



Angeletti, Gioia (1997) *Scottish eccentrics: the tradition of otherness in Scottish poetry from Hogg to MacDiarmid*. PhD thesis.

<http://theses.gla.ac.uk/2552/>

Copyright and moral rights for this thesis are retained by the author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the Author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the Author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

**SCOTTISH ECCENTRICS:
THE TRADITION OF OTHERNESS IN SCOTTISH POETRY
FROM HOGG TO MACDIARMID**

by

Gioia Angeletti

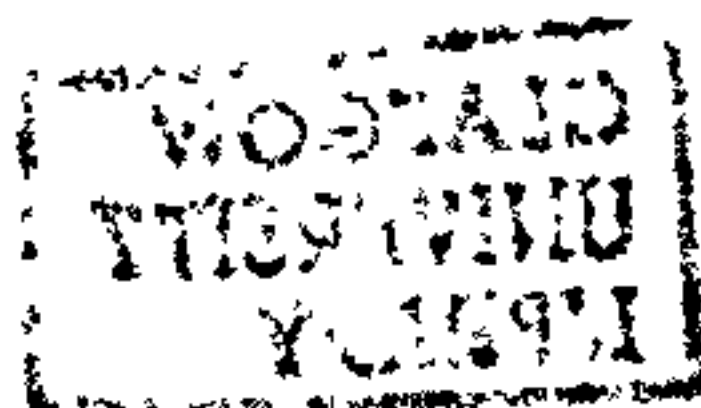
2 VOLUMES

VOLUME I

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

Department of Scottish Literature

Faculty of Arts, University of Glasgow, October 1997



ABSTRACT

This study attempts to modify the received opinion that Scottish poetry of the nineteenth-century failed to build on the achievements of the century (and centuries) before. Rather it suggests that a number of significant poets emerged in the period who represent an ongoing clearly Scottish tradition, characterised by protean identities and eccentricity, which leads on to MacDiarmid and the 'Scottish Renaissance' of the twentieth century. The work of the poets in question is thus seen as marked by recurring linguistic, stylistic and thematic eccentricities which are often radical and subversive. The poets themselves, it is suggested, share a condition of estrangement from the official culture of their time either within Scotland (Hogg, Geddes, MacDiarmid) or in their English exile (Smith, Davidson and Thomson). They can be hardly associated with established tradition, but rather they belong to what I define as tradition of 'otherness' -- other from mainstream literary and cultural society, and characterised by eccentric forms and themes.

The Introduction examines the notions of 'eccentricity' and 'otherness' in relation to the selected poets. Chapter 1, after outlining existing critical theories on nineteenth-century Scottish literature, reinforces the thesis that the dominant voices in Scottish poetry are radical and eccentric by looking retrospectively at some of the eighteenth-century 'eccentrics'. Chapter 2 focuses on the work of Hogg and Byron, the former as the original nineteenth-century eccentric, evincing strong links with later poets, and the latter because of the striking affinities between his work and personality and those of contemporary and later Scottish poets. Chapter 3 focuses on Alexander Smith and attempts to rescue his most interesting poetry from the simplistic categorising of his work as 'Spasmodic'. Chapter 4 on James Thomson ('B. V.') explores the innovative and pre-modernist aura of his *opera omnia*. Chapter 5 concentrates on John Davidson, particularly on his diverse styles and unorthodox ideas, which also look forward to MacDiarmid. Chapter 6 on James Young Geddes analyses the stylistic and ideological radicalism and eccentricity of this almost wholly neglected Victorian poet. The Conclusion brings into focus the unacknowledged links between these poets and Hugh MacDiarmid as well as other twentieth-century Scottish poets, and it suggests that individual, literary and cultural eccentricity is a creative force.

Dedicated to my mother and father

Acknowledgements

My first debt of thanks is to Professor Douglas Gifford for his expert guidance at every stage of the preparation of this thesis.

I am particularly grateful to Professor Andrew Hook for his excellent advice and constant encouragement. My thanks are also to Professor Valentina Poggi for having introduced me first to the field of Scottish literature, and supported me during my years of research, and to Professor Lilla Crisafulli Jones for her moral support.

My special thanks also to the James Hogg Society of Stirling, and in particular to its Head Dr Douglas Mack for his enlightening advice throughout the planning and preparation of this study.

I would like to thank the British Library, the Bodleian Library, the National Library of Scotland, the Mitchell Library of Glasgow and the district libraries of Blairgowrie, Dundee and Perth for having provided me essential material in support of my research.

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Michael Bradshaw for his encouragement during difficult moments of my research.

Finally, my heartfelt thanks to John Luke Barker for his moral support and his help in checking the drafts.

Declaration

This thesis represents my own unassisted work, and no part of it has been submitted previously for any academic qualification. The views expressed are my own and not those of the University of Glasgow.

Gioia Angeletti

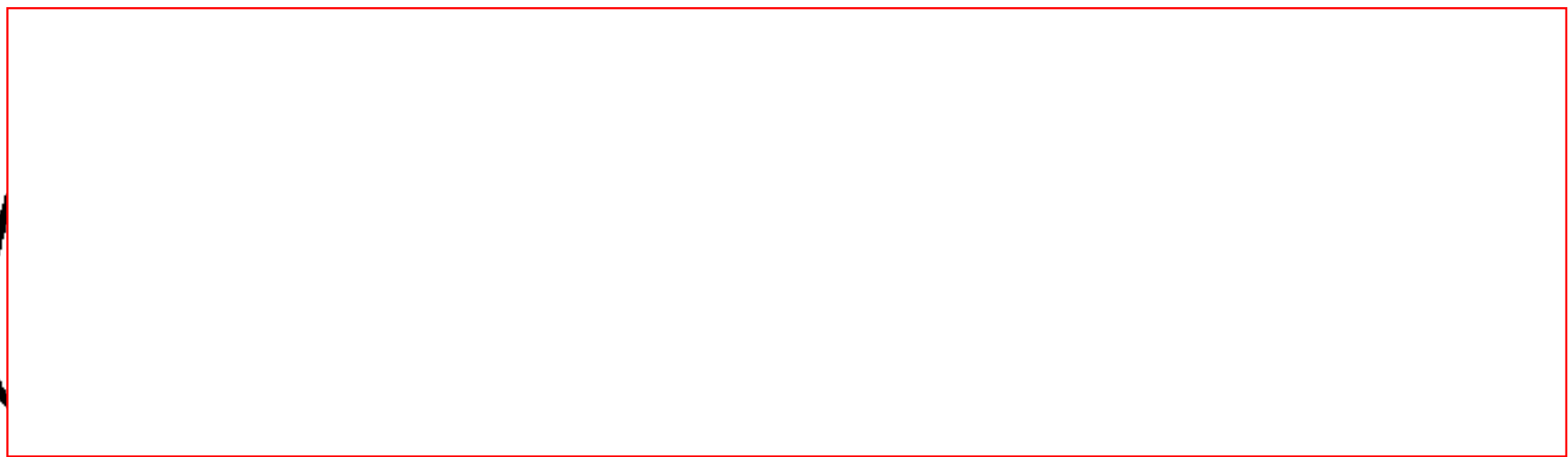


TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	ECCENTRICS AND ECCENTRICITIES FROM JAMES HOGG TO HUGH MACDIARMID.....	1
CHAPTER 1	THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES	
	i. Overview of the emergence of Scottish poetry: theoretical approaches.....	21
	ii. A step backward: eccentricities in the eighteenth century.....	38
CHAPTER 2	TWO EARLY ECCENTRICS: HOGG AND BYRON	
	PART I James Hogg: a Scottish Eccentric.....	52
	i. 'Intermingledoms' in the poetry of James Hogg. Comic and Serious choices.....	60
	ii. 'Intermingledoms' in poems 'whaur extremes meet'.....	93
	PART II The play of comic and serious, or 'whaur extremes meet': Byron and his Scottish heritage.....	145
CHAPTER 3	THE RE-ASSESSMENT OF A SPASMODIC: THE POETRY OF ALEXANDER SMITH	
	PART I The man and his ideas.....	166
	PART II The man and the poet	
	i. The 'Spasmodic years': <i>A Life Drama</i> (1852).....	182
	ii. Alexander Smith's <i>City Poems</i> (1853) and the urban metaphysical.....	197

CHAPTER 4	LIVING IN THE TWILIGHT: THE DIALECTIC OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS IN THE POETRY OF JAMES THOMSON ('B. V.')	
	i. Introductory.....	209
	ii. Between faith and doubt (1834-1860).....	217
	iii. The search for an alternative faith (1860-1870).....	239
	iv. The loss of light and the dreadful night (1870-1874).....	254
	v. A deep gloom with sparks of light (1874-1881).....	286
CHAPTER 5	JOHN DAVIDSON: DRAMATIC ECCENTRICITY AND OTHERNESS	
	PART I The outcast.....	302
	PART II The old and the new: tradition and subversion in Davidson's poetry.....	329
	i. The ballads.....	335
	ii. The music-hall poems.....	373
	iii. Urban poems.....	392
	iv. The <i>Testaments</i> and last poems.....	409
CHAPTER 6	JAMES YOUNG GEDDES	
	PART I	
	i. Another case of a Scottish eccentric.....	435
	ii. Life and works.....	445
	PART II Poetry and ideas.....	449
CONCLUSION	i. Hugh MacDiarmid and the legacy of eccentricity.....	502
	ii. Epilogue: the 'strange procession' continues.....	520
BIBLIOGRAPHY	527

INTRODUCTION

Eccentrics AND eccentricities FROM JAMES HOGG TO HUGH MACDIARMID

Whatever course of action we take
in life there is always some element
in our nature which could only find
satisfaction in exactly a contrary course.¹

Without Contraries is no progression²

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes)³

Recently modern critics have taken issue with MacDiarmid's and other critics' contention that most nineteenth-century novels are far removed from the reality of Scottish life and culture of the time.⁴ On the other hand, a proper and fully satisfactory assessment of nineteenth-century Scottish poetry is still awaited and overdue. This gap in most accounts of Scottish literature was the starting point of my research, and the present study is an attempt to follow in the steps of those critics who have already partly contributed to the revaluation of Scottish poetry produced in the last century. My study is not intended as a comprehensive account of Scottish

¹ Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Eccentrics*, ed. by Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1993), p. 299.

² William Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', in *William Blake's Writings*, ed. by G. E. Bentley, 2 vols (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 74-99 (p. 77).

³ Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself', in *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: David McKay Publisher, 1891), pp. 29-79 (p.78).

⁴ See for example Douglas Gifford, 'Introduction', and 'Myth, Parody and Dissociation: Scottish Fiction 1814-1914', in *The History of Scottish Literature*, ed. by Cairns Craig and others, 4 vols (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987-1989), III: *Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Douglas Gifford, pp. 1-12 and 217-258.

nineteenth-century poets but as a selective -- thus unavoidably subjective and questionable -- analysis of a number of poets whose works substantiate my counter-argument to the already existing and generally disparaging criticism of the period.

Some critics have already lamented the unjust and limited critical judgement of Scottish nineteenth-century literature, and of the poetic production in particular. Alan Riach writes that

it has taken until the 1980s for the nineteenth century to be revaluated in William Donaldson's work on popular literature in Victorian Scotland. But the process of critical revaluation which began in the 1920s continues.⁵

Likewise, William Findlay observes that 'the vast bulk of nineteenth century Scottish literature has been condemned as balefully mediocre', and he refers to the canonical studies of Scottish literature which share this rather negative assessment.⁶ On the other hand, Findlay reports the outstanding work of two critics which has seriously undermined the established view of Scottish prose and poetry produced in the nineteenth century. The first of these studies, William Donaldson's *Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland* (1986), attacks bourgeois book-culture, which dismissed nineteenth-century Scottish literature as badly escapist and oversentimental, and suggests that valid works appeared in the contemporary press by local writers whose

⁵ Alan Riach, Introduction to *Hugh MacDiarmid. Selected Prose* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1992), pp. ix-xxv (p. xv).

⁶ William Findlay, 'Reclaiming Local Literature: William Thom and Janet Hamilton', in *The History of Scottish Literature*, III, pp. 353-375 (p. 353). The critical histories to which Findlay refers are: J. H. Millar, *A Literary History of Scotland* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1903); William Power, *Literature and Oatmeal: What Literature Has Meant to Scotland* (London: George Routledge, 1935); Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh & London: Oliver & Boyd, 1958); David Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People 1680-1830* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961); Maurice Lindsay, *History of Scottish Literature* (London: Robert Hale, 1977); Roderick Watson, *The Literature of Scotland* (London: Macmillan Education, 1984). See also Douglas Young, 'Scottish Poetry in the Later Nineteenth Century', in *Scottish Poetry: A Critical Survey*, ed. by James Kinsley (London: Cassell & Company Ltd, 1955), pp. 236-255. Like the other critics Young rates Scottish poetry of the Victorian age very low in quality. On the other hand, a fair appreciation of nineteenth-century Scottish poetry is to be found in

interest in industrial and urban subjects goes against the argument of anti-Kailyard critics.⁷ Donaldson's book is undeniably a milestone in the history of Scottish literature, but it has been argued -- and to my mind reasonably -- that a lot of the local, working-class writers that he mentions produced works of a merely local or negligible import.⁸ The second of these studies is more notable and more relevant to my own argument, in that it concerns poetry, and it includes an anthology of texts by Alexander Smith, John Davidson and James Thomson, with whom I deal extensively in the following chapters.

Whereas Findlay seems to suggest that these poets have entered the established literary canon, Tom Leonard has included them in an anthology which deals with radical voices in Scottish poetry which have not yet received the acknowledgement they deserve. Indeed Leonard produced *Radical Renfrew* (1990) to challenge the orthodox canon of literary education, and introduce new names to add to the conservative and unimaginative curricula of Scottish schools and universities.⁹ My work follows the path paved by Leonard's study, since I suggest that these and other equally neglected poets are unfairly labelled as 'minor figures', whereas they deserve the major status ascribed to more 'traditionally' accepted writers. Leonard's argument essentially revolves around the radical and non-mainstream tendency which characterises a great bulk of Scottish poetry, and, by including poets who mainly wrote in English, recognises that a writer can be subversive and unorthodox even when he makes use of the mainstream and official language. This means that perhaps the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century was, in Henry Cockburn's words, 'the last purely Scotch age' only in the sense that after Burns most writers employed English as literary language, but not in the sense suggested by Paul Scott that after the late 1830s 'there was a loss of cohesion and self-confidence, a

Edwin Morgan, 'Scottish Poetry in the Nineteenth Century', in *Crossing the Border: Essays on Scottish Literature* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990), pp. 92-108.

⁷ See William Donaldson, *Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1986), p. 87.

⁸ See, for example, Paul H. Scott, 'The Last Purely Scotch Age', in *The History of Scottish Literature*, III, pp. 13-21.

⁹ Tom Leonard, *Radical Renfrew. Poetry from the French Revolution to the First World War* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990).

decline which lasted about 50 years'.¹⁰ Or, even if there was a lack of cohesion and self-confidence, certainly there was no decline, because Scottish poetry continued to develop and be produced, albeit along different lines.

Douglas Gifford points out that, while nineteenth-century Scottish writers can be recognised as clearly belonging to a Scottish tradition, they also frequently 'crossed over the cultural border to locate themselves within a wider audience and market; their work must then equally be "placed" in this wider context'.¹¹ This 'wider context' can be seen as looking forward to MacDiarmid's notion of internationality; from the nineteenth century onwards Scotland's culture is affected by ideological and literary aspects imported from abroad and propounded by British imperialism, but Scottish traditions continue to exist both in prose and poetry. Indeed many nineteenth-century writers also crossed over the geographical border of Scotland -- Stevenson, Carlyle, Smith, Thomson, Buchanan and Davidson offer a few examples -- yet their works have aspects in common which are clearly associated with their Scottish origins and their -- conscious or subconscious -- indebtedness to both medieval and eighteenth-century Scottish literature. Apropos of the Scots' diaspora MacDiarmid wrote:

[...] the Scottish people [...] have been mankind's greatest travellers perhaps and have scattered themselves all over the globe, [so] it is necessary to go all round the world to find the true Scotland of which we are in search [...]¹²

The tradition to which the poets of this study belong is of a very peculiar kind. In fact, the term 'tradition' might in this case be misleading, and therefore a misnomer, since it cannot be defined or labelled according to conventional terminology. In this study I call it a tradition of 'otherness' -- where 'otherness' refers both to the condition of the poets selected and to the tradition itself, it being 'other' from any

¹⁰ P. H. Scott, p. 13.

¹¹ Gifford, 'Introduction', p. 1.

¹² MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet. A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas*, ed. by Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1994), p. 364.

established and official tradition. The term 'otherness' is simply borrowed from postcolonial theory, but I use it essentially to refer to the ways in which the poets of this study hardly belong to any definite literary trend, but rather display constant oscillations of ideas, political loyalties, and poetic choices. Hence their eccentricity, or eccentricities. Hence their ex-centricity, or their remaining aloof from contemporary society and culture; when these poets seem to adhere to any particular ideology or literary canon, it is not for very long, because they are characterised by 'extraordinary contradictions of character', by the 'most dangerous antinomies and antithetical impulses', by a 'lightning-like zig-zag of temper'.¹³ This unavoidably calls to mind the trouble-making term 'identity' and the issues associated to it, which have concerned the minds of many writers and critics from the eighteenth century onwards, including of course MacDiarmid.¹⁴

From Hogg to MacDiarmid many poets saw their sense of national and individual identity continuously challenged and shaken by the conflicts and divisions which affected Scotland; essentially, the 1707 Union, and the 1843 Disruption, which occurred at a time of momentous social and economic changes. Scottish Victorian poets, such as Smith, Thomson and Davidson, were victims of the multiple dilemmas of the age: namely the antinomy of tradition and progress, paralleled by the battle between science and religion, and philosophical materialism and idealism -- the latter a continuation of the eighteenth-century conflict between Humean scepticism and common sense philosophy. Their individual response to this generalised schizophrenic condition resulted in various forms of eccentricity.

First, they were political and social eccentrics; their ideas often clashed with accepted values, and their radical position in most cases caused them to feel 'different' from the establishment -- for example, Hogg -- or to retreat from society -- like Thomson and Davidson. Secondly, they rebelled against orthodox religious values, and propounded their own form of religion -- like Hogg's syncretic beliefs -- although in some cases the search for alternative faiths ended up in a torturing and psychologically disruptive struggle -- Davidson is the paradigmatic example of this

¹³ MacDiarmid, *Scottish Eccentrics*, p. 284.

¹⁴ See Chapter 1.

tragic condition. It is an interesting fact that the theory of 'the elect' was not totally rejected by the Victorian 'eccentrics' and MacDiarmid, but appears in their writing under different disguises -- such as the Nietzschean concept of *Übermensch*, or the secularised image of a Christ-like individual. Conversely Hogg, like Scott and Galt, displays a more blatantly mocking attitude towards some tenets of Protestant doctrine in his most satirical writing.

Thirdly, they were linguistic eccentrics, whereby I refer not only to the use of heterogeneous registers and jargons in some of their works, but mainly to their subversive and radical adoption of the official language with the aim to ridicule it or submit it to a satirical treatment. In particular, the language of Protestantism -- of the most extreme branches especially -- became a double-edged arm for both early and late nineteenth-century poets: they appropriated Calvinist rhetoric, which often allowed them to avoid censorship, but adapted it to their own purposes and needs. This kind of treatment was applied especially by the Scottish poets of the Victorian period and MacDiarmid, who were obviously influenced by Thomas Carlyle. Of course they were linguistic eccentrics also in the sense that they shifted from English to Scots, sometimes within the same piece of work. The Victorian poets, in particular Davidson and Geddes, used Scots very sparingly but at least they began to see the possibility to use the vernacular and a colloquial style for various purposes, and not merely to produce humorous effects.

Nevertheless, despite their individual eccentricities and idiosyncratic behaviours, the poets of this study reveal two central tendencies in their works which can be easily defined as typically Scottish. One of the pivotal aspects emerging from their poetry is a preoccupation with metaphysical questions and their spiritual quest -- often in the form of a vision -- to fill in the void left by their abandonment of orthodox Christianity, or, more generally, by their rejection of closed systems of belief. From the medieval Makars to the present Scottish poetry is marked by, to use Wordsworth's words, a 'visionary gleam',¹⁵ or by the poet's engagement in metaphysical enquiries

¹⁵ 'Whither is fled the visionary gleam?/ Where is it now, the glory and the dream?'. William Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early

concerning himself, man and the universe. In an antisyzygical¹⁶ behaviour, several nineteenth-century Scottish poets, including the selected writers of this study, reveal an almost opposite tendency to bring down to earth and subvert inflated ideas and self-important statements coming from the cultural establishment. The effects of such a reversal are sometimes comic, but more often satirical. Surprisingly, even the works of poets such as Thomson and Davidson, traditionally seen as gloomy and pessimistic, contain examples of what could be defined as 'serious humour' -- an oxymoron which perfectly expresses the mixed nature of some of their poems, dealing with earnest issues yet tinged with humorous touches. In *Scottish Eccentrics* (1934) MacDiarmid includes the *vis comica* among the characteristics of the Scottish people (p. 78), and, by mentioning Fergusson as a model for this kind of humour, he obviously links it with the reductive idiom of the Scottish vernacular tradition. Moreover, as critics such as Robert Crawford and Christopher Whyte point out, this kind of comic vein with the effect of undermining established values foreshadows the characteristics of folk humour and carnival laughter analysed by Mikhail Bakhtin.¹⁷ This peculiar 'comic voice', subversive and radical, is particularly remarkable in the first half of the century in James Hogg and in the second half in James Young Geddes.

Nevertheless, one may generalise and say that this binary development of a metaphysical and a comic tradition is a characteristic of the whole century which parallels the other crucial division between two poetic voices: the official, mainstream voice, and the alternative, radical voice. In early nineteenth century Hogg's, Byron's and William Tennant's works offer examples of *vis comica* which is simultaneously opposed to the gloomy metaphysical aura of Robert Pollok's poetry -- in particular in *The Course of Time* (1837) -- and to the pro-establishment, proto-Romantic, and Anglicised voice of John Wilson's works. In the latter part of the century, James Young Geddes's poetry is the most significant example of a radical, anti-mainstream

Childhood', in *William Wordsworth. Poems*, ed. by John O. Hayden, 2 vols (London: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 523-529 (p. 525).

¹⁶ I will return to this term and G. G. Smith's notion of Caledonian Antisyzygy in Chapter 1.

¹⁷ See Chapter 1 for more details on the reductive idiom and Scottish critics' use of Bakhtin's study. A recent collection of Bakhtin's writings is *The Bakhtin Reader*.

voice, distinct from and critical of contemporary Kailyard writing. His work and contribution to Scottish poetry can be compared to the effects of Arthur Hugh Clough's idiosyncratic writing within the English tradition headed by Alfred Tennyson. Yet this alternative voice also emerges in the poetry of Thomson and Davidson, which was clearly influenced by the innovative style and ideas of Walt Whitman.

This voice is eccentric, protean, wavering between extremes, often unbalanced and full of irregularities. It finds its culmination in MacDiarmid, whose indebtedness to Hogg, Smith, Thomson, Davidson and Geddes has not been stressed enough by academics and critics, whereas MacDiarmid himself explicitly declared that Davidson was the only Scottish poet to whom he owed anything at all.¹⁸ He failed to recognise that in particular his poetry reveals undeniable links, conscious or unconscious, with other Scottish nineteenth-century writers. The discovery of these links gave the second important impulse to my research, and the present study, apart from attempting to amend the map of nineteenth-century poetry, also aims to throw light on some of these yet unacknowledged connections.

Why have I chosen James Hogg and Hugh MacDiarmid as the first and the last examples of a gallery of poets who, in my view, best illustrate the phenomenon of protean identities and eccentricity in Scottish poetry? On reading MacDiarmid's *Scottish Eccentrics* I was impressed, albeit not surprised, by his inclusion of James Hogg among Scottish individuals who, in his words, reveal 'centrifugal traits' and 'schismatic passions' (p. 303). In *Scottish Eccentrics* MacDiarmid expounds his thesis about Scottishness and Scottish identity, and produces, to quote Alan Riach, a 'survey of historical characters whose twisted idiosyncrasies enshrine Scottish history'.¹⁹ The notion of eccentricity is juxtaposed to that of Caledonian Antisyzygy -- the key-word in one of the first critical accounts of Scottish literature by G. Gregory Smith²⁰ -- and

Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov, ed. by Pam Morris (London: Edward Arnold, 1994).

¹⁸ MacDiarmid, 'John Davidson. Influence and Influences', in *John Davidson. A Selection of His Poems*, ed. by Maurice Lindsay (London: Hutchison & Co. Ltd., 1961), pp. 47-54 (p. 47).

¹⁹ Alan Riach, 'Survival Arts', in *Scottish Eccentrics*, pp. 321-336 (p. 321).

²⁰ The book is *Scottish Literature. Character and Influence* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1919). I will refer to it more conspicuously in Chapter 1.

MacDiarmid's case studies are the embodiment of both, in that they display the most bewildering idiosyncrasies of character and, if they are artists, their work is characterised by the most puzzling shifts in style and tone. The most interesting implication of MacDiarmid's argument is that to be eccentric, protean, and self-contradictory is as praiseworthy and positive as what Keats called 'negative capability', that is, man's ability to accept and cope with his own uncertainties and doubts without attempting to find a solution.²¹ These are the qualities that MacDiarmid admired in James Hogg, and my argument is that they also mark the personality and work of other nineteenth-century writers, but MacDiarmid remained silent on this point.

In fact, a strong poetic line connects Hogg through the late nineteenth-century poets to MacDiarmid, and it is predominantly a native Scottish thread but one characterised by inner contradictions and shifting positions which often render the notion of Scottishness more blurred and complex than is generally assumed. Yet the thread linking the various poets resists these oscillations; it actually exists because of them, and corresponds to the tradition of eccentricity and otherness to which I have been referring. My argument and intent will be clarified by a consideration at the outset of the bond between the two extremes, Hogg and MacDiarmid.

In *Scottish Eccentrics* MacDiarmid praises Hogg's comic and mimetic skills -- 'the *vis comica* rose in him like milk coming to the boil', he writes (p. 80) -- but he regrets that Hogg, like Burns before and Muir after him, 'joined to strange Gods', and was only a 'half-and-a-half' (p. 81) user of the Scots tradition instead of consistently adhering to it. He laments the fact that Hogg 'had all too seldom the courage [...] of his native speech', otherwise, 'if he had not been consumed with the infernal inferiority complex of Post-Union Scotland', he would have been a much greater writer' (p. 83). MacDiarmid utterly dismisses Hogg's English writing as 'lamentable fugues from his essential self which alone mattered' (p. 83), which MacDiarmid identifies with his belonging to the Scots tradition opposed to the Anglicised tradition personified by John Wilson and John Lockhart. He points out that 'Hogg was always at his best

²¹ Letter to George and Thomas Keats, in *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. by Maurice Buxton Forman, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), I, pp. 75-78 (p. 77).

when he was just reproducing the actual speech and notions of the countryside' (p. 90), and he considers 'the Witch of Fife' as the best example of his use of Scots.²² Finally MacDiarmid extols Hogg's supernatural mode, and links it with the other 'polar twin' of the Scottish Muse, that is, realistic representation.²³

This tension and at the same time dialogue between the physical and the metaphysical is the first important characteristic shared by the two poets. In both of them we find a syncretic amalgam of visionary and burlesque modes which can be linked with the similar division in the eighteenth century between the Ossianic tradition and the poems of merry-making of the *Christis Kirk* tradition. In short, their poetry fuses the *ubi sunt* and the *carpe diem* motifs without provoking inconsistency. In the poem 'Cary O' Kean' Hogg wrote:

[...] there is a feeling engrafted on mind,
A shoot of eternity never defin'd,
That upward still climbs to its origin high;
Its roots are in nature, it blooms in the sky.²⁴

In *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926) the earthly and the spiritual meet in the metaphorical image of the thistle and its metamorphoses into Yggdrasil, the cosmic tree of knowledge of Norse mythology. Yet also in his early lyrics MacDiarmid repetitively suggests that the earth contains metaphysical seeds, or, to quote Veitch's comment on Hogg's poetry, that there is a 'constant touch of the invisible world on this earth of ours'.²⁵ This dualistic component of Hogg's and MacDiarmid's poetry is

²² On the occasion of a speech to the Burns Federation MacDiarmid quoted Hogg to support his notion of colloquial and natural language: 'Are my verses no' as guid as Keats? They're faur better. Keats' verses are owre pretty to be as guid as mine'. Quoted in Harvey Oxenhorn, *Elemental Things. The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), p. 50.

²³ Cf. G. G. Smith, *Scottish Literature. Character and Influence*, p. 20. Here Smith refers to the fantastic and the realistic as the 'polar twins' of the Scottish Muse', a phrase that he derived from the final section of *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

²⁴ 'Cary O'Kean', in *The Poetical Works of the Ettrick Shepherd*, 5 vols (Glasgow, Edinburgh, and London: Blackie and Son, 1838), IV, pp. 269-280 (p. 280).

²⁵ John Veitch, *The Feeling for Nature in Scottish Poetry*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood & Sons, 1887), II, p. 238.

often associated with their vision of Scotland or mankind in general in their epic -- but also mock-epic -- poetry, and this visionary quality can be traced back to the Scottish medieval Makars. The way in which they can rapidly shift from physical to metaphysical concerns also resembles Byron's idiosyncratic style.

Indeed, in his autobiography *Lucky Poet* (1943) MacDiarmid expresses his admiration for Byron's poetry:

My principal concern has always been poetry, of course, and it is not in Hume but in another great Scotsman, Lord Byron, that I find a statement of the position that goes right to the root of the matter. Byron continued throughout his life to have a dual concept of poetry. On the one hand there were the romantic lyrics like 'Lachin Y Gair' and 'So we'll go no more a roving'. On the other was the poetry of serious moral purpose [...]. This was a poetry that would castigate the errors of the age with stringent wit, would point out deviations from good sense and good taste in brilliant balanced couplets, and would attack the corruptions and injustices in society with Juvenalian fierceness, modified by Popean good temper.²⁶

MacDiarmid obviously delighted in reading Byron because both the poet and his poetry were an exemplification of the Blakean meeting of opposites which is at the centre of MacDiarmid's thought and work. In particular, the mixture of the comic and the serious is a common trait of their poetry, and the coexistence of diverse moods -- Gregory G. Smith's notorious notion of Caledonian Antisyzygy -- is a pervasive characteristic of their writing. Ann Boutelle observes that MacDiarmid's muse 'has both a divine halo and feet of clay', and the same applies to Byron's muse. In her words, both of them stand Janus-like 'between the worlds of innocence and experience, men and gods, time and eternity, violence and tenderness'.²⁷

²⁶ MacDiarmid, 'Author's Note 1972', in *Lucky Poet*, pp. xi-xvi (p. xiv).

²⁷ Cf. Ann Edwards Boutelle, *Thistle and Rose. A Study of Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry*, (Loanhead: MacDonald Publishers, 1980), pp. 24, 35.

James Hogg corresponded with, and, most importantly, dedicated two poems to his contemporary in which he emphasised the dualistic nature of Byron's poetry, the marriage of heaven and hell described in his verses, where '[...] the sweet seraphs of heaven/ Had mixe'd with the fiends of the air'.²⁸ Like MacDiarmid, Hogg saw Byron as a kindred spirit, whose poetry united the comic and serious moods, and dealt with the motley nature of life, and whose personality exemplified Hogg's motto 'Be mine the faith diverging to extremes'.²⁹

Hogg and MacDiarmid's shared admiration for Byron helps to define their own eccentricity. They were both 'Scottish eccentrics' because they accepted the contradictory nature of life without attempting to subdue it to pre-established, fixed systems. They represent the radical, anti-establishment spirit of Scottish poetry, and offer two examples of what MacDiarmid himself defined as the 'uncanny Scot', an individual fitting nowhere in political and religious terms, and preferring to remain in an unsure, wavering position rather than complying with any systematised set of social and moral codes. The difference between them is that Hogg sometimes reveals a repressed sense of frustration and disillusionment at being considered an odd character by his patronising contemporaries, whereas MacDiarmid always enjoyed appearing as an individual of antithetical impulses, and this deliberate cheek was one of the strong points of both his personality and his poetry. Yet that Hogg too had and often revelled in unorthodox attitudes towards society is evinced by some of his poems; we need only read 'Superstition' (1816) and *The Pilgrims of the Sun* (1815) to grasp the universalistic appeal of his verses, his anti-dogmatic and anti-fanatical ideas, which undeniably look forward to MacDiarmid's own cosmic vision and concept of internationality. In both poets the vision of Scotland often merges with that of the universe as a symbol of their acceptance of the divisions and diversities within Scottish

²⁸ James Hogg, 'Ode for Music: On the Death of Lord Byron', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 21 (1827), 520-521 (p. 520). The other poem dedicated to Byron is 'To the Right Hon. Lord Byron', which Hogg prefaced to the original plan of his *Midsummer Night Dreams*. It is published in *James Hogg. Selected Poems and Songs*, ed. by David Groves (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986), p. 31.

²⁹ James Hogg, 'Superstition', in *James Hogg. Selected Poems and Songs*, ed. by Groves, pp. 89-95 (p. 92).

culture.³⁰ Thus, despite Hogg's collaboration with the Tory establishment, which contrasts with MacDiarmid's attack on nineteenth-century conservatism, both writers reveal a democratic spirit and trust in mankind, which in Hogg are reflected in the vision of harmony and conciliation of opposites at the end of his works, and in MacDiarmid in his optimistic vision of man's capability for social progress and personal amelioration.

Another important link between them concerns their peculiar response to the tensions and antinomies of their time. They lived in two different periods of Scottish history, but similarly characterised by momentous political and social changes. Moreover the post-Union problems were only chronologically closer to Hogg. The crisis of identity which derived from Scotland's being deprived of a political centre, thus becoming ex-centric and peripheral, was still an up-to-date issue in the first half of the twentieth century. Nowadays new studies on marginality and the literary canon have undermined the conventional notion of centre and associated power by suggesting that all value is always 'contingent', never atemporal and absolute, and that literary canons are the product of specific cultural and economic factors at a precise historical moment.³¹ So Edwin Morgan could write: 'the circle of empire is breaking, the satellites are escaping. If the 1990s are going to be the age of the periphery, Scotland too may take the plunge; not before time'.³²

Yet neither Hogg and MacDiarmid lived in an age of periphery; the centre still mattered, and to be ex-centric meant being an outsider with social and cultural problems and a poignant question of personal identity to face. Both Hogg's *Memoir* (1807) and MacDiarmid's *Lucky Poet* contain several pages in which they portray themselves as alienated and distanced from their contemporaries.³³ Like Burns before

³⁰ I refer in particular to Hogg's 'Kilmeny', *The Pilgrims of the Sun*, and MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Look at the Thistle*.

³¹ See for example Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value. Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 1988), Susan P. Castillo, *Notes from the Periphery. Marginality in North American Literature and Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), and Marshall Walker, 'The age of the periphery: an ex-paranoiac's thoughts on the literary canon', *Scotlands*, 1 (1994), 18-34.

³² Edwin Morgan, 'Saturn and Other Rings', *Chapman*, 64 (1991), 1-10 (p. 10).

³³ In *Lucky Poet* MacDiarmid wrote: 'I have always had far more enemies than friends in Scotland [...]' (p. 43). And this is Hogg in his *Memoir*: 'For my own part, I know that I

him, Hogg reacted to the conflicting loyalties of his time by shifting between opposite positions, and also by accepting the labelling roles which the *literati* applied to him -- like that of the Ettrick Shepherd in the *Noctes Ambrosianae* or the Boar in the *Chaldee Manuscript* -- because, in a sense, he realised that only by pretending to acquiesce to their rules could he be in a position to react against the system which created them. He decided that the most profitable behaviour consisted in remaining simultaneously inside and outside the canon of letters and society. His means were irony, satire and a mimic skill whereby he could impersonate other people either to eulogise or, in most cases, to inveigh against their pretentiousness. In many respects, MacDiarmid adopted similar ways of facing the tensions of his country: in his life he allowed himself all the most contradictory postures, continuously switching his ideas between opposing positions, and in his poetry irony, paradox, ever-changing forms and styles are the reflection of his eccentric *forma mentis*. The variety of poetic *personae*, genres and techniques of Hogg's and MacDiarmid's poems is symptomatic of their protean identities and the unsureness of their position. It is also an expression of the fragmentation of their self and also of their time, which is reflected psychologically in their self-contradictoriness and artistically in their eccentric versatility. There is affinity between Hogg's and MacDiarmid's long poems in that they are medleys of diverse forms, styles and voices. For example, *A Drunk Man* is both one single poem and a sequence of different lyrics linked together by a common thread of themes. Similarly, Hogg's *The Queen's Wake* (1813) and *The Pilgrims of the Sun* (1815) are long poems divided into correlated lyrical sections.

Connected with their way of coping with the tensions of Scottish culture is the influence which pre-Union Scottish literature exercised upon their writing and in their mental outlook. Hogg and MacDiarmid were born in the region of the Borders, which they had to leave to pursue their literary career. The richness of folk legends and ballads of his native district was transposed by Hogg into his poetry, and it remained an essential component of his work. MacDiarmid certainly knew the Scottish oral

have always been looked on by the learned part of the community as an intruder in the paths of literature'. See *Memoirs of the Author's Life and Familiar Anecdotes of Sir*

tradition, and, even if it is not so evident as in Hogg's poetry, there are undeniable hints of it scattered throughout his works, and, in particular, in his early lyrics. Their indebtedness to the older Scottish literary tradition is also very strong. MacDiarmid's cry 'Back to Dunbar', whereby he meant that Scottish identity could be restored to integrity by rediscovering the spirit of medieval and renaissance Scottish literature, was anticipated by Hogg's adoption of middle-Scots linguistic forms in some of his poems. In fact it is more exact to refer to his form of Scots as 'pseudo-antique' rather than Middle Scots, because it does not exclude the use of modern vernacular expressions.³⁴ This kind of 'synthetic' Scots characterises poems such as 'The Witch of Fife', 'The Goode Manne of Allowa', 'The Perilis of Wemyng' and 'Ringan and May'. It is interesting to note that Hogg knew John Jamieson's *An Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (1808), which was the main source for MacDiarmid's Doric *koiné*. Hogg even refers to Jamieson in a gloss to one of his poems included in *The Shepherd's Calendar*.³⁵ Mack suggests that medieval Scottish poetry was available to Hogg in anthologies such as Pinkerton's *Ancient Scottish Poems*, Ramsay's *Evergreen*, and Sibbald's *Chronicle of Ancient Scottish Poetry*.³⁶ The glamour, the cumulative descriptivism, the satirical vein, and the antisyzygy of realism and fantasy which typify the poetry of the Makars are also characteristic of both Hogg's and MacDiarmid's writing. If we except the political, partly propagandistic purpose of MacDiarmid's linguistic and cultural choices, the two poets share the same love of the past Scottish tradition, and the desire to revive it through their creative writing.

Their love of Scotland is often expressed by means of symbols and allegorical images. For example, there is a fascinating similarity between the symbolic value of

Walter Scott, ed. by D. S. Mack (Edinburgh and London: Scottish Academic Press, 1972), p. 46.

³⁴ See Douglas Mack, 'Introduction', in *James Hogg. Selected Poems*, ed. by Douglas Mack (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. xi-xxvi (p. xxi).

³⁵ It is the poem called 'Sing Round about Hawick, &c', which he inserted in the chapter of 'Dreams and Apparitions. Containing George Dobson's Expedition to Hell, and the Souters of Selkirk', and the gloss is the explanation of the Scots phrase 'pin-todle'. See *The Shepherd's Calendar*, ed. by Douglas Mack (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 270n.

³⁶ Mack, 'Introduction' to *James Hogg. Selected Poems*, p. xviii.

Hogg's Kilmeny or Mary in *The Pilgrims of the Sun* and MacDiarmid's female characters -- Jean and the Silken Lady -- in *A Drunk Man*, since in both cases the figure of the woman is connected with the representation of Scotland. The following quotations from each poet reveal an astonishingly similar use of symbols. Here are Hogg's verses:

Far dearer to me is the thrush or the linnet,
 Than any fine bird from a far foreign tree;
 And dearer my lad, with his plaid and blue bonnet,
 Than all our rich nobles or lords that I see.³⁷

And here is MacDiarmid:

The Rose of all the world is not for me
 I want for my part
 Only the little white rose of Scotland
 That smells sharp and sweet -- and breaks the heart.³⁸

The different kinds of eccentricities which I have been underlining are also distinctive marks of the writing of the other nineteenth-century poets included in this study. Like Hogg and MacDiarmid, they do not fit any precise tradition because of their unorthodox, anti-establishment ideas, and display the same protean identities and unsureness about their social and cultural stance. My selection of these particular poets -- Hogg, Byron, Smith, Thomson, Davidson and Geddes -- was essentially dictated by the fact that to my mind they represent the most paradigmatic eccentric

³⁷ 'How Foolish Are Mankind', in *James Hogg. Selected Poems and Songs*, ed. by Groves, p. 6.

³⁸ 'The Little White Rose', in *Hugh MacDiarmid. Complete Poems*, ed. by Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken, 2 vols (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1993), I, p. 461.

voices of the century, whose poetic achievement had a strong impact on both nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature inside and outside Scotland. For some of them this kind of acknowledgement was long overdue, in particular as regards their pioneering role in paving the way for modernist and post-modernist poetry. Their multi-faceted eccentricity foreshadows MacDiarmid's work as well as the fluid and heterogeneous quality of postmodern literature and art. The main reason why I have chosen six male poets is that any treatment of women writers would have implied a discussion of theoretical issues which would have overloaded and gone beyond the scope of my study. Moreover the most outstanding Scottish women poets emerge only at the end of the nineteenth century, such as Marion Angus and Violet Jacob, whereas the general picture of the early part of the century is characterised by a lack of prominent female poetic voices with the significant exception of Joanna Baillie.³⁹ Although some of these poets present undeniable personal and artistic eccentricities, I do not propose to deal with them in this study.

Chapter 1 is divided into two sections. The first section looks at contemporary criticism of Scottish literature which makes use of theories of division or of dualistic paradigms to interpret post-Union Scottish culture and literature. The general picture emerging from these studies is that the Union had schizophrenic effects on Scottish life and letters, and in most cases the nineteenth century is dismissed as the cultural and artistic nadir, or, according to Wittig, a 'backwash'.⁴⁰ The second section intends to offer a brief retrospect of the phenomenon of eccentricity, and it specifically focuses on the literary, cultural, and linguistic antinomies of the eighteenth century -- namely the crucial division between vernacular and Anglicised poets, the tension between

³⁹ This, for all its assertion of the importance of some neglected women's poetry, is also the picture emerging from the first History of Scottish women writers: *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997). In particular see the following articles: Valentina Bold, 'Beyond "The Empire of the Gentle Heart": Scottish Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century', pp. 246-261; Amanda Gilroy, 'From Here to Alterity: The Geography of Femininity in the Poetry of Joanna Baillie', pp. 143-157; Carol Anderson, 'Tales of Her Own Countries: Violet Jacob', pp. 347-359; Christopher Whyte, 'Marion Angus and the Boundaries of Self', pp. 373-388.

⁴⁰ K. Wittig, p. 239.

orality and literacy, and the existence of different forms of literary antisyzygy in the contemporary poetic expression.

Chapter 2 concerns the poetic eccentricities of the first half of the nineteenth century as they are exemplified in the works of two major writers: Hogg and Byron. Both of them were at odds with the dominant English Romantic tradition, and their works reveal strong links both with a distinctive Scottish oral tradition and with the literary tradition of the Makars and eighteenth-century Scottish vernacular poetry -- in particular their reductive idiom and the radical, subversive angle of some of their works. The chapter was originally intended to be a reading of those poems by Hogg which most critics have generally neglected or discredited because of their effusiveness and patchiness, but the peculiarity of Byron's case -- not so much his mixed ancestry as his being definitely eccentric within English Romanticism -- struck me as a significant and fascinating example in support of my argument. Although the chapter is still mainly centred around the figure and poetry of Hogg, the section on Byron reinforces my thesis that the nineteenth century presents many cases of poetic eccentrics, within and outwith Scotland, and whether or not Byron's eccentricity depends on the fact that he was half-Scottish is still an interesting and unresolved question.

Chapters 3 to 6 apply the argument about eccentricity to late nineteenth-century poets who deserve much more critical attention than they have so far received. Each chapter is devoted to a different poet: Alexander Smith, James Thomson ('B. V.'), John Davidson, and James Young Geddes respectively. Curiously enough the great bulk of the best Scottish poetry in the Victorian period was produced outside Scotland, because a large portion of the Scottish intelligentsia and writers left their country to emigrate to England or elsewhere in the search for a more congenial aesthetic atmosphere. To escape provincialism, the so-called 'Kailyard' of Scottish culture, and the suffocating conservative air of most of the Scottish cities, some writers went to London, where the radical tradition was certainly stronger. About so many exiles David Craig observes that

These men were moved, in varying degrees, by dissatisfaction with hardships, narrowness, or lack of opportunity at home -- though in some cases they were projecting onto Scotland a subjective malaise; or by attraction to the riches available abroad -- though in some cases they were falling in with a tendency rather than knowing clearly what they were after [...]⁴¹

The four poets I have selected attempted, successfully or unsuccessfully, to cope with the continuing conflicts of the previous centuries as well as with the new divisions and complexities of their time such as the religious controversies leading to the Disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843. Each of them responded in an individual way to the issues of their day, but their situation was very similar, because they were all affected by a sense of displacement both from Scotland and from their host-country. Their condition was in fact very common at the time, as a panoramic review of the major writers of Victorian Scotland would show, with particular attention to Robert Louis Stevenson and Thomas Carlyle.

The Conclusion is an epilogue to my study as well as an occasion to expand on the poetry and ideas of Hugh MacDiarmid. MacDiarmid himself recognised some Victorian poets as his precursors, although their efforts did not evolve in his view into successful artistic outcomes. What he did not recognise is that those poets, like Hogg before them, were prototypical examples of what he called the 'uncanny' or 'eccentric' Scot, that is, an individual characterised by 'extraordinary contradictions of character, most dangerous antinomies and antithetical impulses [...]'.⁴²

My study does not attempt to be an extensive survey of Scottish poetry from James Hogg to Hugh MacDiarmid but an analysis of specific individual cases whose work evinces the strong presence in Scottish poetry of a 'tradition' of eccentricity and

⁴¹ David Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People. 1680-1830* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), p. 286.

⁴² 'The Caledonian Antisyzygy', in *Scottish Eccentrics*, pp. 284-320 (p. 284).

otherness, characterised by a 'zigzag of contradictions'⁴³ -- thus difficult to categorise and specify -- but also by recurrent traits, such as the *vis comica* and 'the visionary gleam', which have marked Scottish poetry from the age of the Makars. What I especially intend to underline is that their eccentricity (or eccentricities) is a unifying force, a Blakean source of energy that defines and provides an identity to their personalities and works. Eccentricity is their strength, not their weakness, because it allowed them to come to terms with their self-contradictoriness and, in Whitman's words, to 'resist any thing better [than] their own diversity'.⁴⁴ One can only hope that more and more scholars will be prepared to recognise this, so that, as Castillo points out, 'texts produced by those who until recently were termed peripheral or irrelevant and thus excluded from major anthologies will gain increasing acceptance as canonical'.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Whitman, 'Song of Myself', p. 42.

⁴⁵ Castillo, p. 193.

CHAPTER 1

THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

i. Overview of the emergence of Scottish poetry: theoretical approaches

One of the most famous novels by Luigi Pirandello has a very revealing title in relation to the central argument of my thesis: *Uno, nessuno e centomila* -- *One, Nobody and One Hundred Thousand* -- referring to the multiple personality of the protagonist, to his being 'one' individual member of mankind but essentially 'nobody' because of the profusion, the 'one hundred thousand' roles that he must perform in society, turning his personality into a protean entity, fragmented and dissociated at its core. Through this character, Pirandello offers us one of numerous prototypical exemplifications of modern man, whose spiritual and ethical unity has been gradually disintegrated by the Janus-faced progress of civilisation and by cultural and scientific movements far outside his control. In a condition full of both opportunities and contradictions, the playing of social roles and the chameleon practice of changing identity in accordance with social circumstances appear to offer an escape from the danger of total aloofness and isolation; but such social histrionics are not always safe, nor are they always seen as appealing as they appear in the protagonist of 'Cerebral', one of MacDiarmid's short stories about a journalist with a myriad personality:

The Cynic, the Poet, the Prig, the Working Journalist, the Mere Human Being, His Father's Son, his Mother's Son, the Social Man, the Beardless Boy, the Seeker, Lazybones, the Innermost Critic, the Impersonal Factor, and an ever-increasing host more of them, all had fair play and carried on their separate activities with the mingled

and *protean* [my italics] materials of his mental life with the fair effect of social commonwealth in being.¹

Although there may be an ironic component in this description, it is not difficult to understand why the champion of Gregory Smith's theory of the Caledonian Antisyzygy should here show the eccentric, kaleidoscopic inner life of his hero in positive, creative terms. The fact that 'things fall apart; the centre cannot hold' is seen by MacDiarmid, unlike Yeats, as less than tragic, because, paradoxically, one has to be 'eccentric' and 'extraordinary'² in the etymological sense of these words in order to gain a place in the world without being devoured by its standardisation of manners and habits. Indeed MacDiarmid was an extraordinary personality, and not many Scottish poets possessed his Whitmanesque ability to shift from one extreme to the other, or to live in a situation of perpetual uncertainty and doubt without traumatic effects.

Once again Keats's concept of 'Negative Capability' comes to my mind, which the Romantic poet explained as the capacity of 'being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'³ -- Keats attributes this capability to the successful poet, and, as *exemplum*, to Shakespeare. In fact, Burns can offer us another example, because the Ayrshire poet anticipated MacDiarmid's contradictoriness and shifting identities by continuously submitting himself to constant self-questioning. Both Burns and MacDiarmid had the ability to adopt various literary and social roles which provided them with a skilful means of moving beyond the moral codes and restrictions of the establishment. MacDiarmid himself pointed out that '[...] Burns spoke with a double voice [...]. In practically all connections he says one thing in one poem and the opposite in the next'⁴ -- outstandingly, Burns reveals this inconsistency also in one single poem, such as 'Epistle to a Young Friend'. Hence the distance between Burns (and perhaps Ramsay

¹ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Cerebral' in *Annals of the Five Senses* (repr. Edinburgh: Polygon Books, 1983), pp. 21-34 (p. 28).

² MacDiarmid makes frequent use of these terms in *Scottish Eccentrics*.

³ See Introduction footnote 22.

⁴ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The Burns Cult', in *At the Sign of the Thistle. A Collection of Essays* (London: Stanley Nott, 1934), pp. 164-176 (p. 172).

before and Fergusson after) and MacDiarmid can be bridged by perceiving their common capacity to exploit the possibilities of the 'antisyzygy', and keep the opposites in play. MacDiarmid borrowed a maxim from Schopenhauer to justify his penchant for eccentricity of character: 'Whatever course of action we take in life there is always some element in our nature which could only find satisfaction in exactly a contrary course'.

MacDiarmid quotes this sentence in *Scottish Eccentrics* (p. 299), the book which, by expounding his own thesis of Scottish identity, prepared the ground for later investigations into the characteristics of the Scottish psyche and the predicament of the Scottish writer.⁵ Most of these studies present us with a common thematic pivot: the Scot is a divided individual, psychologically split into two or more personalities as a consequence of the historical and cultural developments which Scotland underwent. Moreover several of the authors of such studies interpret these inner conflicts and divisions within Scotland as a source of disability and weakness for the Scottish arts, because they believe that any cultural and artistic renaissance is possible only in a climate of political and social harmony, and with linguistic unity. Both MacDiarmid's writing and other later studies back up my belief that works of great literary merit can be produced in a situation of political and cultural conflict, thus substantiating Edwin Morgan's point that 'an awareness of the continuously shifting potentialities and admixtures of a varied and unsettled language situation can stimulate the art of writing in individual cases [...]'.⁶

The history of Scotland does suggest some legitimacy in the various theories on the division of Scottish identity, but what may be questioned is whether the actual effects of certain events of Scottish history were as purely negative as some critics want us to believe. The two Acts of Union of 1603 and 1707 did not mark the absolute beginning of the Anglicisation of Scottish arts and education; rather they were two crucial events increasing the sense of a diminishing Scottish national identity.⁷

⁵ I will return to these texts later in this chapter.

⁶ Edwin Morgan, *Crossing the Border. Essays in Scottish Literature* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1990), p. 14.

⁷ For a discussion of Anglicisation see Duncan Glen, *The Poetry of the Scots* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991).

The Saxons pushed northwards by the Normans in the eleventh century may have started the process, and even during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when Scottish language and literature were distinct and independent from England, English literature -- together with European literature (Italian and French, in particular) -- exercised prolonged influence on the Scots, especially through Chaucer and his contemporaries. One hundred years before the Union of the Crowns, James IV of Scotland married an English princess, a daughter of Henry VII of England, and by virtue of this wedding James VI eventually inherited his right to the English throne. Between these two events Scotland committed itself to Protestantism, an act with serious repercussions on the literature and the language of the country, since the introduction of the English Geneva version of the Bible by John Knox brought about the development of an educational system which elected English as its official language.

From around 1560, therefore, the process of Anglicisation was already under way. Nonetheless, the Scottish tradition in poetry was never eliminated by this process, nor was the use of Scots as the language of poetry, because, as T. S. Eliot has observed:

It is easier to think in a foreign language than it is to feel in it. Therefore no art is more stubbornly national than poetry. A people may have its language taken away from it, suppressed, and another language compelled upon the schools; but unless you teach that people to *feel* in a new language, you have not eradicated the old one, and it will reappear in poetry which is the vehicle of feeling [...].⁸

Similarly, Duncan Glen refuses to see the Union of the Crowns as 'the day a blind came down on the Scots tradition in poetry', and stresses that 'poetry can flourish

⁸ Quoted in David Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People. 1680-1830*, p. 235. In many respects this statement looks forward to Muir's theory of the language of the heart and the language of the mind.

under the most harsh of political circumstances as the poets of twentieth-century Russia have shown' (p. xxix). Indeed Scottish poetry did flourish both in Scots and in English, surviving the Act of Union in 1707 as well as the Disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843. One needs merely open the anthologies of Scottish poetry of the last two centuries to find the evidence confirming this claim. Fortunately more and more critics are beginning to acknowledge that political stability is not a prerogative for the development of arts. It has been said that

[...] if Scotland remained a nation after its crown and parliament went to London, then the soul of a nation was a more abstruse thing than a monarch and a legislature. But whatever it was it seemed it must be one thing, variegated, complex, richly diverse, perhaps, but held together by some power of convergence, or centred on some essential national *geist*.

The same critic adds that 'it is certain that the old concept of a community of people united by language, culture, geography and political convention will be radically revised'.⁹ Certainly, since the Middle Ages up to the present, Scotland has used a variety of languages for poetic purposes -- Latin and Gaelic, as well as English and Scots. Hence it is impossible to argue that a Scottish national literature requires the existence of a single national language.

Originally both Scots and English were dialects of Anglo-Saxon origin, but historical circumstances meant that the Southern version, Middle English, became the official language of England. Although one should never forget that there was a time when Scotland possessed its own independent language, or languages, a long time has elapsed since then, during which many things have changed. Nowadays, few people would feel English to be a foreign language, unless they were born and brought up in the Gaelic speaking area of Scotland like the poet Iain Crichton Smith (but even there

⁹ Anon (or the editors Crawford, Dunn, Kerrigan, McGuirk, Riach, and MacLachlan), 'Introduction' to *Scottlands*, 1 (1994), unnumbered pages.

English has long coexisted with Gaelic). Certainly, one cannot help considering MacDiarmid's work as a linguistic and cultural revolution of crucial importance for the future of Scotland, although some aspects of his battle against the English absorption of Scottish culture and for the creation of a new 'synthetic' Scots might appear too propagandistic and political. MacDiarmid criticised Burns's shifting from Scots to English -- for example, in *Tam O'Shanter* -- and the fusion of the two languages in other poems, but his own later writing arises the question of whether he eventually accepted that it was possible to convey the same messages, and express the same contents, by means of stylistic and linguistic varieties. Maybe he came to the conclusion that linguistic disunity is not the first enemy to combat in order to restore Scottish identity. Thus, in one of his essays MacDiarmid was to declare: 'I'm looking for a diversity in unity, not for a unification of languages'.¹⁰

Scottish literature presents us with many examples of how it is possible to adopt English and still belong to the Scottish literary tradition. Scott, Hogg, Stevenson, Davidson and Geddes, to mention only a few, wrote works which, even if largely in English, can unquestionably be classified as 'Scottish' in terms of themes, settings, imagery, and ideas. Both Scott and Stevenson became European figures because their innovative styles, techniques and subjects influenced the literatures of many foreign countries, but their works continuously remind the reader of their Scottish origins and identity. The satirical poems of James Young Geddes, although they are written in English, recall a long poetic line which begins with the flyting of the Makars, passes through the reductive idiom of the eighteenth-century vernacular poets, and arrives at the mock-heroic -- half-humorous, half-serious -- tirade of MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. Therefore, the linguistic schizophrenia originating first from the establishment of Protestantism, later from the Union of the Crowns, and finally from the Union of Parliaments did not stop both eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature from developing and finding its own modes of expression. This argument goes against Edwin Muir's and Paul Scott's theories.

At the centre of Muir's *Scott and Scotland. The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (1936) is the debate over language, and, applied to it, the theory of the dissociation of sensibility, which he borrowed from T. S. Eliot, in order to explain the lack of intellectual import and stylistic panache in Scottish poetry after the Golden Age of the Makars. His argument is synthetically expressed in the following statement:

Scottish literature, considered linguistically, may be divided into Early Scots, Middle Scots, and Anything At All. The first two periods exhibit a certain homogeneity of language and as result of that a definite style; the third, which began tentatively with Knox [...] and definitely with the acceptance of the English translation of the Bible, signalises a disintegration of the language of Scottish literature and the disappearance of a distinctive Scottish style.

[...] this linguistic division means that Scotsmen feel in one language and think in another; that their emotions turn to the Scottish tongue [...] and their minds to a standard English which for them is almost bare of associations other than those of the classroom.¹¹

From these premises he deduces that from a certain point onwards, coinciding more or less with the adoption of the English translation of the Bible and the establishment of the Protestant Church, Scottish literature began to lack that intellectual beauty and that sense of harmony which, in Muir's view, only derive from the mutual control that heart and mind exercise on each other; the result is a tendency towards extreme expressions -- on the one hand, excessive sentimentalism, and on the other, abstract, arid thought. Scots had then become the language of the former, and English the language of the latter, argued Muir; an idea which MacDiarmid overtly attacked in his

¹⁰ 'MacDiarmid on MacDiarmid', in *The Uncanny Scot*, ed. by Kenneth Buthlay (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), pp. 170-173 (p. 171).

¹¹ E. Muir, *Scott and Scotland. The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1936), pp. 17, 21.

Introduction to *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry* (1948), defending the use of Scots in dealing with intellectual subjects and also the value of Scottish comic verse, against Muir's dismissal of this tradition as bawdy and void.¹² Two years before Muir, R. L. Mackie had written that the Scottish writer excels in songs and ballads but not in odes and epics, that he 'can achieve perfection only when he works within narrow limits', and that 'he lives a life of sensations, not of thoughts'.¹³ But Muir was prepared to define the predicament of Scottish writing in even more apocalyptic terms going on to mention

[...] that reciprocally destructive confrontation of both [feeling and intellect] for which Gregory Smith found the name of the 'Caledonian Antisyzygy': a recognition that they are irreconcilable, and that Scottish life is split in two beyond remedy. (p. 61)

Muir's theory is not wholly convincing. The presence of opposing and mutually contradictory aspects in Scottish poetry is seen by Muir as a doom condemning poetry to contain 'no principle of progress, no dialectic' and to 'remain stationary'.¹⁴ On the contrary, I see it as a source of creative energy and in no means as an obstacle to artistic production. Moreover, the theory of the separation of feeling and thought, and of the two respective languages to express them, is flawed by an element of artificiality. When a dominant foreign language supersedes the native language, because specific historical circumstances favoured the former instead of the latter, to what extent can it be said that the subjugated speakers begin to *feel* in one language (their own) and *think* in another (the foreign one)? Would it not be more appropriate to talk about a split between an 'interior' and an 'exterior' language, that is, between the language which comes more naturally to give expression to *both*

¹² Introduction to *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Literature*, ed. by Hugh MacDiarmid (London: Macmillan, 1946), pp. vii-xxxvii, *passim*.

¹³ *A Book of Scottish Verse*, ed. by R. L. Mackie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), pp. v-xix (p. xix).

¹⁴ *Scott and Scotland*, p. 62.

feeling *and* thought, and, the language which one is forced to use in the intercourse of society, given that it has become the official language of the establishment?

What may have happened is that, from the moment English was recognised as the first language of both Scotland and England, the Scottish writer was affected by a kind of linguistic schizophrenia, whereby the language of his heart *and also* of his mind was Scots, but new social demands compelled him to learn and use English if he wanted to be accepted by the system produced by the Acts of Union. For how long the Scot experienced this psychological and cultural uneasiness is hard to say, but certainly, on reading Scott's, Stevenson's, Hogg's and Galt's works one does not get the impression that they were writing in an alien language, and the same applies also to the writers of the Enlightenment and even to some of Burns's poems. Therefore to say that 'Scottish dialect poetry is a regression to childhood' and that 'dialect Scots is associated with childhood, and English with maturity'¹⁵ may not reflect accurately the linguistic situation shared by many nineteenth-century writers. It is also true, though, that when these writers make use of Scots words, the text becomes endowed with associations with the past and old community values, which equivalent English expressions would fail to convey. Perhaps this is what MacDiarmid meant when he said that 'the value of the Doric [Scots] lies in the extent to which it contains lapsed or unrealized qualities which correspond to "unconscious" elements of distinctively Scottish psychology'.¹⁶

Muir overemphasised the relation between the lack of a homogeneous language and the alienation of the individual, and, consequently, the decline of an autonomous national literature -- 'the curse of Scottish literature is the lack of a whole language, which finally means the lack of a whole mind', he wrote.¹⁷ T. S. Eliot anticipated this idea when he asserted that 'Scottish literature lacks [...] the continuity of a language', and that 'the basis for one literature is one language'.¹⁸ After the

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 71.

¹⁶ 'Introducing "Hugh MacDiarmid"', in *Hugh MacDiarmid. Selected Prose*, ed. by Alan Riach, pp. 8-12 (p. 11).

¹⁷ *Scott and Scotland*, pp. 22.

¹⁸ T. S. Eliot, 'Was There a Scottish Literature?'. Review of *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence*. By G. Gregory Smith', *Athenaeum*, 1 August 1919, pp. 680-681 (p. 681).

Makars, writes Muir in *Scott and Scotland*, 'Scots speech not only became localized; it thinned to a trickle' (p. 83). There are illuminating studies on the different usages of English and Scots in the literary works,¹⁹ whereas my concern is especially for the thematic components of Scottish poetry which reflect the protean identities of their authors. This is the reason why, despite its underlying nationalistic strain, Gregory Smith's book *Scottish Literature. Character and Influence* (1919) can still be found enlightening and fascinating in some respects. Its central flaw is to consider the coexistence of opposite moods as an exclusive prerogative of Scottish literature, when there are examples of an equal or a similar aspect in the literature and art of other European countries.²⁰ Nevertheless, there is surely validity in its central argument that objective reasons exist to see the yoking of opposites and the coexistence of contradictory aspects as a characteristic of Scottish culture -- from the paradoxes and dualisms of eighteenth-century culture to the nineteenth-century 'Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde' syndrome, and the twentieth-century's re-evaluation of Scotland's 'eccentric' qualities.

On the other hand, Smith's -- like any kind of -- critical generalisation should be treated with some circumspection, because it might contain assumptions reflecting an uncritical cultural nationalism. Indeed, by considering cultural Antiszygy as a typically Scottish trait, Smith, perhaps unintentionally, emphasised, rather than opposed, Scotland's provincialism and insularity. After all, Matthew Arnold pointed out a similar dualism in the Englishman many years before Smith's book was published -- that is, the tension between the Germanic and the Celtic spirit, which are almost

¹⁹ See Emma Letley, *From Galt to Douglas Brown: Nineteenth-Century Fiction and Scots Language* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988). Letley's argument that a dominant authorial English language encloses a sympathetic and vivid Scots is fascinating, although her main point is that Scots is essentially used by minor characters.

²⁰ See, for instance, John Bayley's *The Romantic Survival* (London: Constable, 1957), in which he describes the various kinds of polarities which characterise Romantic literature, and one of them is the dualism of realism and fantasy which Gregory Smith emphasises in his book.

equivalent to Smith's realistic and fantastic moods.²¹ However, this does not invalidate the truth lying behind some of Smith's crucial statements:

Perhaps in the very combination of opposites [...] we have a reflection of the contrasts which the Scot shows at every turn, in his political and ecclesiastical history, in his polemical restlessness, in his adaptability [...] (pp. 4-5)

The mixing of contraries -- 'intermingledons', to recall Burns's word -- helps to explain the presence of certain qualities which have come to be considered as characteristic of Scottish literature. (p. 34)

Smith goes on to say what these qualities are: the talent for the picturesque; the mingling of the real with the fantastic, the sacred with the profane, the natural with the supernatural; a peculiar kind of humour (pp. 35-36). Smith does not present the Caledonian Antisyzygy as disabling Scottish arts and letters; this perception became the springboard of MacDiarmid's campaign to prove that cultural antinomies could be turned from a weakness into a source of intellectual and spiritual energy for Scottish literature.

Conversely, Edwin Muir could only recognise the mutually destructive action of the opposites, and conceived the irreconcilable clash between the fantastic and the real, the comic and the serious as a damaging factor for Scottish literature. In his study, he points out that from the eighteenth century until today Scottish writing is either devoted to the expression of overflowing feeling -- often degenerating into sentimentalism -- or of abstract thought, and arid rational investigation. Muir was only partly right; if part of Scottish poetry produced after Burns can be dismissed as pseudo-Romantic and Kailyard in the most derogatory meaning of these terms, on the other hand, there is also a substantial body of poetry which deserves consideration.

²¹ Matthew Arnold, *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. by R. H. Super, 5 vols (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1962), III: *Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, pp. 360-361.

This poetry works against Muir's claim that the 'two polar twins of the Scottish Muse'²² -- the real and the fantastic, and, parallel to them, the comic and the serious -- failed to find a controlled expression in literature after the advent of Presbyterianism. Some critics denied the existence of any Scottish literature at all from the eighteenth century onwards. For example, John Speirs almost seems to hint that Scottish literature came to a standstill after the age of Dunbar, when Scots stopped being used as a literary national language -- 'that is why there has been no Scottish literature (and indeed no literature in Scotland of any kind) since the eighteenth century'.²³ It is not clear whether or not he preserves the eighteenth-century vernacular tradition from total dismissal.

The critic Paul H. Scott transposes the end of the 'purely Scotch age' to a later date;²⁴ the eighteenth century was for him a period in which the Scottish vernacular literary tradition was still alive despite the first emergence of the process of Anglicisation. It is afterwards, and especially post-1830, that Scott perceives the deterioration of Scottish poetry, when it began to sink to the sentimental Kailyard. As I have already pointed out in the Introduction, with the publication of books such as William Donaldson's *Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland* and Tom Leonard's *Radical Renfrew*, this general view has been undermined. Yet not enough has been done in order to give full recognition to those poets who, because of their status outside the literary 'canon', and because they somehow refuted the conventional values of their time, were neglected then, and largely continue to be so.

Nevertheless, some critics have attempted to rescue the nineteenth century from a totally dismissive judgement. Douglas Young, although he stresses the general 'impotence of poetry in Victorian Scotland',²⁵ has the merit of having included John Davidson, together with Stevenson, among the prominent voices of late nineteenth-century Scottish poetry, but he spends very few words on James Thomson, Alexander Smith, and James Young Geddes. He points out the linguistic division of the time

²² G. G. Smith, p. 20.

²³ John Speirs, *The Scots Literary Tradition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 154.

²⁴ Phrase which Paul H. Scott borrowed from Henry Cockburn, *Memorials of His Time* (1856), and quoted in his essay 'The Last Purely Scotch Age', p. 15.

²⁵ D. Young, 'Scottish Poetry in the Later Nineteenth Century', p. 236.

between standard literary English -- employed for 'major flights' (p. 240)-- and Scots, which 'they tended to restrict in literary use to childish themes' (p. 239). Kurt Wittig offers a fairer -- though less detailed -- study of nineteenth-century Scottish literature in *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (1958), where he particularly stresses the strong Anglo-Scot component of certain writers, such as Byron, Carlyle, Thomson and Davidson, and the related dualisms and ambiguities at the heart of their works. He underlines the 'mixture of the serious and the grotesque' in Carlyle, the coexistence of aspects derived from Scottish culture and from the English tradition in Davidson and Thomson, whom he considers two examples of 'split personality'.²⁶ The dualistic pattern is crucial in Wittig and other contemporary critics; their common aim is to show that the divisions in Scottish culture and society from the eighteenth century onwards were reflected in the literary production of the time.

Daiches wrote two studies about the paradoxes and divisions of eighteenth-century Scotland, both of them developing Muir's theory of the dissociation of sensibility, and of the two languages available to Scottish writers. The first one, *The Paradox of Scottish Culture*, appeared in 1964. It elaborates Muir's claim that the Union of the Crowns and Parliaments marked the end of a courtly tradition in Scotland and the beginning of an increasingly strong influence coming from England. The result was that English became the official language, while Scots was downgraded to humorous subjects and the poetry of rustic merriment.²⁷ The question which inevitably comes to mind is, 'to what extent can comic poetry become the vehicle of serious messages?'

This problem is handled more successfully by Daiches in his second study on the eighteenth century, *Literature and Gentility in Scotland* (1982). Here Daiches still maintains that the poets were divided in their use of Scots and English, but he calls attention to an interesting difference between Ramsay's and Fergusson's choices when facing this linguistic bifurcation. While Ramsay made a separate use of Scots and English according to his poetic aims and themes, Fergusson, on the other hand, often

²⁶ K. Wittig, pp. 242-244.

²⁷ David Daiches, *The Paradox of Scottish Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 23.

produced a mixture of the two languages and of the two registers conventionally associated with them (the serious for English and the comic for Scots). The effect of such a juxtaposition is tremendous; the fusion of the 'low' and the 'high' is so well achieved that it generates an inversion of the two categories, so that what then was seen as 'high' (uppishness and pretentiousness of manners, as well as religious orthodoxy) ends up appearing 'low'. This is what the so-called reductive idiom achieves in the poetry of Ramsay, Fergusson, and, later on, Burns, Hogg, Geddes, and eventually MacDiarmid and other poets of the Scottish Renaissance. In most cases, it is the treatment of the subject rather than the subject itself which produces comic effects, and this applies to eighteenth-century as well as to nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry. The link between Ramsay, Fergusson and MacDiarmid is also linguistic, given that the kind of Scots adopted by the two eighteenth-century poets can be defined as 'synthetic', resulting from the fusion of different contemporary vernacular elements with the 'high' style of Middle Scots.

The late nineteenth-century poets I have selected for analysis inherited that crisis of identity and those oscillations of moods which Kenneth Simpson attributed to the eighteenth-century Scot in his illuminating study *The Protean Scot. The Crisis of Identity in Eighteenth Century Scottish Literature* (1988). In *Late Victorian Attitudes* (1969) David Daiches seems to pass by this aspect when he talks about James Thomson and his poem *The City of Dreadful Night*, whereas he emphasises the links between the Scottish poet and previous or contemporary European writers. He ignored the fact that James Thomson, in another time and in another place (since he lived most of his life in London), was experiencing inner conflicts and facing contradictions similar to those affecting Scottish culture in the eighteenth century.

Simpson's study aims to show that a protean sensibility characterised Scottish literature from the eighteenth century onwards because of the effects produced especially by the Union of 1707, but also because of the clash between the European wave of Romantic literature, which inevitably influenced the Scottish arts, and the repressive force of Scottish Calvinism arguing against the validity of any work of creative imagination. To these factors could be added the Scot's deep-rooted fear of the excessive individualism of the Romantics, as representing a threat against the

values of Scottish community. Although Simpson admits that the eighteenth century was a century of radical change for all of Europe, he treats Scotland as a special case, and presents such dualisms as realism and romance, rationalism and imagination, sentimentalism and satire of sentimentalism, primitivism and progress, heart and mind as affecting Scotland in a very peculiar and remarkable way; the result was a situation in Scotland in which the human spirit needed to be 'protean' in order to compensate the 'inability to feel whole'.²⁸

The role-playing and the projection of alternative selves and voices on the part of writers were ways of responding to the increasing power of the country's Anglicised official culture. Certainly, Scotland is not the only multiethnic country in Europe or in the world to have experienced cultural conflicts it.²⁹ A similar condition affects other countries which saw their own national customs and institutions being turned into a minority culture as the result of their subjugation by a more powerful system -- for example, England's ex-colonies. Simpson suggests instead -- and to my mind reductively -- that such aspects as the multiplicity of voices and the crisis of identity represent distinctive marks of the Scottish psyche and, by projection, of Scottish literature, thus setting Scotland apart from other national cultures. As for Gregory Smith, for Simpson the 'Antisyzygy' is essentially and specifically a 'Caledonian' trait.

Another recent study describes the Caledonian Antisyzygy as a mental condition from which the Scots can hardly escape. I refer to Alan Bold's *An Open Book* (1990), in which the all too familiar notion of antithetical mind and Dr Jekyll-Mr Hyde syndrome are emphasised as typically Scottish peculiarities. Once again one might object to analysing Scottish literature according to a labelling paradigm, and also to considering the dualistic pattern as distinctively Scottish. Yet Bold underlines very interesting points, which are particularly relevant to the eccentrics of my study.

²⁸ Kenneth Simpson, *The Protean Scot. The Crisis of Identity in Eighteenth Century Scottish Literature* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), p. 246.

²⁹ Hamish Henderson has pointed out the similarity between Scotland and Switzerland for instance: 'Scotland, like Switzerland, is [...] a multiethnic country [...] Never throughout its entire history has the country had one single unitary language, covering its whole area'. See 'The Ballad and Popular Tradition to 1660', in *The History of Scottish Literature*, ed. by C. Craig and others, I: *Origins to 1660*, ed. by R. D. S. Jack, , pp. 263-283 (p. 263).

Concerning the Scot's eccentricities of behaviour, he remarks that 'the extremism of the Scot, which ranges from lachrymose sentimentality to vicious brutality and from cosy domesticity to disorderly drunkenness, is evidence of uncertainty', and he adds that 'Scottish literature seeks to make artistic sense of the confusion'.³⁰ What interests me most, though, is Bold's linking the cultural and historical divisions of Scotland with peculiar aspects and techniques permeating Scottish writing: 'contrast and counterpoint, juxtaposition and antithesis, paradox and parallelism' (p. 126). Indeed, these literary devices were copiously adopted by the poets I have selected; they are the artistic reflection of their personal eccentricity.

The most recent studies in Scottish culture and literature, such as Robert Crawford's *Devolving English Literature* (1992), Cairns Craig's *Out of History. Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (1996), Marshall Walker's *Scottish Literature Since 1707* (1996), and Crawford's and Christopher Whyte's theories of Scottish literature based on Bakhtin's ideas,³¹ tend to avoid identifying fixed ideological patterns and a continuing Scottish tradition, and propose instead a re-evaluation of the notions of periphery, cultural pluralism and fluid canonicity, which suit Scotland much better than any attempt to see it as one culture marked by rigid features. There is an echo here of Edwin Morgan's statement 'CHANGE RULES is the supreme graffito'.³²

Craig attacks Eliot's and Muir's contention that an 'organic' and a unified tradition based on an established centre is necessary in order for any writer to achieve success, while his view is that 'we need a peripheral perspective that allows us to draw our own lines of filiation, within our own culture, between ourselves and the core cultures, but most important of all between ourselves and other peripheral cultures'.³³

³⁰ Alan Bold, *An Open Book* (Edinburgh: MacDonald Publishers, 1990), p. 125.

³¹ I refer in particular to the following studies: Christopher Whyte, 'Bakhtin at Christ's Kirk: Carnival and the Scottish Renaissance', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 28 (1993), 178-203; Robert Crawford, 'Introduction. Bakhtin and the Identifying Poet', in *Identifying Poets. Self and Territory in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 1-15, and by the same author 'Bakhtin and Scotlands', *Scotlands*, 1 (1994), 55-65.

³² Edwin Morgan, 'Preface' to *Essays* (Cheadle: Carcanet New Press Ltd, 1974), p. vii.

³³ Cairns Craig, *Out of History. Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), p. 30.

This is similarly expressed by Crawford through the notion of 'dialogic encounter of cultures'.³⁴ Crawford borrows Bakhtin's conception of identity -- as 'formed and reformed through language' -- and dialogic discourse in support of his own view of national identity as fluid and changeable -- 'too many of us like to believe that there is one true Scotland', he writes (p. 57). He underlines the 'heteroglossic condition' of Scotland (p. 60) against the vision of a monolingual society. Likewise, Walker observes that 'peripheries are asserting themselves in a global fugue of regional accents' and that 'it is time for the peripheral culture to reassess itself, respecting the canon as formative fact but shaking off fear like a handful of dust'.³⁵

These studies are fascinating and illuminating, but there is no denying the fact that the word 'tradition' can still be used to express the specific affinities linking some Scottish writers, even when the tradition is not monolithic but characterised by contradictions and eccentricities, or, as Walker suggests, by 'a sequence of highs and lows' (p. 16). Most studies in Scottish literature substantiate the theory that a strong line of Scottish poetry is characterised by the juxtaposition, and sometimes the inversion, of opposite moods, registers and categories, and that each poet belonging to this line was to confront contradictory cultural choices. Each of them, in different degrees, experienced a crisis of identity, because society expected them to make their own choice between antithetical positions. However, many of them could not find a definite way out of the maze of contradictions, nor were they able to face and control them; so they ended up being overwhelmed by them, and, as a consequence, some of them lost their psychological balance. Who succeeded were those writers who learnt how to make a profitable use of the contradictions, and who gave up looking for a solution to the problem of identity, and accepted it as part of human life.

In short, from the eighteenth century onwards Scottish poets dealt either successfully or unsuccessfully with the cultural divisions of their time and the effects they produced on their identity. Both Hogg and MacDiarmid, at the two extremes of my analysis, usually succeeded in exploiting advantageously the energy which may

³⁴ 'Bakhtin and Scotlands', p. 59.

³⁵ Marshall Walker, *Scottish Literature Since 1707* (London and New York: Longman Limited, 1996), p. 19.

derive from the 'Antisyzygy' of opposite realities. In his own peculiar manner, Byron achieved the same, but among the late nineteenth-century poets very few managed to handle the clashing of faith and doubt, Scottish origins and English authority, as well as many other polarities, without suffering distressing consequences -- Geddes is perhaps the only exception.

ii. A step backward: eccentricities in the eighteenth century

Speak my ain leed, tis gueed auld Scots I mean;
 Your Southren gnaps, I count not worth a preen.
 We've words a fouth, that we can ca' our ain,
 Tho' frae them now my childer sair refrain,
 An' are to my gueed auld proverb confeerin -
 Neither gueed fish nor flesh, nor yet sa't herrin.³⁶

Alexander Ross, one of the most important representatives of eighteenth-century Scottish vernacular poetry, was here referring to the corruption of the 'pure' vernacular which the *literati* provoked by favouring the process of Anglicisation, and the infiltration of English elements into the native speech. In other words, Ross was reversing the establishment's view that Scots was a degenerate, vulgarised form of English. This was the generally accepted opinion, resulting for example in James Beattie's publication of a list of 'Scoticisms' to be avoided in speech, after Thomas Sheridan had delivered a series of lectures on proper diction in Edinburgh in 1761.³⁷ Likewise, Henry Mackenzie wrote articles in *The Mirror* (1779) and its successor, *The*

³⁶ Alexander Ross, 'Helenore', in *Longer Scottish Poems*, ed. by T. Crawford, D. Hewitt, A. Law, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), II: 1650-1830, pp. 80-95 (p. 83).

³⁷ James Beattie, *Scoticisms, Arranged in Alphabetical Order, Designed to Correct Improproprieties of Speech and Writing* (1799). See Trevor Royle, *The Macmillan Companion to Scottish Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 256: 'a list of 200 words which might be used by those who 'had no opportunity of learning English from the company they kept'.

Lounger (1785-1787), in favour of a total omission of Scots idioms from English style. Ross's *Helenore* appeared in 1768, and it represents one of the first protestations against the suppression of Scots on the part of Anglicised members of society. In Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), the character called Lismahago is the spokesman for a similar defence of Scots when he says that what is conventionally called Scottish dialect is in fact genuine old English. He is a comic character, and doubt remains whether one is supposed to take his words seriously or not, but, in any case, the passage alerts the reader to the idea, and this is enough to make one ponder on its significance.

The linguistic dilemma was certainly one source of controversy between the vernacular and the Anglicised poets of the eighteenth century. The issue is more complicated than it seems, owing to the complex, ambiguous relationship between the two apparently antithetical parties. The general view that the *literati* of the Enlightenment on the one hand, and the poets of the Vernacular Revival on the other represent the crucial literary and linguistic dichotomy of the century is far too simplistic -- it ignores, for example, the existence of literatures in both Latin and Gaelic. In fact, the *literati* were themselves just as much victims of inner schizophrenia and divisions as were most of the poets commonly called Scottish Augustans or Anglo-Scots.³⁸

Some critics have pointed out that the *literati*'s obsession with linguistic purism and the banishment of dialect elements from their writing was contradicted by the use of Scots, or a Scottish variety of English, in their daily intercourse and conversation. Also they saw Scots as attractive in songs, proverbs, folk-tales, and admired Burns's poetry both in English and Scots. In fact, to speak perfect English was more of an aspiration of the well-educated upper-class than a fact.³⁹ Moreover, the same critics warn us against false interpretations of the vernacular used by Ramsay,

³⁸ The adjective 'Augustan' derives from the age of the Emperor Octavio Augustus (I century B.C), the age when Horace, Virgil and Ovid lived. The expression 'Scottish Augustans' is taken from A. M. Oliver's essay 'The Scottish Augustans', in *Scottish Poetry: A Critical Survey*, pp. 119-149.

³⁹ As regards this theme, see David Hewitt, 'Scoticisms and Cultural Conflicts', in *The Literature of Region and Nation*, ed. by R. P. Draper (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 131-133.

Burns and Fergusson. Hewitt, for instance, describes the Scots used in the most representative works of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century as '[...] a clear talking style, which was characterised by a highly rhetorical shifting of register [...] this style [...] became the *matter of art* [my italics] in poems like "The Cotter's Saturday Night" and "Tam O'Shanter", and in the novels of Scott and Galt'.⁴⁰ If the style they used was a 'matter of art', it could not be simply derived from colloquial speech. The phrase implies that the Scots they used was in a sense a creation, the result of individual procedures and exercises to give birth to a sort of high-style vernacular -- an oxymoron, but, after all, is there a more suitable figure of speech for an age full of paradoxes?

Edwin Muir, as we have seen, originated a theory of 'two languages', in which he saw Scots as the language of feeling, and English as the language of thought. Related to this is the view that Scots is the 'natural' language and English the language imposed from the outside system and therefore 'unnatural'. Whether one agrees with this theory or not, one needs to add another term to that dualism, in order to define the kind of language used by the vernacular poets in the eighteenth century. It might be called the 'literary' language, which attempts to find a balance between the purely colloquial and the purely formal. David Craig suggests that, in any event, the vernacular component was stronger than the English one:

[...] if it is true that the vernacular had come to be considered as the old language and that the poetry of Ramsay and Fergusson was affected by an antiquarian tendency in using it, nevertheless it is often strikingly evident in Fergusson's (and Ramsay's and Burns's) poetry that, whatever forms and styles they took over from English literature, it was Scots that welled up in them as the right medium, and the only right medium, for whatever they felt at a creative

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 132.

level.⁴¹

In Burns's poetry Scots and English are often mixed both in grammar and syntax, and this was the solution adopted by several poets of his age facing the linguistic dilemmas and conflicts of their society. MacDiarmid strongly objected to such a compromising attitude, because he liked to be 'whaur extremes meet', without fusing them; but in the eighteenth century, poets had to find ways of mediating their radicalism, and to utilise circuitous means to articulate what they really wanted to say, since it was more convenient for them to gain the sympathy rather than the censorship of the *literati*. The attempt to make use of a mélange of English and Scots forms was not always successful. It certainly was in Burns, because he had the ability to absorb the English influences without being dominated by them, which enabled him 'to achieve [...] a fusion of contrasting levels of language that is quite typical of the greatest poems of the Scots tradition'.⁴² The reductive idiom and irony allowed the writers to convey unorthodox ideas in oblique ways, and therefore without arousing the scorn of Edinburgh intelligentsia. In fact, the *literati* loved Burns and involved him in their social life, which raises the question of why they did not treat Fergusson in the same way. After all, Fergusson had an admiration for the classics similar to theirs, and several of his poems anticipate the themes of Burns's poetry. Essentially, one difference between the two poets accounts for the *literati*'s dissimilar attitude towards them.

Fergusson's poetry, on the whole, has one main protagonist, which is the pivot around which all the other images of the poems rotate: the city of Edinburgh. 'The Farmer's Ingle' is probably the only remarkable exception. On the other hand, Burns's poems present us almost uniquely with pictures of rural life or idylls of rustic habits, apart from 'The Twa Dogs', which, not accidentally, is modelled on mock debate poems by Ramsay and outstandingly on Fergusson's 'Mutual Complaint of Plainstones and Causey, in Their Mother-Tongue'. It was not so much the choice of

⁴¹ D. Craig, p. 239.

⁴² D. Glen, p. xxx.

urban subjects itself which the *literati* objected to, as the particular way Fergusson handled them, together with his language and style of expression. In spite of his love for Edinburgh, or maybe because of it, Fergusson did not neglect any aspect of the town in his descriptions, which are invariably realistic, a faithful poetic projection of the real city with its topographical and social divisions. He wanted Edinburgh to appear on the page as it really was, whereas the realistic portrayal of its meaner aspects represented a risk for the *literati*, because it destroyed the idealistic image of the Augustan town -- the so-called Athens of the North -- which they had created. Fergusson anticipated both Hogg's and Scott's ambiguous response to the social and economic changes of their time; their awareness of the inevitability of progress and the commercialising of life was not strong enough to repress their nostalgia for the old time when the values of the community counted for more than the individual achievement of each of its members. In a sense, Fergusson's choice and treatment of urban themes were ironic, because in his heart he still had the rural community as an ideal, but city-scape, and in particular Edinburgh life, offered him very wide possibilities to ridicule and deflate the affairs of the upper-class by means of his common-sense language.

Reductive idiom corresponds more or less to what David Craig defines as 'country wit',⁴³ a slight variation from Burns's 'countra wit' -- that is, the peculiarly disrespectful and suddenly debasing form of mockery and self-mockery which characterises many Scottish poems from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. It is present in Fergusson, in Burns, later in Hogg, and in MacDiarmid, especially when he describes drinking as a means of release, and an escape into misrule.⁴⁴ Edwin Morgan has remarked that 'in a country where life tended to be harder, and people poorer, than in England, uppishness and pretentiousness were ready targets for mockery, and the well-known and not always very amiable Scottish "reductive idiom" makes its

⁴³ D. Craig, p. 76.

⁴⁴ It would be interesting to explore the unrecognised indebtedness of MacDiarmid to Fergusson. There are obvious links between *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* and some of Fergusson's holiday poems. First, the use of a concrete language based on physical, sometimes crude, descriptions; secondly, the relationship between drink and fantasy, as opposed to sober rationality; thirdly the Bakhtinian, radical value of any form of misrule and release from inhibitions.

appearance [...].⁴⁵ Douglas Gifford describes it as an 'ironic juxtapositioning with high-flown assertions of romantic idealism, in a kind of self-mockery or parody within the fiction's apparent romanticism [...]'.⁴⁶ Reductive idiom consists of 'reducing' high-flown subjects to a down-to-earth, everyday level by means of a satirical matter-of-fact language, so that what is conventionally seen as high is exposed as fundamentally low and pretentious. This use of reductive idiom was resented by the upper-class and Edinburgh *literati*, and this was another reason why they did not like Fergusson. Conversely, they enjoyed reading and listening to Burns's poetry because they completely misunderstood the satirical component of his verses. Years later, Matthew Arnold fell into the same trap; in spite of his admiration of Burns's poetic talent, he limited the content of his works to three subjects: 'Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners'.⁴⁷ Burns's poems 'To A Louse' or 'Holy Willie's Prayer' are two of the best examples of reductive idiom, but the *literati* failed to perceive the irony of these poems, because they were disoriented -- and unconsciously deceived -- by Burns's role-playing and shifting identities.

What an antithetical mind! -- tenderness, roughness -- delicacy,
coarseness -- sentiment, sensuality -- soaring and grovelling, dirt
and deity -- all mixed up in that one compound of inspired clay!⁴⁸

This description of Burns was written by Byron, who must have perceived in Burns's multiple personality a reflection of his own contradictoriness. Hogg, another member of the 'strange procession'⁴⁹ of Scottish eccentrics, admired both Burns and Byron presumably for similar reasons.

⁴⁵ See Introduction to *Scottish Satirical Verse. An Anthology*, ed. by Edwin Morgan (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1980), pp. xi-xix (p. xi).

⁴⁶ Gifford, 'Introduction', in *The History of Scottish Literature*, III, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Matthew Arnold, 'The Study of Poetry', in *Essays in Criticism*, Second Series, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1921), pp. 1-55 (p. 44).

⁴⁸ Byron's Journal, 31 December 1813, in *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols (London: John Murray, 1973), III, p. 239.

⁴⁹ MacDiarmid makes use of this term in *Scottish Eccentrics*, p. 261.

An extensive analysis of Burns's protean identity can be found in Simpson's *The Protean Scot*; my purpose here is to provide a short summary of his internal conflicts, which anticipate the inner strife and ambiguities of later poets. Burns's psychological divisions found an outer expression in the different roles he played in Edinburgh society, and especially in his relationship with the *literati*.

The first dichotomy to take into account concerns Burns's education. The description of him by contemporaries as a 'Heaven-taught ploughman' was just a label, a fictional *persona* invented by the *literati* in order to identify Burns with the fashionable pre-Romantic figure of the noble savage, but Burns did not reject but rather encouraged it.⁵⁰ Burns was only partly an autodidact; in fact, he received the rudiments of a good education from his tutor John Murdoch, who provided him with a heavily Anglicised course of instruction.⁵¹ This scholarship was deeply assimilated by Burns, and it was never completely dismissed, not even when he committed himself more devotedly to the other side of his preparation, namely his knowledge of the old tradition of Scottish literature. He learnt the latter from his mother, and listening to the folk stories recited by her kinswoman, Betty Davidson.⁵² The enthusiasm for ballads, songs, and popular literature went alongside his interest in the literature of his time, both English and foreign, so that his own poetry often reflects this juxtaposition or fusion of the popular and the literary, the Scottish vernacular and the English tradition. In other words, the two main poetic lines of the eighteenth century converged in both his personality and work (Ramsay and Fergusson had achieved a similar compromise by intermixing humanistic and vernacular elements in their poetry). The formal and informal components of his education led Burns to love the ballad tradition inaugurated by the fifteenth-century poems *Peblis to the Play* and *Christis Kirk on the Greene*, and Robert Sempill's sixteenth-century poem *Life and Death of*

⁵⁰ It was Henry Mackenzie who first used the term in his review of the Kilmarnock Edition of Burns's *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1789) in *The Lounger*, 9 December 1786, pp. 385-388 (p. 388).

⁵¹ For the details of Burns's life see Donald A. Low, *Robert Burns*, Scottish Writers Series, (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986), pp. 1-29; James Mackay, *A Biography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Company, 1993); Catherine Carswell, *The Life of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1990).

⁵² See Low, p. 4.

Habbie Simson, as well as contemporary works like Macpherson's *Ossian* (1761-1763), James Beattie's *The Minstrel* (1771-1774), and Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771).

The second important polarity concerns Burns's position in relation to the social establishment. He came from a family of farmers, and he never denied but rather showed pride in his humble origins. On the other hand, the fame he obtained among the *literati* and the aristocratic circles of Edinburgh fuelled his literary and social ambitions, so that he entered their world while simultaneously criticising it in his work. Moreover, rejecting popular Calvinism, he sympathised with Hutcheson's and Reid's enlightened philosophy of common sense, and Adam Smith's related theory of moral sentiments. His situation was therefore paradoxical, yet he realised he could exploit the contradictions of his life, even when this resulted in a crisis of identity and in a substantial fracture within his poetic production.

The antithesis between vernacular and literary traditions becomes in his poems an opposition between two separate categories of themes and two different styles. It is an antagonism also between two different figures of the poet: one extreme is represented by the poet complying with the tastes of the *literati*, appealing to a Romantic sensibility in language and style; at the other extreme, is the poet of radical principles who denounces the hypocrisy and pretentiousness of society by means of satirical and mock-heroic techniques. None of these figures matches exactly Burns's personality, which is rather a combination of aspects of both. The former *persona* appears in poems such as 'The Cottar's Saturday Night', 'Ode to Melancholy', and 'The Epistle to a Young Friend'. Here Burns is like the eponymous 'man of feeling' of Mackenzie's novel, and his voice continually assumes melodramatic and sentimental tones. Burns the political and religious satirist speaks in the verses of poems such as 'The Jolly Beggars', 'Tam O'Shanter', 'The Twa Dogs', and many others, in which Burns's reductive idiom and his comic vein make their most significant appearance. Burns constantly experienced the tension between these two poetic roles and choices, and between the two opposite literary loyalties of his time.

Ramsay had had to face a similar conflict before him. Like Burns, he stood between two traditions: on the one hand, the native Scottish tradition and the

vernacular; on the other, the genteel models of the classical and English tradition and English language. It was not only a literary contrast but also a conflict between two different Scotlands: the old Scotland, politically independent from England, and based on the values of community and on rural economy; and the present Scotland which, under the English ascendancy, was beginning to give up old customs under the effect of its first commercial and industrial development. The solution Ramsay devised consisted in the adoption of what I have previously called 'literary' vernacular, a language fusing elements of the colloquial speech with more ornate expressions and forms drawn from classical literature. In Virgil and Horace Ramsay found an ideal compound of the earthly and the spiritual, of the simple and the elegant, of 'carpe diem' philosophy and higher aspirations. *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725) is a perfect exemplification of the harmonious fusion of realism and idealism, because the protagonists are simple shepherds but their ideas and the themes explored through their voices are anything but simplistic. In a similar fashion, the poem 'The Vision' unites the visionary, idealistic theme with a description of Scottish history. This kind of poetic representation continued with Fergusson and Burns, was then pursued by Hogg in the nineteenth-century, and revived by MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man* in the present century.

The visionary theme is a topos bridging the gap between the vernacular and the Anglicised poets of the eighteenth century. In fact, apart from the choice of a different linguistic medium, the links between the two parties are stronger than we may think. As I have already indicated, the Anglo-Scottish poets were almost as divided in their literary loyalties as the vernacular poets, and, in most cases, they too experienced inner splits. The eighteenth-century Anglicised tradition of poetry was represented especially by James Thomson (1700-1748), James Beattie (1735-1803), James Macpherson (1736-1796), Robert Blair (1699-1746), and William Wilkie (1721-1772).

The influence of Spenser, Milton and of the neo-classical tradition of contemporary England was very strong on James Thomson. It is particularly evident in his most famous works: *The Seasons* (1726-1730) and *The Castle of Indolence* (1748). Among the classics he felt himself especially consonant with the genius of

Virgil, whose *Georgics* was one of the most authoritative texts in the eighteenth century, not only in Britain but generally in Europe. Thomson's works are characterised by a sprinkling of archaisms and Latin words, in accordance with the neo-classical fashion of the time. In fact, this practice was fostered not only by the Anglicised poets but also by Ramsay and Fergusson in some of their works; the admiration of the classics was therefore an aspect linking and not distinguishing the two poetic lines. Is there any relation between the use of Latinisms by the eighteenth-century poets and the archaic, classical terms scattered in the works of the Scottish Makars? Certainly the vernacular poets turned to the pre-Union Scottish writers to find a linguistic model for the revival of Scots in the eighteenth century, but the fact that the Anglicised poets did not use the vernacular language does not imply that they did not know the Scottish poetry which preceded them.

In fact, it is even possible to draw a comparison between James Thomson and the Scottish Renaissance poet William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585-1649). Both poets introduced into their works scientific notions (Pythagorean ideas in Drummond and Newtonian theory in Thomson) which mingled with their Platonic idealism without clashing. They were the precursors of modern conceptions of literature as an all-embracing field where poetry and science are not seen as two separate areas but as potentially interchanging and mutually co-operative disciplines. Drummond and Thomson were in this respect the forerunners of John Davidson and Hugh MacDiarmid, who took over this interdisciplinary practice and applied it to modern Scottish poetry.

There is also another strong link between Thomson and the Scottish tradition. Apart from his intense feeling for nature, which brings him close to a long line of Scottish poetry,⁵³ he shares with many other Scottish poets the love for 'actuality', 'grip of fact' and a 'sense of detail'⁵⁴ in the depiction of natural scenarios. These characteristics mark, for example, Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*, and Gawin Douglas's *The Eneados* (1512-1513). *The Seasons* offer one of the best

⁵³ A still extensive study on this topic is the already quoted Veitch's *The feeling for Nature in Scottish Poetry*.

⁵⁴ G. G. Smith, pp. 4-6.

examples of the picturesque mode, which is certainly a typical trait of Scottish poetry, yet also an expression of the classic maxim 'ut pictura poesis'.

James Beattie is especially remembered as the author of *The Minstrel*, a long poem on the growth of a poetic sensibility by means of a dialectic process. The first stage consists in discovering the dimension of the uncanny within himself, which he accomplishes by assimilating the imaginary universe of the folklore legends of his country. The second step is to develop his rational thinking and philosophical knowledge; this time he is tutored by a wise hermit, and, thanks to him, he can go on to the third and most important phase. The two different acquisitions must now be united in a superior synthesis which only can allow a full intellectual and spiritual formation of the individual. The whole work is like a *Bildungsroman* in verse, and Wordsworth may have had it in his mind when he composed *The Prelude*.

The Minstrel is in English and both its style and themes reflect the larger European *Weltanschauung* rather than a local or national tradition of poetry. The protagonist is the personification of the *à la mode* taste for primitivism and melancholy sensibility, the incarnation of Rousseau's myth of the noble savage and of the notion of 'natural genius'. Accordingly, the poem was one of the standard literary texts of the *literati*, who had created the fable of the 'heaven-taught ploughman', and who supported the 'moral sense' tradition of Scottish philosophy. As Professor of Moral Philosophy and Logic at Aberdeen University, Beattie was one of the defenders of Thomas Reid's theories, designed to refute Hume's destructive scepticism. Nevertheless, the belief that each individual possesses a 'common sense' allowing him to apprehend experience of any kind was not alien to the poets of the Vernacular Revival. Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd* conveys this concept through the figure of the protagonist, and Edwin, the 'minstrel' of Beattie's poem, is the son of a shepherd.

Yet there is another more convincing reason why James Beattie can be considered as yet another divided spirit of Scottish literature. In the works meant to be known and appreciated by a large reading audience, English was the language Beattie elected as his literary medium, but in his epistles, which, at least theoretically, constitute a more private kind of writing, he sometimes used Scots, in particular the Scottish dialect of his native district, Aberdeenshire. In fact, the epistolary genre was

as popular as the lyrical and the epic in the eighteenth century, but the nature of letter-writing itself offered Beattie a pretext to voice his subconscious life, in particular his repressed Scottishness. The epistle 'To Mr Alexander Ross' is the best exemplification of Beattie's 'alternative voice' in contrast with his Anglicised voice. Which of the two was his *bona fide* voice is difficult to gather, and, as in the case of Burns, it can be argued that he never completely solved the tension, which in his case was more psychological than literary, since, contrary to Burns, he only rarely put it into words or verbalised it by means of linguistic shifts.

To talk extensively about James Macpherson and the Ossianic controversy would be outside the range of my thesis. At the same time, to mention Macpherson and the debate surrounding him only briefly runs the risk of oversimplification. Macpherson escapes the map of the protean identities of Scottish poetry, because his major venture, even if it concerns the recovering and 'translation' of Gaelic texts -- including those preserved by oral tradition only -- was dictated by a pre-Romantic nostalgic attitude towards the past and a consequent antiquarian practice, rather than by a simple love of local native literature. One could counteract this argument by saying that Ramsay's *The Evergreen* (1724), his collection of old Scottish and English songs, has a latent antiquarian value, and the same objection could be raised about later similar enterprises like Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-3) and James Hogg's *Jacobite Relics* (1819-22). Despite his editorial changes, Ramsay's aim, to bring to light a huge bulk of native texts which had till then remained in darkness, was a genuine one, and his purpose was intentionally nationalistic, as indicated by the preface to *The Evergreen*. Ramsay wanted to pursue the work started by James Watson, whose *Choice Collections of Comic and Serious Poems both Ancient and Modern* had appeared in 1706. On the other hand, Macpherson's undertaking was inspired by a patriotism of a different kind, concerned as he was to preserve, in the post-Culloden context, a Gaelic culture and tradition under serious threat.

It is certainly true that *Ossian* became a European rather than a merely Scottish phenomenon; *Ossian* seemed to articulate the European *Weltschmerz* and the contemporary love of sublime landscape. Goethe's deployment of his own translations

of passages from *Ossian* in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* became merely a single expression of the European vogue for *Ossian*. Macpherson's initiative proved an immensely important and successful one; but from my point of view what is significant is how Ramsay's work reflects a recognisably Scottish tradition while Macpherson's is immediately assimilated into an English or European one.

Similarly, both Robert Blair and William Wilkie were writing within the English rather than the Scottish poetic tradition. Blair's name is always mentioned in relation with the graveyard school of poetry, a kind of mournfully reflective and meditative poetry which emphasises the transitoriness of life and the inevitability of death. The poetic paradigm of this strain was *Night Thoughts* (1742) by the English poet Edward Young (though Milton's 'Il Penseroso' may be seen as the ultimate source). *Night Thoughts* is a long meditative poem in free verse on which Robert Blair certainly modelled the leit-motifs of his poem *The Grave* (1743), a didactic work meditating on death and its mystery. The dualism of comic and serious expression characterising many Scottish poets does not seem to apply at all to Robert Blair, who wrote only a poetry serious in the extreme. His poems present a style and a decorum which will later be taken over by the Sabbatarian poetry of the nineteenth century -- for example by Pollok in *The Course of Time*. In fact, among the Anglicised poets, James Thomson was the only one who also composed comic poems; *The Castle of Indolence* (1748) was projected as a humorous work, even if the final product presents us with many hints of the same pre-Romantic sensibility which Thomson had expressed in *The Seasons* (1730). Finally, William Wilkie's poem *The Epigoniad* (1757) provided the *literati* with the epic work they were looking for in order to complete the neo-classical picture of their time. Nonetheless the poem was not a successful achievement, because the language Wilkie used was then too outmoded to be credible, and too overcharged with pointless archaisms.

In conclusion, the poetic choices in eighteenth-century Scotland pivot around two antipodes: on the one hand, the vernacular tradition of Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns, and on the other, the Anglicised poetry of the *literati*. Yet it is wrong to conceive of them as two incompatible modes of writing, because they were both surrounded by the same post-Union circumstances, and therefore both must have felt

the consequent sensation of 'not belonging' and of being decentred, however much they differed in their response to the paradoxes and divisions of their culture. The vernacular poets asserted their allegiance to the native Scottish tradition in a spirit of patriotism but, in a sense, also of isolationism, to defend the literature Scotland produced when it was still an independent nation. Contrariwise, the Anglo-Scottish poets and the *literati* saw the Union as a means of overcoming Scotland's provincialism, and opening its frontier to outside influences, an attitude which, if it had been fostered, might have reduced the number of Scottish poetic exiles in the second part of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, they too soon forgot that Scotland had a vast store of indigenous literature to draw from and to be preserved. Scottish culture probably needed both parties; the results of such a configuration of competing traditions show how productive and fruitful it was not only for Scottish culture in the eighteenth-century but also for the literary and the intellectual development of the following centuries. As the editors Crawford, Hewitt, and Law speculate:

Is it not at least conceivable that these achievements took place not in spite of the split but because of it? Is division not perhaps a law of nature, seen equally in the evolution of galaxies and planetary systems and in the growth of individual minds and souls?⁵⁵

⁵⁵ 'Introduction', in *Longer Scottish Poems*, II, pp. vii-xii (p. x).

CHAPTER 2

TWO EARLY ECCENTRICS: HOGG AND BYRON

PART I

James Hogg: a 'Scottish Eccentric'

And my flytin' and sclatrie sall be
 Wi' your fantice and mocage entwined
 As the bauch Earth is wi' the life
 Or fate wi' mankind!

I'll ha'e nae hauf-way hoose, but aye be whaur
 Extremes meet -- it's the only way I ken
 To dodge the curst conceit o'bein' richt
 That damns the vast majority o' men.

Man's spreit is wi' his ingangs twined
 In ways that he can ne'er unwind.¹

Be mine the faith diverging to extremes!²

¹ MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, in *Hugh MacDiarmid. Complete Poems*, I, pp. 81-167 (pp.82, 87, 101).

² Hogg, 'Superstition', p. 92. There are many editions of the works of James Hogg. Whenever it was possible, I have used the most recent editions, that is, the Stirling/ South Carolina Research Edition of the Collected Works of James Hogg (general editor -- Douglas S. Mack), published by Edinburgh University Press. The new edition of Hogg's works is a very ambitious and so far successful attempt to provide Hogg's readership with the original texts before they were mutilated or shamefully altered by Hogg's publishers, who accused the author of lacking delicacy in the form and content of some of his works. Obviously this operation spoilt Hogg's genuine robust tone, which reflects his indebtedness to the oral tradition. For those works which have not yet been recently re-published, I have -- regretfully -- used either the 1838 edition (for *The Queen's Wake* and *Mador of the Moor*) or David Groves's edition (for *Midsummer Night Dreams* and later

The idea of embracing extremes expressed in MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926) finds an early parallel in James Hogg's *Superstition* (1816). Despite the century separating them, the two poets and their works can be seen as belonging to the peculiar poetic tradition which I have defined by the notions of 'otherness' and 'eccentricity'.³ James Hogg is an early exponent of this tradition, and an early nineteenth-century example of the condition of exile and displacement which many Scottish writers experienced within their own country or elsewhere in the latter part of the century. In his case exile was not so much geographical -- Hogg stayed in London only very briefly and his Edinburgh life was always parallel to his Ettrick life - - as cultural and social, due to his remaining ex-centric and somehow constantly aloof from the contemporary establishment. In his *Memoir* Hogg shows full awareness of his condition of outcast amidst what he calls a 'powerful aristocracy' who control 'the walks of learning'. The entire passage is worth quoting:

For my own part, I know that I have always been looked on by the learned part of the community as an intruder in the paths of literature, and every opprobrium has been thrown on me from that quarter. The truth is, that I am so. The walls of learning are occupied by a powerful aristocracy, who deem that province their own peculiar right [...]. No wonder that they should view an intruder, from the humble and despised ranks of the community, with as jealous and indignant eye, and impede his progress by every means in their power.⁴

poems). Unless indicated, further references to Hogg's poems are from these three main sources.

³ See my Introduction.

⁴ James Hogg, *Memoirs of the Author's Life and Familiar Anecdotes of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. by D. S. Mack (Edinburgh and London: Scottish Academic Press, 1972), p. 46.

The reading of Hogg's *The Queen's Wake* (1813) helps us to understand why MacDiarmid includes James Hogg in *Scottish Eccentrics*. *The Queen's Wake* encapsulates in its composite structure the heterogeneous nature of Hogg's genius -- his eccentric and multifarious verse, his shifting poetic tones and modes. This is achieved by framing together a diversified range of poems, of which 'The Witch of Fife' and 'Kilmeny', Hogg's most anthologised poems, are the most representative examples. They are the paradigms of the two main poles of Hogg's writing: a burlesque, comic vein and a Romantic, or more generally metaphysical mode respectively. Moreover, they contain two opposite expressions of womanhood, neither of which is dismissed by the author, in that, despite, or by virtue of, their difference, they convey an image of totality and union in diversity which is at the heart of Hogg's work.

Hogg's total *oeuvre* is marked by a constant tension between antipodal aspects which reflects his complex *forma mentis*. Throughout his life, Hogg was subject to different kinds of influences. A fair assessment of his writing must take into account its fluctuating nature, its oscillations between a diverse range of traditions without trying to place it within one specific literary tradition. Hogg's ex-centricity accounts for his hostility to any self-enclosed and monolithic system of thought, and yet he seems to concoct opposite components, motifs and themes intentionally and almost systematically. The 'Edinburgh Hogg' and 'Ettrick Hogg'⁵ are not always conflicting sides of his ego; Hogg's works show that the autodidact shepherd-poet often shakes hands with his more sophisticated double. To label Hogg as a Romantic writer is as wrong as to consider him a self-taught poet of merely local import. Hogg is and simultaneously is not a Romantic writer; he absorbed some of the tenets of the Romantic tradition but in the epigrammatic parodies of *The Poetic Mirror* (1816) he rebuked its derivative expression, in particular the inherent danger of excessive egocentricity. Before 1810, when he 'took [his] plaid about [his] shoulder, and marched away to Edinburgh, determined [...] to push [his] fortune as a literary man',⁶

⁵ Douglas Gifford, *James Hogg* (Edinburgh: The Ramsay Head Press, 1976), p. 9.

⁶ See A. L. Strout, *The Life and Letters of James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd*, 2 vols. (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1946), I, p. 53.

Hogg felt above all the influence of eighteenth-century Scottish literature and local folklore traditions, which continued to represent an important source of inspiration also after his official entrance into the world of the *literati*. What happened to Hogg's poetry after 1810? Did he compromise his writing because of the Edinburgh literary establishment?

The Hogg quotation after that from MacDiarmid at the beginning of this chapter challenges any straightforward interpretation. By professing a faith 'diverging to extremes' Hogg deliberately puts his readers in face of a riddle -- another occasion to challenge them as when he camouflages himself behind fictional *personae*. Although the citation is specifically referring to religion, it can also be applied to Hogg's *Weltanschauung* and poetic vision, both incorporating antinomies and heterogeneous aspects. By saying that his faith diverges 'to' and not 'from' extremes, Hogg seems to imply that he is not willing to make compromises and stand, to quote MacDiarmid, 'half-way hoose' between the two extremes. Can this implication be seen as an anticipation of MacDiarmid's ambition to embrace all knowledge and all experience, and eventually express both through the literary medium?

Hogg's case is complicated by the fact that his entrée in the literary environment of Edinburgh was immediately followed by experiences which required some compromising solutions. Though intending to preserve the values of the pastoral world and oral tradition in which his upbringing was steeped, Hogg arrived in Edinburgh with precise plans and ambitions. In the Athens of the North, the Anglophile John Wilson gave birth to the counterfeit Ettrick Shepherd of the *Noctes Ambrosianae*, an *outré*, parodic version of the self-taught poet, which Hogg accepted as a means of easing his access into the world of the *literati*.⁷ Undoubtedly this was a compromise, though strategic, to make himself popular in the Edinburgh scene.

⁷ cf. D. Mack's Introduction to *James Hogg. Selected Poems*, ed. by Douglas Mack, p. xii: 'The "Noctes", which appeared regularly in *Blackwood's Magazine* from 1822 till 1835, purported to be reproductions of the table-talk of the Blackwood group of writers, including Hogg in the character of the "Ettrick Shepherd". Hogg soon became identified in the public mind with Wilson's conceited, hard-drinking, quaint rustic'. The title of the series derives from the name of the tavern where the conversations were held -- Ambrose's Tavern in Edinburgh.

Hence he deferred to play the role of Burns's caricature disciple but his authentic voice -- or voices -- would emerge in his original poetry and prose. Thus he fell on his feet by keeping constantly an eye on the *literati's* tastes, and simultaneously attending to his own individual ambitions. His compromises were of a peculiar and eccentric nature, like his behaviour and personality. R. P. Gillies ascribes even Hogg's vanity to his own eccentricity:

[...] The good Shepherd's vanity differed from that of all other authors, inasmuch as it was avowed and undisguised, and he himself laughed at it objectively as such [...] it was mere native eccentricity.⁸

Hogg faced the question of identity in an Anglicised society without incurring the psychologically disruptive consequences which affected later Scottish poets. On the other hand, the need of official recognition had some deleterious effects on his writing whenever he forced his pen to adopt or imitate canonical forms and genres -- for example some passages in *Mador of the Moor* (1816) and *Queen Hynde* (1824) are flawed by rhetorical devices and a stilted style which do not befit the general narrative quality of the works. Like Burns before him, Hogg could not help being influenced by the cultural establishment of Edinburgh. One of the problems he had to face in order for his work to be acknowledged by the *literati* concerned the question of what language to adopt -- either Scots or English. Often he solved the problem by resorting to a form of diluted Scots or to a spare use of Scots phrases in a prevalently English text⁹ -- in this he resembles Scott and Galt. Douglas Mack points out that 'many of the movements between Scots and English in Hogg's poetry mirror in a

⁸ R. P. Gillies, *Memoirs of a Literary Veteran: including sketches and anecdotes of the most distinguished literary characters from 1794 to 1849*, 3 vols (London: Samuel Bentley and Company, 1851), II, pp. 128-129.

⁹ In the novel *The Three Perils of Woman* (1823) Daniel Bell -- father of the two protagonists -- rejects this kind of mongrel Scots in favour of the 'doric tongue', or broad Scots. On the other hand, his daughters Gatty and Cherry stand for Anglicised culture, which is a principal source of conflict between Daniel and them. At the opposite side of the spectrum there is Mrs Bell, the representative of genteel society and delicacy. Hogg's use of Scots can at times be condescending and self-conscious, as in the case of Daniel Bell, but in other occasions -- in particular in the songs -- he adopts it without any implied element of mockery but simply to speak in his own authentic voice.

similar way the fluctuations of post-Reformation Scottish speech'.¹⁰ In other cases his works 'diverge to extremes' also as regards linguistic choices; they are either totally in English like *Queen Hynde*¹¹ or in Scots like some of the songs.

The expression 'diverging to extremes' is undoubtedly -- perhaps deliberately --ambiguous. On the one hand Hogg suggests that his faith is not identified with any specific orthodox creed but embraces different forms of belief; on the other, the verb 'diverge' implies separation, which contrasts with the underlying sense of unity -- though unity in diversity -- of the poem 'Superstition'. Nevertheless, neither Hogg nor MacDiarmid were much preoccupied with solving such apparent contradictions. Hogg is one of MacDiarmid's 'eccentrics' by virtue of the peculiar position he occupied within the contemporary literary establishment. As a matter of fact, Hogg was not integrated uniquely in one tradition but oscillated between two cultures -- the literary and the oral -- throughout his life. His position was therefore eccentric, influenced but never totally identified with the cultural mainstream represented, for example, by the work of Walter Scott or other inheritors of the Enlightenment.

In short, Hogg's *opera omnia* seem to reject the classical principle of *in medio virtus*, and embrace instead a polarised vision, or, to quote Bakhtin, a 'dialogic imagination', whereby the universe is seen as a gallimaufry of dualisms and contradictions. Therefore Edwin Muir's general argument in *Scott and Scotland* (1936) appears reductive when it is applied to Hogg's work. Through his theory of the two languages -- one for thought and one for feeling -- and by denying the existence of nineteenth-century poems in which the two 'polar twins'¹² of Scottish literature -- the realistic and the fantastic -- can become the vehicle for serious and intellectual issues, Muir failed to recognise the significance and import of many nineteenth-century works. He commented with contempt that 'Kilmeny' is only a 'wild irresponsible fantasy ungoverned by intellect'¹³, but there were also critics who described it 'as the greatest religious poem to be written in Scotland since the days of

¹⁰ Mack, *Selected Poems*, p. xviii.

¹¹ The Scotticisms in this poem are rare. I managed to detect a few: 'gleen' (shine), 'collied' (darkened), 'to-fall of day' (eventide).

¹² G. G. Smith, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence*, p. 20.

¹³ Muir, *Scott and Scotland. The Predicament of the Scottish Writer*, p. 65.

the Old Makars'.¹⁴ Muir also failed to perceive the moral, social and political implications of the 'vis comica', its potentially subversive effects, as both MacDiarmid and Mikhail Bakhtin would prove. This aspect in Hogg stems from eighteenth-century vernacular reductive idiom, although it can also be traced back to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Scottish literature respectively produced by Henryson, Dunbar, Lyndsay, and Montgomerie, Aytoun and Drummond. It is one side of his literary versatility, counterbalanced by his concern with the metaphysical. Some critics have even associated the antisyzygy of comic and serious aspects characterising the poetry of the Borders with the changeful tonalities of the Scottish landscape:

This curious blending of opposite feelings [hilarity and sadness] flows all through these songs, and seems to reflect the familiar contrast in the scenery -- the sparkling gleam of the morning and noon gradually passing into the pathetic shade of the gloamin' on the river [Tweed] itself.¹⁵

But the dualism inherent in Scottish poetry is better described in the following passage from John Buchan's *The Ballad and the Folk* (1924), in which he likens Scottish poetry to

Some cathedral of the Middle Ages, with peasants gossiping in the nave and the devout at prayer in side chapels, carved grotesques adjacent to stained-glass saints, and beams of heavenly light stealing through the brooding upper darkness [...]¹⁶

¹⁴ Douglas Mack, 'James Hogg and the Ettrick Shepherd', *Library Review*, 22 (1970), 307-309 (p. 309).

¹⁵ John Veitch, *History and Poetry of the Scottish Border* (Glasgow: J. Maclehose, 1878), p. 431.

¹⁶ John Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1924), pp. xxx-xxxi.

Since Hogg's writing draws on different traditions simultaneously, any attempt to categorise it according to restricting labels is doomed to fail. Nonetheless it is still possible to identify two main categories of his work according to stylistic and thematic features. The first group includes individual poems which are the expression either of Hogg's comic mood or of the opposite concern with lofty and metaphysical subjects. In each poem the poet's tone is either humorous or grave: the two extremes are kept separate instead of resorting to a compromising mixture of the two. Two poems from *The Queen's Wake* ideally represent this first group. 'The Witch of Fife' and 'Kilmeny' paradigmatically exemplify the dichotomy of comic and serious at the heart of Hogg's poetic production. Other examples are *The Pilgrims of the Sun* (1815) and 'Connel of Dee' (1815), which would have provided another basis for the serious-versus-comic paradigm, if Hogg had not modified the original plan of the *Midsummer Night Dreams* which was meant to include both.

The second group incorporates poems characterised by a mixed style, shifting tones, and a medley of motifs. The long poems following *The Queen's Wake* -- in particular, *Mador of the Moor* and *Queen Hynde* -- offer two examples of this formal and thematic patchiness. With them Hogg attempted to produce works which could amalgamate the heterogeneous knowledge derived from his dual familiarity with the oral and literary traditions, but the result was not always successful. Many aspects in *Mador of the Moor* and *Queen Hynde* could be defined as either Classical or Romantic, but they evince also a strong link with oral and local traditions. Hogg's experiments with the epic form did not last long. In 1832 *A Queer Book* was ready to be published. This is a collection of poems which looks back to the themes and styles of *The Queen's Wake*, and encompasses a similar polarisation of comic and serious poems, such as, for example, 'The Goode Manne of Allowa' and 'Elen of Reigh'. Nevertheless many poems in the collection elude any clear-cut division and strict polarisation.

My analysis reflects this pattern of division between poems in which the two comic and serious extremes are kept separate and poems 'whaur extremes meet'. I have grouped the poems from *The Queen's Wake* together with *The Pilgrims of the Sun*, 'Connel of Dee' and other poems as examples of either a post-Miltonic but still

recognisably Scottish metaphysical tradition or of the burlesque, parodic and satirical modes. Nonetheless, since *The Queen's Wake* can also be seen as one long poem, rather than a collection of ballads, it would be equally sensible to include it in the second group together with *Mador of the Moor* and *Queen Hynde*. This categorisation is not an attempt to compartmentalise Hogg's texts but an arbitrary methodological strategy to approach them. In fact, my main purpose is to show that Hogg's poetry is not definable according to generally accepted critical terms, because it is characterised by an eccentric interplay of the sublime and the grotesque, the metaphysical and the facetious. Some of his works are like the 'motley' page in *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767) or an expression of the Blakean idea that 'without contraries is no progression'¹⁷, and they are marked by a stylistic eccentricity which calls to mind Byron's linguistic shifts and bathos.

i. 'Intermingledoms' in the poetry of James Hogg. Comic or serious choices.

It was Burns who spoke about the 'intermingledoms of the good & the bad'¹⁸ to describe the black-and-white quality of life. I have borrowed this term to refer to the mixed range of themes and styles characterising Hogg's poetry, where matter-of-fact and metaphysical subjects, comic and serious modes are intermingled. Hogg's poetry evinces similar features from his debut as local balladeer and songster. This section will analyse the components of these 'intermingledoms' -- mainly the comic and the serious -- as they are expressed in various individual poems. Sometimes it is not possible to draw a definite line of division between comic and serious expression, since some poems, including early songs and ballads, are characterised by an alloy of the two modes. Yet one of them is generally prevalent throughout the individual poem.

¹⁷ See Marshall Brown, 'Romanticism and Enlightenment', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. by Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 25-47 (p. 26).

The themes and imagery of Hogg's early production are drawn from the ballad tradition and folk culture of his native district. Another influence was the eighteenth-century Scottish vernacular tradition. In 1790 Hogg was working for the Laidlaws of Blackhouse, who allowed him to consult their library -- a rich storage of Scottish and English texts. One of the books which Hogg read at Blackhouse, and which turned out to be a strong influence on his work was Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725). About the same time Hogg heard recitations of Burns's poetry by Border shepherds and peasants. Hence his self-education was already dualistic: a blending of the eighteenth-century Scottish literary tradition, and the oral tradition passed down to him by his grandfather and his mother.

Hogg experimented with different poetic forms from an early date, but from 1790 to 1807 he was at his best in the capacity of local songster. His first compositions include miscellaneous songs -- either comic or serious -- an unpublished epistle to a student of theology, the poem 'An Address to the Duke of Baccleuch', an eclogue later included in *The Scottish Pastorals*, the song 'The Way that the World Goes On', and finally the ballad 'Glengyle'.¹⁹ Even years later he would still excel in the lyrical form. As Edith Batho points out, in 'A Boy's Song' (*A Queer Book*, 1831) 'there is the shepherd piping with the touch of childlike innocence and simplicity which [...] never quite forsook him'.²⁰ Or, from a more hostile perspective, 'Hogg did not really develop as a writer. His later poems and stories show little significant advance either in theme and technique over the earlier ones'.²¹ Undoubtedly, Hogg's writing displays a continuity in theme and style, but it also evolves towards an experimentation with a more varied range of techniques and genres.

The publication of *The Mistakes of a Night* in the *Scots Magazine* in 1794 was the first important breakthrough in his career. Hogg derived the title from Oliver Goldsmith's comedy *She Stoops to Conquer, or the Mistakes of a Night* (1773),

¹⁸ This term was used by Burns in a letter to Mrs Dunlop dated 22 August 1792, included in *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. by G. Ross Roy, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), vol II: 1790-1796, p. 143.

¹⁹ Information about Hogg's life and works are from various biographies and critical works of the poet. See bibliography.

²⁰ Edith Batho, *The Ettrick Shepherd* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1927), p. 59.

²¹ Nelson Smith, *James Hogg* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), p. 138.

which he greatly admired. The poem is his first remarkable achievement in that it is a successful amalgam of literary and oral components derived from the tradition of Burns and Ramsay on the one hand, and from local folk culture on the other. The mystery and suspense pervading the landscape, the mixture of comic and tragic elements are in tune both with the ballad tradition and with some of Burns's poems. Between 1793 and 1804 Hogg visited the Highlands several times, thus following in the steps of Macpherson, and he became familiar with Ossian.²² Yet Hogg did not explore the Highlands in the capacity of an antiquarian who intended to delve into the past and resurrect imperilled treasures to pass on for posterity. The motivation to visiting the Highlands was mainly for financial and personal adventure, but eventually the tours turned out to be productive in another respect. They offered him the opportunity to collect the material for the *Jacobite Relics* (1819-1822) -- a work in which Hogg shows his uncommitted political ideas, wavering between Tory unionist ideas -- as he shows in the novel *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* (1818) -- and a personal interest in Jacobitism.

In 1800 Hogg stepped into the world of Edinburgh and the *literati* for the first time. He was ostensibly there to sell sheep in the town market, but more importantly the visit provided him the first contact with an environment wholly different from that of the Borders. In the 'Athens of the North' he conceived the plan of *The Scottish Pastorals* (1801), which E. Petrie describes as 'the first major landmark in a remarkable career'.²³ Its importance within Hogg's *opus* rests essentially on two factors: the adoption of a specific local speech, and the synthesis between aspects of literacy and orality. The characters speak their own local dialect -- the result of

²² See 'A Journey Through the Highlands of Scotland, in the Months of July and August 1802, in a series of Letters to ---, Esq.', *Scots Magazine*, 64 (1802), 813-818, 956-963; 65 (1803), 89-95, 251-254, 312-314, 382-386. See also 'A Journey Through the Highlands and Western Isles in the Summer of 1804 -- In a Series of Letters to a Friend', *Scots Magazine*, 70 (1808), 423-426, 569-72, 672-674, 735-738, 809-811; 71 (1809), 14-17, 99-101, 181-184. Finally see the posthumous publication of Hogg's account of the 1803 tour: *A Tour in the Highlands in 1803: A Series of Letters By James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, addressed to Sir Walter Scott, Bart* (Paisley: Alexander Gardner; London: Paternoster Row, 1888). This was reprinted from the *Scottish Review*, 12 (1888), 1-66.

²³ Introduction to *Scottish Pastorals, Poems, Songs, &c.*, ed. by Elaine Petrie (Stirling: Stirling University Press, 1988), pp. vii-xx (p. vii).

mutual linguistic influence and exchange between the Borders and northern England, a form of diluted, or 'thin',²⁴ Scots which characterises many of Hogg's works.

The range of poems varies: from light-hearted, comic pastoral to serious, dramatic elegy. Sometimes the two genres are intermingled as in 'Geordie Fa's Dirge', the first *Scottish Pastoral* in the collection, a humorous elegy in the tradition of Burns's 'Tam Samson's Elegy'. 'Dusty' is a dialogue eclogue modelled on Burns's 'The Twa Dogs'. Two conflicting political positions -- the conservative and the radical -- emerge in the dialogue -- a kind of flyting -- between the two protagonists. Hogg does not ally with one or the other but recedes in order to allow the reader to observe the situation from a distance and embrace a wider perspective. Thus Hogg warns the reader against the danger of a monolithic and absolute vision of reality, and suggests instead that life is ruled by relativism and subjectivity. 'Willie an' Keatie' reveals Hogg's indebtedness to *The Gentle Shepherd*, and is characterised by a light-hearted tone. Conversely, both 'A Dialogue in a Country Church-Yard' and 'The Death of Sir Neil Stuart, and Donald M'Vane, Esq.' present a graver atmosphere. Different literary models lurk behind the volume: Dryden's translation of Virgil's pastorals, Pope's satires, Ramsay's drama, Burns's Kilmarnock Poems, and Romantic lyric poetry, such as Wordsworth's *Michael: A Pastoral Poem* (1800). Hogg continued to write pastoral poems until late in his career. In 1831 'A Pastoral on Women' appears in the *Royal Lady's Magazine*, a comic poem about woman's dual nature of angel and seductress, in which Hogg's at times misogynist attitude is smoothed by a sense of humour.²⁵

In 1802 Scott and Leyden visited the Borders in order to collect the material for *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. Thus started the friendship between the Ettrick Shepherd and the Sheriff of Selkirkshire. Scott's enterprise was antiquarian, therefore opposed to Margaret Laidlaw's desire to preserve orality against the attempt to turn songs and ballads into literary products. D. Vincent observes that

²⁴ Douglas Mack, 'A Note on Kilmeny', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 6 (1968), 123-126 (p. 123).

[...] it was not until he met with the *Minstrelsy* and its author that [Hogg] became fully conscious of the deep division in his cultural identity. It was Scott who made him realise the wealth and vitality of his mother's oral tradition, and it was his mother, in her denunciation of Scott's activity, who dramatised the impact on that tradition of the urban literary culture which the ballad collector represented.²⁶

Walter Scott and Margaret Laidlaw embodied the two worlds which impinged upon Hogg's works simultaneously, and which he tried to bridge in some of them. In a sense, Hogg's position in regard to oral culture was privileged because he was distanced enough from it to be able to participate -- though partly -- in the world of the *literati*, and, on the other hand, his whole upbringing and *forma mentis* were embedded in orality enough for him to evaluate the enormous loss which its decline would involve. The meeting with Scott boosted Hogg's self-confidence and the *Minstrelsy* urged him to embark on a similar project. Hence the composition of *The Mountain Bard*, which was first published in 1807.

The Mountain Bard is a collection of ten ballads followed by ten songs whose stories are mostly drawn from pre-existing traditional material. However, it is not so much the narrative as the stylistic and structural aspects that deserve particular attention. Douglas Gifford points out that the tales belong mainly to two classes:

On one hand there are rousing, fast-moving stories of fierce wars and tender loves of the old Border families after the manner of Jamie Telfer and Kinmont Willie, and on the other there are Ballads of wraiths (*James Hogg*, p. 34).

²⁵ See David Groves, 'A Pastoral on Women by the Ettrick Shepherd', *Notes and Queries*, 234 (1989), 178-181.

²⁶ David Vincent, 'The Decline of the Oral Tradition in Popular Culture', in *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-Century England*, ed. by R. Storch (London: Croom Helm, New York: St. Martin's, 1982), pp. 20-47 (p. 21).

Nevertheless some poems belong to a more eclectic category. In ballads such as 'Sir David Graeme', 'The Pedlar', and 'The Fray of Elibank' history and fantasy are blended, while 'Mess John' is a collage of historical, religious, and supernatural themes expressed in a half-humorous, half-satirical tone. Mess John's Faust-like pact with the Prince of Lies conforms to the burlesque representation of the Devil in many Scottish texts.

The stern tone of the ballads is counterbalanced by the lighter atmosphere pervading the songs, except the melancholic 'A Farewell to Ettrick'. Each song is a miniature picture of Scottish life and nature, either in the manner of *The Scottish Pastorals* -- such as 'The Hay Making' and 'Sandy Tod' -- or in a lyrical mode which records the poet's feelings. The poet intervenes especially in the notes and comments appended to the individual poems. For example, 'Thirlstane. A Fragment' is preceded by the author's comment according to a procedure which recalls Scott's *Minstrelsy*, except that in Scott the fragments precede his explanatory notes. This semi-parodic reversal lays emphasis on the notes themselves, which are indeed an essential key to understand Hogg's ambiguous and sceptical attitude towards Scottish legendary lore and superstitions.

The notes may undermine the eeriness of the ballads, yet they function as a subtext where the poet's subconscious tensions and polarised loyalties are revealed. In the poems Hogg deals with uncanny situations and characters in a kind of magic-realistic form; in the notes he rationalises the uncanny in the light of historical and scientific facts. Hogg's attitude towards autochthonic traditions and superstitions is constantly ambivalent, oscillating between belief and disbelief, genuine child-like wonder and adult scepticism.

1810 was a momentous year in Hogg's literary career. He made his official entrance into the intellectual world of Edinburgh, where he certainly had more possibilities to assert his talent but where he also realised increasingly his own eccentricity and otherness. Even though after 1810 Hogg's poetry displays a more complex range of subjects and forms, the essential dualism of oral and literary traditions still affects it -- in particular, English Romanticism then had a strong impact

on Scottish literature thanks in part to its discussion in both *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and the *Edinburgh Review*. Hogg became a character in Wilson's *Noctes Ambrosianae*, a representation which certainly distorted his personality and genius but provided him also with a strategic disguise to play a part on the literary stage of Edinburgh.

In 1810 *The Forest Minstrel* was published, a collection of traditional songs which aims to achieve a purpose similar to that underlying *The Mountain Bard*: the recovery of a huge bulk of folk material which, because of the contemporary tendency to Anglicisation, risked sinking into obscurity. Rev. Thomson's 1865 edition of *The Forest Minstrel* arranges the songs in four different categories according to their themes: pathetic, love, humorous, and national. Some songs present comic or burlesque motifs -- for example, 'Doctor Monroe', 'Love's Like a Dizziness', and 'Birniebouzle' -- whereas other poems are characterised by a graver atmosphere and a more melancholy tone -- for example, 'The Soldier's Widow', 'The Moon was Awaning', 'The Gloamin', and 'My Native Isle'. Hogg's main achievement with *The Forest Minstrel* consists in having produced a miscellaneous work which already exhibits his heterogeneous concerns and eccentric style.

The Queen's Wake (1813) is a more mature work, and Hogg's first true literary success. Hogg's own judgement of the poem -- or string of poems -- was very severe: 'It is a very imperfect and unequal production and if it were not for three of the ballads, which are rather of the redeeming quality, some of the rest are little better than trash'.²⁷ Some of his contemporaries shared exactly the same opinion. According to John Wilson, 'Hogg ought not to attempt any long poem in which a variety of characters are to be displayed acting in the theatre of the world'.²⁸ Some critics made the mistake of judging the work on the basis of the literary models behind it, particularly Walter Scott's verse romance. When the poem appeared, Scott had already published *Marmion* (1808), *The Lady of the Lake* (1810) and *The Vision of*

²⁷ *Memoir of the Author's Life*, p. 30.

²⁸ John Wilson, 'Burns and the Ettrick Shepherd', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 5 (1819), p. 529.

Don Roderick (1811), Southey *The Curse of Kehama* (1810), and Byron the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812). Wordsworth praised 'The Witch of Fife', 'Kilmeny' and 'The Abbot MacKinnon' but pointed out that:

the intermediate parts of *The Queen's Wake* are done with much spirit, but the style here [...] is often disfigured with false finery, and in too many places it recalls Mr. Scott to one's mind. Mr Hogg has too much genius to require that support, however respectable in itself.²⁹

Hogg responded to his eulogy in his own eccentric way: he wrote the parodies of the *Poetic Mirror* (1816) and *New Poetic Mirror* (1829-1831), which pay a tribute and at the same time benevolently ridicule Wordsworth's Romantic flights -- David Groves termed this kind of satire 'two-dimensional'.³⁰

Although it cannot be denied that Scott's long poems -- in particular *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* -- and William Tennant's mock-epic *Anster Fair* (1812) exerted a significant influence on it,³¹ *The Queen's Wake* achieves much more than a successful imitation of previous works. More than in other poems Hogg succeeds in blending together different traditions and simultaneously producing something totally original.

Not all the thirteen ballads which form *The Queen's Wake* are successful pieces, but some deserve particular attention. Even less convincing poems, such as 'Malcolm of Lorn' or 'Young Kennedy', are worth considering, at least because they conceal a subtle irony behind their flaws: their high-flown rhetoric and over-emphasised dramatic aspects are an indirect allusion to -- and implicit criticism of -- the themes and language of certain Romantic literature. Hence the possibility to see parallels between *The Queen's Wake* and *The Poetic Mirror*, even if in the latter the

²⁹ William Wordsworth, 'Letter to R. P. Gillies', in R. P. Gillies, *Memoirs of a Literary Veteran*, II, pp. 145-147 (p. 146).

³⁰ David Groves, 'The Satirist and His Age. Hogg's Development of a Romantic Brand of Satire', *Studies in Hogg and his World*, 1 (1990), 6-18 (p. 7).

³¹ For the influence of William Tennant on Hogg's poetry see Gioia Angeletti's article 'Hogg's Debt to William Tennant: the Influence of *Anster Fair* on Hogg's Poetry', *Studies in Hogg and His World*, 6 (1995), 22-32.

parodic quality is much more prominent.³² Some of the minstrels described in *The Queen's Wake* are 'poetic mirrors' of Hogg's contemporaries, that is, the living 'bards of Britain' whom he satirically described in heroic couplets in the poem under that title.³³ The bard of Fife, for example, presents striking similarities with the poet

³² Hogg's brilliant parodies in *The Poetic Mirror* (1816) and *A New Poetic Mirror* (1829-1831) -- two volumes which were very likely modelled on James and Horace Smith's *Rejected Addresses* (1812) -- are not analysed in detail in the present study because any discussion of parody as genre would unnecessarily widen the scope of my thesis. What interests me most is the general meaning that such an enterprise assumes in the context of Hogg's *opera omnia*. In particular, it attests to Hogg's ability to stand both inside and outside the Romantic tradition by offering a criticism of his contemporaries' *outré* idiosyncrasies and eccentricities -- including his own (Hogg parodied himself in 'The Gude Greye Katt'). As Dwight Macdonald points out, parody is 'an intuitive kind of literary criticism, shorthand for what "serious" critics must write out at length. It is Method acting, since a successful parodist must live himself, imaginatively, into his parodce [...] Most parodies are written out of admiration rather than contempt.' See, *Parodies. An Anthology from Chaucer to Beerbohm -- and After*, ed. by Dwight Macdonald (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), pp. xiii-xiv. For a theoretical and practical criticism of Hogg's parodies, see *Romantic Parodies*, ed. by David A Kent and D. R. Ewen (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1992), pp. 114-138, 365-367. In the Foreword to this volume Linda Hutcheon writes that Romantic parody was both 'a retentive, conservative force used to ridicule and thus control innovation' and 'a form of oppositional discourse against a dominant culture, social, or political discourse' (pp. 7-8). Hogg's parodies are both original poems and pieces of literary criticism exploiting the possibilities of intertextuality, and therefore challenging, to quote Hutcheon again, 'the notion of literature as unique inscription' and 'the idea not only of the unique text but also of the Romantic "ego" -- the individual, unique genius' (p. 9). See also Jill Rubenstein, 'Parody as Genre Renewal: the Case of the *Poetic Mirror*', *Studies in Hogg and His World*, 2 (1991), 72-80, and Dieter A. Berger, 'James Hogg as a Parodist in Verse: *The Poetic Mirror*', *Papers Given at the Second James Hogg Society Conference. Edinburgh 1985*, occasional papers: n. 8 (Aberdeen: ASLS in conjunction with the James Hogg Society, 1988), pp. 42-55.

³³ This is part of the title of Hogg's *The Poetic Mirror; or The Living Bards of Britain* (1816), and the poem prefaced to *A New Poetic Mirror; By the Ettrick Shepherd* (1829-1831) is called 'The Bards of Britain'. See *James Hogg: Poetic Mirrors*, ed. by David Groves (Frankfurt am Main; Bern; New York; Paris: Peter Lang, 1990), pp. 107-109. See also M. M., 'Portraits of Living Scottish Poets. By James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd', *Literary Magnet*, 3 (1827), 214-217. The author points out the strong resemblance of Hogg's bards to contemporary writers. Groves suggests that the author of this article is Hogg himself, since M. M. is one of the pen-names he used in *The Spy* and in *Blackwood's Magazine*. See David Groves, 'James Hogg: Alterations to the Bibliography', *Notes & Queries*, 235 (1990), 421. Before 'The Bards of Britain' Hogg wrote another poem in which he satirically portrays some of his contemporaries; I refer to 'Robin's Awa', which is simultaneously an homage to Burns. This poem can be read in the National Library of Scotland, MS 546, f. 33, or in the 'Memoir of Burns', in *The Works of Robert Burns*, ed. by the Ettrick Shepherd and William Motherwell, 5 vols (Glasgow: Archibald Fullarton, and Co., 1834-1836), V, pp. 287-288. David Groves has pointed out various similarities between *The Queen's Wake* and *The Poetic Mirror*. Firstly, both include poems on battles and journeys; secondly, in both the central ballad describes a successful journey to the otherworld -- 'Kilmeny' and 'The Gude Greye Katt' respectively;

William Tennant, whereas Gardyn calls to mind Byron both because of his dark tale and because his harp carries the emblem of 'A Rose beneath a Thistle bowed' -- a plausible allusion to Byron's mixed parentage. Most of the bards form contrasting pairs. For example, the effeminate Rizzio singing 'Malcolm of Lorn' is rivalled by the masculine Gardyn singing 'Young Kennedy'; the bard who sings 'The Witch of Fife' stands for the comic and grotesque strain as opposed to the Romantic sublime expressed by the bard of Farquhar's 'Glen-Avin'.

The structure of *The Queen's Wake* is an echo of that of *The Canterbury Tales*, but it may be that Hogg was partly drawing on Burns's practice of the multiple narrating voice in *The Jolly Beggars*. It consists of a collage of poems, diversified in themes and forms but held together by various leit-motifs and a narrative frame. The unifying theme is the royal wake of 1561: an almost carnivalesque event to welcome Queen Mary in Edinburgh. In this respect, the whole poem is linked with the eighteenth-century tradition of holiday poems, although the frame encompasses both comic and tragic pieces. The thirteen ballads, sung by different minstrels, tinge the atmosphere of the royal hall with cheerful or gloomy notes. Either as painter of nature or as teller of supernatural events, each bard is somehow the poetic reflection of their chameleon-like creator. Hogg projects his antiszygical temper in this poem where fact and fiction, history and fancy, Romantic idealism and down-to-earth realism are interchanged and intermingled.

It is not possible to provide a study of the whole 'garland of fair forest flowers'³⁴, as *The Queen's Wake* has been described, within the scope of few pages. I chose to look at 'Kilmeny', the last ballad of Night the First, and 'The Witch of Fife', the last ballad of Night the Second, not because they are Hogg's most anthologised poems but because they are paradigmatic examples of Hogg's dialogic imagination, of the pivotal polarisation in his work between the metaphysical and comic modes. On a larger scale, these two poems reflect the nineteenth-century crucial antithesis between

finally, they are marked by 'perspectivism' -- a vision of reality from multiple perspectives. See David Groves, 'The Satirist and His Age', 10-11.

³⁴ *The Works of Professor Wilson of the University of Edinburgh*, ed. by J. F. Ferrier, 12 vols. (Edinburgh and London: W. Blackwood, 1857), IX, p. 202. This is apparently a fair

serious -- essentially metaphysical -- and comic verse. In short, the opposition between the kind of poetry exemplified by Robert Pollok's *The Course of Time* (1827) and a lighter poetic expression such as, for example, William Tennant's *Anster Fair*. On the other hand, the two ballads are linked with each other through the common theme of womanhood -- though presenting two opposite female protagonists -- and the coexistence of realistic and fantastic elements.

Thus both ballads present simultaneously 'the two moods' of Scottish literature indicated by Gregory Smith, but in 'The Witch of Fife' Hogg subjects them to humorous and burlesque effects. Both poems are connected with Scottish folk traditions, thus differing from ballads such as 'Malcolm of Lorn' or 'Young Kennedy', which are more in tune with European Romanticism and the Gothic tradition. In both poems the protagonist travels to an 'otherworld' which the poet defines in similar terms -- yet in different tongues:³⁵ in 'The Witch of Fife' as the land 'quhare the gray cock never crew',³⁶ and in Kilmeny as the land 'where the cock never crew'.³⁷ In fact, they visit two different supernatural territories. The witch of Fife's flight is an imaginary journey towards the eerie meeting-place of supernatural agents -- 'The warlock men and the weird wemyng,/ And the fays of the wood and the steip,/ And the phantom hunteris all war there,/ And the mermaidis of the deep' (p. 48). The land visited by Kilmeny defies strict labelling and identification. Clearly, 'Kilmeny' embraces more complex issues than those involving the traditional revenants or abduction by the fairies. Kilmeny's vision of Scotland corresponds to the poet's perception of national history and religion; through Kilmeny Hogg exhibits his anxious

judgement, but I have omitted the second half, which says 'bound with a band of rushes from the moor'.

³⁵ 'The Witch of Fife' is written in the archaic orthography of the Medieval Makars, or the so-called ancient style -- a compound of ballad phraseology, the rhetoric of the late Scottish Makars and the contemporary idiomatic expression. Mack defines it as 'pseudo-antique Scots'. Some examples are the old forms -is, quh-, and -it instead of the -s for plural nouns, wh-, and -ed. 'Kilmeny' was initially written in the same style, but then Hogg revised it in 1814 and wrote it in modern Scots -- basically English, only sparsely peppered with Scots expressions (*Selected Poems*, p. xxi).

³⁶ 'The Witch of Fife', in *The Poetical Works of the Ettrick Shepherd*, 5 vols (Glasgow, Edinburgh, and London: Blackie and Son, 1838), I, 43-56 (p. 43).

³⁷ 'Kilmeny', in *The Poetical Works of the Ettrick Shepherd*, 5 vols (Glasgow, Edinburgh, and London: Blackie and Son, 1838), I, pp. 109-120 (p. 110). Further references to this

feelings about past and current Scottish affairs, and his inbred patriotism, but also his repudiation of any form of fanaticism. Kilmeny is transported to a land which seems to blend features of the Christian Heaven with aspects of fairyland, a land

[...] where the cock never crew,
Where the rain never fell, and the wind never blew;
[...]
A land of love, and a land of light,
Withouten sun, or moon, or night;
[...]
And the light a pure celestial beam:
The land of vision it would seem,
A still, an everlasting dream (p. 110)

The topography of the otherworld in 'Kilmeny' is quite vague. Hence the diversified, often conflicting, critical interpretations. Mack writes that 'Kilmeny is not taken to fairyland [...] but to heaven' both because fairyland is never mentioned in the poem and because the bard who sings it is described as a religious mystic (*Selected Poems*, pp. xxii-xxiii). According to Thomas Crawford the heroine does not go to the highest Heaven, but to another kind of heaven, described in the poem as the 'lowermost vales of the storied heaven' (p. 114)³⁸. Nelson Smith sees it as 'a vague idyllic place, full of sensuous beauty, but with peace and mildness rather than life and passion the keynotes'³⁹. Nevertheless, 'Kilmeny' is undeniably linked with folk traditions and superstitions. The girl stays in the otherworld for seven years -- like Thomas the Rhymer in a popular ballad. According to a superstition,

O pleasant is the faery land

edition of 'The Witch of Fife' and 'Kilmeny' will be documented internally by page number.

³⁸ Thomas Crawford, 'James Hogg: the Play of Region and Nation', in *The History of Scottish Literature*, III, pp. 89-106 (p.91).

³⁹ N. Smith, *James Hogg*, p. 132.

For those that in it dwell,
 But aye at end of seven years
 They pay a teind to Hell.⁴⁰

Furthermore, the abduction occurs in a 'green-wood' (p. 111), and she is accompanied towards a green mountain -- in traditional ballads such as *Thomas the Rhymer* and *Tam Lin* green is always associated with the fairies.

'Kilmeny' belongs also to the tradition of visionary poetry. It calls to mind the pioneering works of this tradition -- both English and Scottish -- such as, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*, Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*, Montgomerie's *The Cherry and the Slae*, down to Ramsay's *A Vision*. Kilmeny's dream-vision is a device to explore the Scottish geographical and historical landscape, and to survey the milestones of its past. Like Adam and King Arthur, Kilmeny has a vision of the future -- in her case of the future of Scotland. As John R. Mair points out, the Scottish scenery is pervaded by a nationalistic enthusiasm:⁴¹

A lovely land beneath her lay,
 And that land had glensand mountains gray;
 And that land had valleys and hoary piles,
 And marled seas and a thousand isles;
 Its fields were speckled, its forests green,
 And its lakes were all of the dazzling sheen,
 [...]
 She saw the corn wave on the vale,
 She saw the deer run down the dale;
 She saw the plaid and the broad claymore,
 And the brows that the badge of freedom bore (p. 115)

⁴⁰ Quoted in D. Percy Bliss, *The Devil in Scotland* (London: Alexander Maclehose, 1934), p. 3.

Beside its metaphysical component, 'Kilmeny' presents a strongly physical perception of natural landscape. In other words, it perfectly blends universal and local aspects in a pre-MacDiarmid fashion, and, as Gifford suggests, 'has its own magnificent achievement in its beautiful realisation of an archetypal and ancient vision of transcendental spirit and beauty triumphing over place and time. It is universal and local simultaneously' (*James Hogg*, p. 58). In the *Noctes Ambrosianae* Hogg tells Christopher North that Kilmeny appeared to him in a dream:

[...] my imagination, sir, a' at ance wafted me awa intil the laneliest spat amang a' the hills whare my childhood played -- and amang the broom-brushes and the brackens there, I was beginnin [...] to sink awa back again intil the dream o' dreams! [...] the dream, sir, in which I saw Kilmeny! For though I write down the poem on the sclate in the prime o' manhood, anither being than mysel did in verity compose or create it, sir, ae day when I was lyin a' by mysel in that laneliest spat [...] but oh! how sweetly the glad cretur sang! [...] she keepit whisper, whisperin the words far within my ears, till memory learned them a' off by heart as easy as the names o' Christian creturs that we meet wi' on Sabbaths at the kirk [...].⁴²

In the 'land of thought' Kilmeny has three main visions, which retrospectively look at Scottish but also at European history. Firstly, she foresees the religious controversies between Catholics and Protestants culminating in the death of Queen Mary; secondly, she has a vision of the Covenanters' rebellions and the Glorious Revolution; finally, she sees the Napoleonic campaign up to the Battle of Leipzig. According to MacQueen, these three visions

⁴¹ J. R. Mair, 'A Note on Hogg's 'Kilmeny'', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 6 (July 1968-April 1969), 123-126.

⁴² 'Noctes Ambrosianae', in *The Works of Professor Wilson of the University of Edinburgh*, III, pp. 120-121.

differ from anything in Scott and Galt. In the first place, they are prophecies rather than transcripts of reality, and the figures which appear -- lion, maiden, gruff grim carle, eagle -- are symbolic, rather than representative of individuals. Only Mary is shown in something like her own form. [...] the visions are seen, not from an earthly viewpoint, but from 'the lowermost vales of the storied heaven', the Land of Thought, to which Kilmeny has been bodily assumed [...] the total effect is metaphysical, other-worldly, unlike anything in Scott and Galt [...].⁴³

In 'The Witch of Fife' the visionary component is part of the comic situation. The protagonist flies away from her husband and children, and has a vision of the otherworld and its inhabitants. On her return she tells her husband about her escapade in Carlisle, where, she says, 'we drank, and drank of the bishopis wine/ Quhill we culde drynk ne mair' (p. 49). This form of village humour is reminiscent of Burns's *Tam O'Shanter*, which presents a similar burlesque treatment of the supernatural, and a similar use of reductive idiom, whereby the demonic anathematised by Calvinism becomes a source of comic expression.

The religious component in 'Kilmeny' is not uniquely Christian but participates in the pre-Christian world of superstitions and popular beliefs. On the whole the ballad conveys a sense of harmony and reconciliation of opposites. Here is the portrait of the bard singing 'Kilmeny':

Well versed was he in holy lore;
In cloistered dome the cowl he wore;
But, wearied with the eternal strain
Of formal breviats, cold and vain,
He wooed, in depth of Highland dale,
The silver spring and mountain gale. (p. 107)

⁴³ John MacQueen, *The Rise of the Historical Novel. The Enlightenment and Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1989), pp. 201-202.

The bard professes a pantheistic faith; he sees nature as a receptacle of divine runes, and his life as in total symbiosis with nature's holiness. His creed blends Christian mysticism with a quasi-pagan adoration of nature. As Douglas Gifford indicates, Hogg's 'Christian and pagan worlds are opposite ends of a spectrum' (*James Hogg*, p. 3). This religious syncretism appears also in other poems of *The Queen's Wake*: the mountaineer in 'Old David' believes in the existence of fairies, yet he prays to God; the gigantic temple described in 'The Abbot M'Kinnon' evokes images of pagan rituals, and the monks address their hymns to a pagan-like God of the sea. Likewise, in the later poem *Superstition*, the poet suggests that the borderland between religion and superstition is very hazy. The figure of Kilmeny bridges the Romantic and classical traditions: her Orpheus-like impact on the animal world is combined with her Romantic and quasi-mystical symbiosis with landscape. The 'wee wee' man in 'The Witch of Fife' is her comic counterpart.

Neither of the two most beautiful ballads wins the bardic competition. The prestigious harp is given to Gardyn, the singer of 'Young Kennedy', whereas the Ettrick bard who performed 'Old David' receives a consolatory prize. Thus it is both a Byronic tale, loaded with pseudo-Romantic mannerisms and stereotypes, and a ballad about the increasing disappearance of old beliefs and superstitions receive unanimous approval. The final verdict is a vehicle for the author to convey the idea that fashion had -- certainly in part regrettably -- triumphed and the time was ripe for the replacement of old folk traditions and legends with new literary trends, such as the Gothic tale and the heroic romance in the manner of Scott and Byron. The apparent victory of the two ballads conceals a parodic intent on the part of the author, and an indirect criticism of contemporary literature.

In one of his *Letters on Poetry* in the *Scots Magazine*, Hogg praises Shakespeare's genius, and in particular the play *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, because it embraces '[...] a number of the most wild and extravagant ideas imaginable,

delivered in a manner the most elegant, and withal so very natural'.⁴⁴ Hogg was fascinated by the play because he saw it as an example of a work encompassing heterogeneous or opposing aspects. His admiration for this particular play is clearly evinced in the later poem 'The Song of Oberon', which appeared in *The Musical Bijou* (1830).⁴⁵ It is one of Hogg's most blatant Romantic poems, but with an undeniable evocative power. Oberon is the fairy in *Midsummer-Night's Dream* who asks the other fairies to bless the couples' wedding-beds. Yet Hogg's poem is not an epithalamion; Oberon/ the poet evokes the fairies as angel-like symbols of immortality, rather than folk supernatural beings, in the hope that they will bestow eternity on his song. Oberon asks the fairies to meet him 'to-morrow at even' so that

Soft music shall flow of the spheres above,
The songs of gladness, and songs of love;
And our feast shall be with glory and glee,
Whatever the end of our days may be.⁴⁶

One of the intentions underlying the original plan of the *Midsummer Night Dreams* was to emulate his great predecessor by inserting in the same volume three different poems which could convey an idea of wholeness and totality: the metaphysical world of *The Pilgrims of the Sun*, the motley vision of *Superstition*, and the grotesque, down-to-earth reality of *Connel of Dee*.

Nonetheless, Hogg decided to follow the advice of James Park, one of the *literati*: he abandoned his original plan and published the individual poems separately. Soon afterwards he was to regret his decision, as is corroborated by the 1822 edition of his poems, where the three poems are published together as originally planned. In a note he writes:

⁴⁴ James Hogg, 'Letters on poetry', *Scots Magazine*, 63 (1806), 17-18.

⁴⁵ Reprinted for the first time by David Groves in "'The Song of Oberon" by James Hogg', *Notes and Queries*, 232 (1987), 474-476 (p. 475).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 475.

It ('The Pilgrims of the Sun') is therefore given in this edition as at first intended, namely, one of a series of Midsummer Night Dreams; it being literally so, -- the visions of one in a trance, or the wanderings of her disembodied spirit during that oblivious cessation of mortal life.⁴⁷

The Pilgrims of the Sun is characterised by a shadowy, chiaroscuro atmosphere which recalls some of Shakespeare's plays; the interplay of light and darkness is reflected in the language and themes of the poem. The verses are permeated throughout by physical and metaphysical brightness sporadically interrupted by dark and gloomy passages -- an objective correlative for man's sinfulness. Yet there are also lines in which the poet dwells on the colourful light effects produced by the sun; hence the following description of the rainbow, almost fused in symbiosis with Mary:

On battlement of storied cloud
That floated o'er the dawn serene,
To pace along with angel tread,
And on the rainbow's arch to lean.

Her cheek lay on its rosy rim,
Her bosom pressed the yielding blue,
And her fair robes of heavenly make
Were sweetly tinged with every hue. (I, p. 37)

This sensual contact between Mary and the rainbow turns her into an allegory of love between man and nature.

In another moment of their pilgrimage, the two protagonists, Cela and Mary, fly from the bright atmosphere of Venus towards the reddish, dark vapours

⁴⁷ Groves, *Selected Poems and Songs*, p. 212. References to, *Connel of Dee*, and *Superstition* are taken from this edition, and are documented internally by page number.

surrounding Mars. They reach their goal at dusk; the description of the scene occurs in one of Hogg's most Romantic pages:

[...] When on the world of warriors they alight,
Just on the confines of its day and night;
The purple light was waning west away,
And shoally darkness gained upon the day.

'I love that twilight', said the pilgrim fair,
'For more than earthly solemnness is there.
See how the rubied waters winding roll;
A hoary doubtful hue involves the pole!
Uneasy murmurs float upon the wind,
And tenfold darkness rears its shades behind!

'And lo! where, wrapt in deep vermilion, shroud,
The daylight slumbers on the western cloud!
I love the scene! [...] (III, p. 56)

Gradually, the light becomes weaker and weaker, until they get to a place which has all the characteristics of Dante's *Inferno*. In fact in *The Pilgrims of the Sun* Hogg describes a kind of marriage of heaven and hell, a Blakean union of opposites. Indeed it is not by chance that he dedicates the poem to Lord Byron,⁴⁸ the most eccentric among the Romantics, whose work is the embodiment of the contrasts and paradoxes of the whole Romantic movement, and, to quote Kenneth Simpson, 'who exemplified the crisis of Romanticism'.⁴⁹ Interestingly, in 1814 Byron wrote a letter to Hogg which perhaps triggered the project of *The Pilgrims of the Sun*: 'You shall write

In the case of *The Pilgrims of the Sun* the Part of the poem is also indicated by roman numerals.

⁴⁸ See epigraph to Part II of the present chapter.

seventeen odes for me, anything from Miltonic blank down to Phillupian [sic] namby, and I a similar number for you, and let a jury of good men and true be the judges between us.'⁵⁰

Apart from the depiction of the two antipodal otherworlds, the poem comprises also a vision of a version of 'Purgatorio' where the soul undergoes an amelioration process to advance towards perfection. The nature of this world is described as protean and continually oscillating between good and evil; Hogg refers to the place also as one of a multitude of petty pieces forming the universal mosaic of planets. These and other images convince that this elusive world is an allegory of earth, and that Hogg replaces the post-Renaissance anthropocentric vision of the world with one lacking a centre and based on relativism.

The ultimate significance of the poem is that absolute truth is inscrutable, that one must stop looking for an answer to metaphysical enquiries and accept the ever-changing and contradictory quality of life. Hence the meaningful finale: after visiting the different otherworlds, the protagonist Mary Lee finally returns back to earth to plunge again into the ordinary by marrying the minstrel Hugo of Norroway, who is in fact the earthly double of her spiritual guide, Cela. By embracing the human instead of remaining in the supernatural world, Mary adds a variation to the Kilmeny leit-motif. David Groves observes that 'In Romantic works like Hogg's *The Pilgrims of the Sun* and *Confessions*, reality is often acknowledged by a final section which returns the reader to the real world'⁵¹. The poem reveals Hogg's love for life, which is also one of the leit-motifs linking the three poems of the unfinished trilogy. In 'Connel of Dee' the eponymous protagonist has a final epiphany about happiness in ordinary life. In this he anticipates the protagonist of 'The Goode Manne of Allowa' in *A Queer Book*. In 'Superstition' nature is represented in pre-symbolist terms as a receptacle of metaphysical signs. The poet contemplates it in a quasi-religious mood. On the other hand, Hogg does not dwell long on the description of the otherworld in *The Pilgrims of the Sun*, because

⁴⁹ K. Simpson, *The Protean Scot*, p. 251.

⁵⁰ *Byron's Letters and Journals*, IV, pp. 84-86 (p. 86).

To sing all the scenes our travellers saw
 An angel's harp were meet, which mortal hand
 Must not assay. -- These scenes must be concealed
 From mortal fancy, and from mortal eye,
 Until our weary pilgrimage is done. (II, p. 45)

The poet desists from any pretentious attempt to break the inscrutability of divine designs, hence offering a critique of all those philosophies and ideologies that presume to explain metaphysical truth. Sometimes Hogg succeeds in bridging the distance between the physical and metaphysical by resorting to a device that Dante used lavishly in his *magnum opus*: the 'comparatio domestica', or a simile whose vehicle is derived from down-to-earth phenomena. An example of this technique occurs in Part Third of *The Pilgrims of the Sun* to describe the unearthly flight of the two protagonists:

Like pilgrim birds that o'er the ocean fly,
 When lasting night and polar storms are nigh,
 Enveloped in a rayless atmosphere,
 By northern shores uncertain course they steer;
 O'er thousand darkling billows flap the wing;
 Till far is heard the welcome murmuring
 Of mountain waves o'er waste of waters tossed,
 In fleecy thunder fall on Albyn's coast.

So passed the pilgrims through impervious night,
 Till, in a moment, rose before their sight
 A bound impassable of burning levin!

⁵¹ David Groves, 'Early 19th Century, Excluding Scott', *Scottish Literary Journal*, The Year's Work (1988), 16-35 (p.16).

A wall of flame, that reached from earth to heaven! [...] (III, p. 57)

The divine in *The Pilgrims of the Sun* is often associated with nature: God is called 'God of Nature' and the sun is both a metaphor of God and a deity by itself. Hence the syncretism of Christian and pagan aspects. As F. Marian MacNeill points out, the Scots have always bestowed a mystical value on the image of the sun and associated it with goodness. On the other hand, the moon has always been seen as a source of threatening mystery.⁵² In fact, the sun symbolism is not only part of pagan religiosity but occurs also in Christian iconography and literature -- *The Divine Comedy* is a leading example. Within the unachieved structure of the *Midsummer Night Dreams*, *The Pilgrims of the Sun* describes an upward and simultaneously eastward journey towards the light, whereas *Connel of Dee* represents the opposite downward journey into the 'heart of darkness' of the protagonist.

Both subject and style undoubtedly make *The Pilgrims of the Sun* Hogg's most ambitious poem. It is also one of his most Romantic poems in terms of both language and themes, although, like Byron's poetry, it includes some anti-Romantic episodes with satirical intent -- for example the scene where the monk of Lindeen steals the jewels from Mary Lee, the protagonist, while she is in a state of catalepsy. As far as the story of Mary and Cela is concerned, Hogg claimed that it 'is founded on a traditionary tale well known over all Scotland, and affirmed to have happened, not only at old Lindeen, but in some lonely and eiry churchyard here and there over the whole country'.⁵³ He admits being indebted to folk traditions and legends, but his response to them is as ambiguous as ever. The story of Mary Lee and her journey can be evaluated by means of both a supernatural and a scientific interpretation. According to the latter, her unearthly pilgrimage would be only the content of a dream. The 1865 edition of the poems reports the following explanation:

⁵² M. MacNeill, *The Silver Bough*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1989), I, *passim*.

⁵³ cf. D. Groves, *Selected Poems and Songs*, p. 212.

In almost every case, also, the subject of such a burial and restoration was a lady destined to be the mother of some wonderful person whom the world could not well have dispensed with.⁵⁴

If we read these words in the light of Hogg's conviction that his family descended from the Vikings like Hugo of Norroway, the above mentioned 'wonderful person' can be read as a pretentious, though humorous, allusion to Hogg's ancestry. Anyhow, Hogg's claims are not always to be taken literally. For example, his assertion of descent from the Vikings is much like his well-known insistence on sharing a birthday with Burns.

The Pilgrims of the Sun poem consists of four parts, each characterised by a different metre and style; the end is linked with the beginning by a circular pattern. The opening scenes are set in Selkirkshire, the native region of the protagonist; the metre here is the traditional ballad quatrain (abab), which particularly suits the rapid description of Mary's journey from the earth to the otherworld. In the second and third parts the poetic vision shifts to the otherworld; the metre must therefore be adapted to the new metaphysical material, more demanding and sophisticated than the images in the previous part. Hence the choice of Miltonic free verse,⁵⁵ and the heroic couplet respectively, the latter due to the fact that the discussion about the different otherworlds includes a satirical component. Hogg handles free verse quite successfully; his forceful imagination is totally suited to the Miltonic images of Part Second.

On the other hand, Hogg's use of the Augustan style is more stilted; obviously the fixed pattern of the rhyming couplet puts some restriction on his usually carefree

⁵⁴ *The Works of the Ettrick Shepherd. With a Memoir of the Author by the Rev. Thomas Thomson*, ed. by the Rev. Thomas Thomson, 2 vols (London, Glasgow, and Edinburgh: Blackie and Son, 1865), II, pp. 125-126.

⁵⁵ Although Wilson's and Lockhart's manipulation of the Ettrick Shepherd in the *Noctes Ambrosianae* makes it difficult to know if the Shepherd's words can be attributed to the poet or if they are another invention of the two *literati*, one may conjecture that it is not by pure chance that the character of the Ettrick Shepherd often quotes Milton together with other poets. However caricatured Wilson's peasant might be, the Shepherd's use of intertextual references is not too far from Hogg's borrowing or mimicry of other authors' styles and themes -- including his parodies. See Alan Lang Strout, 'The *Noctes Ambrosianae* and James Hogg', *Review of English Studies*, 13 (1937), 46-63, 177-189.

style and candid expression. Finally, the last part describes Mary's return to her country; the rhythm changes again, this time into iambic tetrameters in the manner of Scott. The physical portrait of Mary Lee links her with Kilmeny and other female characters modelled on the virgin girl. Yet she is original in that she is more than a female icon or a symbol; she is a round character and a mother figure marked by an earthly quality which in Kilmeny is subdued to her superhuman attributes. Although she is religious, Mary fears that some churchmen are not to be trusted -- 'She feared the half that the bedesmen said/ Was neither true nor plain to man'(I, p. 32). Her scepticism towards the religious institution is corroborated and emphasised by Cela's prayer. Mary is a mouthpiece for Hogg's attack on religious hypocrisy and the falsity of some churchmen. In general, she is the vehicle for the author's ironic stance when he is confronted with any pre-conceived creed and belief. She stands for objectivity and criticism, which Hogg sees as essential to come to terms with the paradoxes and riddles of life.⁵⁶

Cela, the male protagonist of the poem, is a mysterious figure from the very beginning. He abruptly appears while Mary is sleeping, so that it is hard to say whether or not he is part of a dream. Moreover, even assuming that the events described are real and that Mary is really accompanied to the otherworld, the identification of this world remains a mystery. Cela's angel-like appearance substantiates the hypothesis that Mary is taken to heaven, yet, on the other hand, he could be a fairy abducting Mary to Fairyland. Both interpretations are validated by the syncretic atmosphere of the poem, by the coexistence of Christian and pagan aspects. Mary disappears during the 'Third night of the waning moon' (I, p. 33), which a popular tradition associates with the arrival of the fairies or some other supernatural occurrence in everyday life. Indeed throughout the poem the poet seems to speak from the standpoint of the community of Carelha -- 'They knew on that night that the spirits were free;/ That revels of fairies were held on the lea' (IV, p. 64). In

⁵⁶ On the other hand Rev. Thomson comments: 'It was the scepticism of an innocent mind yearning for a higher knowledge than she could discover, and a more congenial society than that which surrounded her -- a disposition which in such an age brought her in fearful proximity to the statue *de hereticis* and the pile of martyrdom' (*The Works of the Ettrick Shepherd*, II, p. 125)

short, the worlds visited by Mary are too multifarious to pin down to a single identification, be it Fairyland or Christian Heaven.

Some of these worlds are an idealised representation of the earth, as in the following lines:

That pleasant land is lost in light
 To every searching mortal eye;
 So nigh the sun its orbit sails,
 That on his breast it seems to lie.

And, though its light be dazzling bright,
 The warmth was gentle, mild, and bland
 Such as on summer days may be,
 Far up the hills of Scottish land. (I, p. 39)

After visiting the first and the second 'green world', the two pilgrims enter the 'bright regions of eternal day', and there they stop on the top of a hill in order to contemplate the panorama underneath. This pause during the journey is similar to the didactic interludes in *The Divine Comedy*, when Virgil instructs Dante on philosophic, moral, or theological subjects. From the hill, Cela and Mary observe 'The motioned universe, that wheeled around/ In fair confusion [...]' (II, p. 41), a heliocentric universe where God's throne is juxtaposed to the sun. Mary is struck by this vision, but her response climaxes when Cela guides her to the place where the earth lies. Hogg projects in the figure of Mary his patriotic love for Scotland:

'[...] where Tweed from distant moors
 Far travelled flows in murmuring majesty;
 And Yarrow rushing from her bosky banks,
 Hurries with headlong haste to the embrace
 Of her more stately sister of the hills.' (II, p. 42)

Cela and Mary visit a world which offers Hogg the opportunity to convey his vision of a universe without ethnic, social and racial discriminations, inhabited by '[...] men of all creeds,/ Features, and hues! [...]' (II, p. 45). Thus he confirms also his belief in relativism and his rejection of any doctrine which claims to embrace absolute truths -- for example the fanatical Calvinism of Robert Wringhim's father in *The Justified Sinner*. On approaching the centre of the universe, the two pilgrims are accompanied by a melody of sounds and voices in different languages. His vision is generally optimistic because, despite his satirical and sarcastic attitude towards certain social categories, Hogg believes in the possibility of human and social amelioration. Groves substantiates this idea by observing that Hogg 'experiments with the satirical visions of Dryden and Pope, and bends those eighteenth-century perspectives to a Romantic outlook in which all human beings are in a state of progression towards a condition of ultimate truth'⁵⁷.

Cela guides Mary across many different lands, which he sums up in the following verses:

'[...]
 In heaven above, or in the deep below,
 What thou misconstruest I shall well explain,
 Be it in angel's walk, or mortal reign,
 In sun, moon, stars, in mountain, or in main.' (III, pp. 53-54)

He explains to Mary that a manichean division between good and evil does not exist, that each individual is endowed with a potential for goodness, but often antagonistic forces drive it back to its source. The warring population of Mars embodies the forces of evil. This is an opportunity for Hogg to launch his pacifist message with vehemence, in particular when he refers to 'A fiend, that in Tartarian gulf was tossed,/ [...] The scourge of God, the terror of the land!' (III, p. 58) -- possibly a portrait of Napoleon, who was then making war all over Europe. The same figure is later on

⁵⁷ D. Groves, 'The Satirist and His Age. Hogg's Development of a Romantic Brand of Satire', p. 11.

described as a 'wolfish fiend' who will be defeated by the joined forces of the antagonistic nations. The following lines bespeak Hogg's democratic feelings:

'[...]

To be unanimous is to be great!

When right's own standard calmly is unfurled,

The people are the sovereigns of the world!' (III, p. 59)

A prophetic component runs through the whole poem, and Cela is its main channel. Thanks to him, Mary can envisage the future of Scotland in the historical process. By means of his explanations and revelations Cela addresses a didactic message both to his pupil and to the readers. Hogg speaks through the *persona* of Cela in order to sneer at some social categories that he 'debars' in later poems such as *Queen Hynde* (1824) and *The Monitors* (1831). Hence Cela and Mary's pilgrimage is not merely to Eden-like lands but also to worlds marred by corruption and sin, since Mary must reach the conclusion

'[...]

That human life is but the infant stage

Of a progressive, endless pilgrimage,

To woe, or state of bliss, by bard unsung,

At that eternal fount where being sprung.' (III, p. 62)

Eventually she is to bring this message back to earth to the community of Carelha, because, as Hogg seems to suggest, prophetic visions are pointless if they do not become the spiritual possession of the whole human community. A strong democratic feeling dominates the last section of the poem, where the tone shifts back to narrative, and the poet takes us back to the beginning of the poem when Mary fell asleep. The general atmosphere is tinged with gloomy, almost macabre sensations, which evoke the setting of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, or the atmosphere in many Gothic novels. The folk of Carelha find the girl in the same 'bower' from where she took off

with Cela, but this time 'her sleep was the sleep of death' (IV, p. 65). This is the voice of the community, or how the community interprets a case which could be scientifically explained by phenomena such as syncope or catalepsy. If this is the case, Mary's re-awakening corresponds to the end of her comatose state and not to an uncanny case of resurrection. This Enlightenment view is supported by Reverend Thomson, who in the 1865 edition of Hogg's poetical works, compares Mary's experience to 'a simple case of syncope or catalepsy'.⁵⁸ Yet Hogg leaves the mystery unresolved and the readers free to choose the interpretation they prefer. After the satirical episode of the monk of Lindeen attempting to steal Mary's jewels from her grave -- an anticipation of Connel of Dee's theft from the wreck underwater -- the poem closes with a fable-like exit of the protagonists; Cela reappears on the earth as the harpist whose charming music stirs up Mary's love. He is now called Hugo of Norroway, and is introduced as the pioneer of the pastoral song in the Ettrick valley. As I have already pointed out, Hogg believed that he had Scandinavian ancestors, and therefore Hugo's musical talent could be a hint at the artistic vein of the Hoggs or a more direct suggestion of Hogg's own destiny in the manner of his use of the poet in *The Three Perils of Man*.

In sum, one of the most remarkable aspects of the poem is the interplay of earthly and spiritual realities -- the antithesis as well as the link between them. The heavenly beauty which especially characterises the second part of the poem, where Hogg adopts Miltonic free verse, is counterbalanced by the earthly beauty of the Scottish landscape and the realistic picture of community life which particularly emerge in the first and the last two parts. Accordingly, the metre changes from Miltonic verse into ballad stanzas, and, parallel to this, the content becomes more and more associated with the traditions and superstitions of the Scottish people. The only interlude occurs in the third part, when the poet makes use of the heroic couplet reminiscent of eighteenth-century English satirical verse. Indeed the beginning of Part Third is tinged with bitter satire. The poet appeals to the harp of England, which he sees as corrupted by modern urban society, and therefore he pleads for it to 'come to

⁵⁸ *The Works of the Ettrick Shepherd*, ed. by Thomson, II, p. 125.

the silent moorland dale' (III, p. 52) with him. Hogg's apparent eulogy to England conceals an anti-imperialistic message in the last line:

Imperial England, of the ocean born,
 Who from the isles beyond the dawn of morn,
 To where waste oceans wash Peruvia's shore,
 Hast from all nations drawn thy boasted lore.
 Helm of the world, whom seas and isles obey,
 Tho' high thy honours, and though far thy sway,
 Thy harp I crave, unfearful of thy frown;
 Well may'st thou lend what erst was not thine own. (III, p. 52)

Then he goes on to criticise the harp of contemporary English poetry, since it has lost 'Dryden's twang, and Pope's malicious knell' (ibid.), and its chords are instead 'worn'

[...]
 By peer, by pastor, and by bard forlorn;
 By every grub that harps for venal ore,
 And crabbe that grovels on the sandy shore. (ibid.)

And then the final comment: 'I wot not if thy maker's aim has been/ A harp, a fiddle, or a tambourine' (ibid.). Groves argues that the above verses refer to Hogg's contemporary poets, such as Byron ('peer'), Crabbe ('pastor' and 'crabbe') and Cowper ('bard forlorn'), and also to Grub street in London, a nucleus for hack writers (*Selected Poems*, p.213). This is undoubtedly an interesting point, but the reference to Byron is not convincing, in that Hogg profoundly admired him and his work, as he shows in the dedicatory poem 'To the Right Hon. Lord Byron' prefaced to the *Midsummer Night Dreams*.

The second part is undoubtedly metaphysical poetry, whereas the other three sections are conceptually more elusive. They also contain a metaphysical component

but not so conspicuously as the second section. The figure of Cela and his earthly incarnate are the essential vehicle for Hogg's metaphysical vision, which does not exclude but rather include a vision of human life as receptacle of spiritual existence. Mary's love for her supernatural guide is born again in ordinary life; the seeds of happiness were already embedded in everyday life but she needed to undergo her spiritual *Bildung* before being able to perceive them and make them bloom. Despite a slight sense of nostalgia towards those times when the folk innocently believed in the supernatural and let their imagination wander freely, Hogg's ultimate message is optimistic: men's happiness belongs to this world and can be found in the simplest things provided that we recognise the magic and mystery that they encompass. The story of Connel of Dee encapsulates the same *cârpè diem* message, a philosophy of life which, without denying dreams and imagination, encourages the acceptance and appreciation of ordinary life as the starting point for higher flights.

The Pilgrims of the Sun is essentially a post-Miltonic, visionary poem in the same mode as Robert Pollok's *The Course of Time* (1826), but Hogg's wit and satirical vein are unequalled, and certainly absent in Pollok's saturnine poem. *Connel of Dee* is its comic counterpart, characterised by similar themes, such as the journey-motif and the intermingling of reality and dream. Indeed the whole poem revolves around an oneiric experience. Connel, the protagonist, is a young man with high aspirations and ambitions, hoping to leave his family and cottage behind, and find 'a wife with a mailin, and store'.⁵⁹ His dream seems to become true when he meets 'a young maiden [...] / Who seemed in the bloom and the bell of hir life' (p. 77), who asks him exactly what he has long been wishing for:

[...]

I'm weary of lying my lane;

I have castles, and lands, and flocks of my ain,

But want ane my gillour to share;

⁵⁹ 'Connel of Dee', in *James Hogg. Selected Poems and Songs*, ed. by Groves, pp. 76-89 (p. 76).

A man that is hale as the hart on the hill;
 As stark, and as kind, is the man to my will,
 Who has slept on the heather and drank of the rill
 And, like you, gentle, amorous and fair. (p. 77)

She asks him to make her his wife, and share all her riches. In one of his typical anticipatory comments, Hogg warns Connel against the brevity of illusions and the evanescence of dreams, which wane when 'cool reason' (p. 78) intervenes, and turns 'all those pleasures to pain' (p. 78). His journey to the maiden's castle turns out to be a journey to hell -- a place inhabited by people 'Who thought not of sin nor of Satan aright,/ Nor the dangers that mankind belay;/ Who joked about heaven, and scorned to pray' (p. 80) -- which he opposes to the heavenly vision of 'the hills of the Dee' and his 'moorland abode' (p. 79). The sinful people he meets turn him into the butt of their mockery; hence Connel is, in a sense, another *alter-ego* of the poet surrounded by affluent, successful and at times scoffing *literati*. Consequently, when Connel decides to run away from the castle and return to his moorland, he is a figure of the poet turning his back to the world of the *literati* and the high ambitions associated with it, in order to resume his native harp, and, as he writes in *Queen Hynde*, to please himself alone.⁶⁰ Connel runs away 'from a wife,/ And a trap-door that sunk on a screw' (p. 83), an instrument of torture that his witch-wife employs to kill her 'irksome' (p. 82) husbands. Hogg's black humour is at its best here, in particular where he describes Connel's pressing escape in lines with an equally pressing rhythm:

He turned and he dashed his fair lady aside;
 And off like the lightening he broke,
 By staircase and gallery, with horrified stride,
 He turned not, he staid not, nor spokel

[...]

He stop'd not to rap and he staid not to call,
 With ram-race he cleared at a bensil the wall,

And headlong beyond got a grievous fall,
But he rose, and he ran! and he ran! (p. 82)

The poet himself presses him to run, till Connel reaches the waters of the Dee, and dives in the river as a means of escape, despite his terror for eels -- 'like a scared otter' (p. 85). Hence his downward journey begins, a kind of purgatorial passage before reaching the surface again and plunge into his old life. In fact, this only occurs after Connel is woken up from his nightmare by his sisters. It was all a dream, the poet says, but one which remained stamped on Connel's brain, and taught him a lesson, because from then onwards 'No longer his wishes or appetite ranged/ With the gay and voluptuous to share', and 'He viewed every luxury of life as a snare' (p. 89). The poet comically concludes that Connel's

[...] wishes were few, his enjoyments were rife,
He loved and he cherished each thing that had life
With two small exceptions, an eel, and a wife,
Whose commerce he dreaded the same. (p. 89)

The poem obviously centres on the *carpe diem* motif which recurs in many poems, often associated with the *ubi sunt* theme. 'This World's an Unco Bonny Place' (1832) is a typical example; according to the poet, every humble man should say 'I'm here as God hath made me/ I'll make the most o't that I can'.⁶¹ Likewise the concluding lines of 'The Lass o' Carlyle' (1830) read: 'The best thing in life is to mak/ The maist o't that we can'.⁶² The same frolicsome spirit emerges in the autobiographical poem entitled 'The Monitors' (1831), in which the poet looks backward and forward in time with a sense of pride for having 'fought/ Against a world wi' courage true',⁶³ and for feeling now strong enough to confront and

⁶⁰ See discussion of *Queen Hynde* later in this chapter.

⁶¹ 'This World's an Unco Bonny Place', in *James Hogg. Selected Poems and Songs*, ed. by Groves, pp. 197-200 (p. 197).

⁶² 'The Lass o' Carlyle', in *James Hogg. Selected Poems and Songs*, p. 172.

⁶³ 'The Monitors', in *James Hogg. Selected Poems and Songs*, pp. 192-195 (p. 193).

'outbrave' (p. 195) the 'ups an' downs' (p. 194) of the world. In 'The Minstrel Boy' the old poet addresses the young minstrel with a message which again conveys a *carpe-diem* idea: '*Better in the first race contend,/ Than all that follows to transcend*'.⁶⁴

Yet 'The Minstrel Boy' is written by a nostalgic poet who looks back to those days when he, like the minstrel boy envisioned by his imagination,⁶⁵ used to wander in the countryside and compose songs:

Yes, there was a time with memory twined,
(But time has left it afar behind),
When I, like thee, on a summer day
Would fling my bonnet and plaid away,
And toil at the leap, the race, or the stone,
With none to beat but myself alone. (p. 161)

The last line contains another implication that Hogg had to struggle against adversities and adversaries in order to have his genius recognised by his contemporaries; many poems include similar allusions to a hostile exterior world where the poet is relegated to an eccentric and isolated position, and has to fight to overcome his otherness from the social and cultural context. One such estranged figure is the protagonist of the comic poem 'The Left-Handed Fiddler' (1824), whose eccentric way of playing the violin turns his whole perspective of life topsy-turvy; or the protagonist of 'The p and the q, or the Adventures of Jock M'Pherson' (1829), a parody of the adventurer who cannot take on any social role but chooses exile in 'otherworlds' and aloofness as the condition of his existence.

⁶⁴ 'The Minstrel Boy', in *James Hogg. Selected Poems and Songs*, pp. 160-162 (p. 162).

ii. Intermingledoms in poems 'whaur extremes meet'

This section will focus on Hogg's long poems written after *The Queen's Wake*, considering them as syncretic patchworks of divergent motifs and styles.

Mador of the Moor is the result of Hogg's experimentation with the epic tradition, a genre which he hoped would provide him with world-wide prestige and fame. In fact, *Mador of the Moor* is a kind of mock-epic, the result of Hogg's own appropriation and personal rendering of the traditional epic. Rather than being concerned with historical facts, he essentially recounts a story in the capacity of a ballad minstrel or folk storyteller. John MacQueen points out that 'the history with which Hogg is best acquainted is what nowadays would be called oral, based on tradition passed on by work of mouth'.⁶⁶ In the 'Introduction' the poet writes:

Since Scotland's crimson page was first begun,
Tay was the scene of actions great and high:
But aye when from the echoing hills I run,
My froward harp refuses to comply;
The nursling of the wild, the Mountain Bard am I.⁶⁷

The story of Ila and Mador, the minstrel -- but in fact the king in disguise -- with whom she falls in love and whom, after a series of adventures, she will end up marrying, could perfectly provide the narrative framework for a ballad. Various stories within the main story call to mind traditional ballads such as 'The Cruel Mother', in particular the tale that the Palmer, a mysterious pilgrim that Ila meets on

⁶⁵ See James Hogg. *Selected Poems and Songs*, pp. 219-220. The poem was written under request from Thomas Pringle, who asked Hogg to produce a poem for the illustration of one of the plates of his Christmas annual *Friendship's Offering*.

⁶⁶ MacQueen, *The Rise of the Historical Novel*, p. 203.

⁶⁷ *Mador of the Moor*, in *The Poetical Works of the Ettrick Shepherd*, 5 vols (Glasgow, Edinburgh, London: Blackie and Son, 1838), IV, pp. 153-227 (Introduction, p. 156). *Mador of the Moor* is not included in Groves's edition; thus I have used the 1838 edition. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text and documented by book and page number.

the road, tells Ila in Canto Fourth: the tale of how his past lover, Matilda, turned out to be a mischievous mother who killed their child. Furthermore, the story contains many characteristics of the fairy-tale -- for example, Ila succeeds in finding Mador again thanks to the ring, a sort of magic token, that Mador gave her before his sudden disappearance. Two characters help her to accomplish her destiny, acting as the 'helper' -- in Propp's terminology⁶⁸ -- in the traditional fairy-tale. They are the Palmer in Canto Fourth, and the Abbot of Dunfermline in Canto Fifth. Canto Second begins with a *topos* of the fairy-tale: 'That time there lived upon the banks of Tay/ A man of right ungainly courtesy' (II, p. 172). In the same Canto the landscape surrounding the two protagonists is described as 'a fairy land' and 'a paradise' where 'every bloom that scents the woodland green/ Opened to Heaven its breast, by human eye unseen' (II, pp. 181-182). Again fable-like and religious aspects are mingled without causing incongruity. Finally Ila, also called May like the protagonist of 'May of the Moril Glen' (*A Queer Book*), is the Beauty of the story, a Snow White figure, but also reminiscent of Kilmeny, in particular when the poet writes:

Haply a world is hid from mortal eyes,
Where thou mayest smile in purity again,
And shine in virgin bloom, that ever shall remain. (II, p. 174)

Yet she is simultaneously one of Hogg's most flesh-and-blood, and in a sense masculine, female characters, strong-willed and rebellious when necessary. For example, when her people want her to abandon her illegitimate child, Ila reveals a strong determination to keep him: 'But I will nurse thee kindly on my knee,/ In spite of every taunt and jeering tongue' (III, p. 199). Finally, the poem ends with another fairy-tale *topos*; just before the Conclusion, the poet writes: 'Needs not to sing of after joys that fell'/ Of years of glory and felicity;/ Needs not on time and circumstance to dwell' (V, p. 226).

⁶⁸ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. by Laurence Scott, rev. and ed. by Louis A. Wagner, 2nd edn (Austin; London: University of Texas Press, 1968), pp. 79-80.

The general structure and form of *Mador of the Moor* are those of a traditional epic poem. The idea of an epic poem occurred to him in 1814 when he was in Athol in the Highlands, host of his friend, Mrs Izett. Athol and the valley of the river Tay are also the setting of the poem. Mrs Izett suggested he should write something therapeutic to kill time -- Hogg was also convalescing in the Highlands -- and he followed her advice by planning the composition of a narrative epic poem. Therefore *Mador of the Moor* originated as an occasional work, although the structural framework and the elaborate story would suggest that Hogg planned the work long before executing it. The poem does not present a stylistic consistency throughout but represents a paradigmatic example of Hogg's eccentric and changeful poetic tone.

From the very beginning of the poem, Hogg reveals his ambiguous relationship with the epic tradition: he claims authenticity by saying that the story is 'ancient' (I, p. 156); in fact his personal adaptation of historical facts starts with the title itself. The word 'Moor' refers to the natural setting of the story -- as in the opening hunting scene -- but it is also an echo of Ila 'Moore', the name of the female protagonist. This name is apparently associated with Elizabeth Moore (or Muir), wife of Robert II, a historical detail corroborated in the 'Argument', where Hogg refers to the famous Scottish victory against the English in 1388 at Otterburn during the king's reign. Thus the poem seems to be based on well-founded historical sources.⁶⁹ Conversely, an attentive reading reveals that Hogg's central concern is verisimilitude rather than historical truth, and that the apparent historical framework is only a device to suit his own narrative. For example, Ila Moore is not a Queen but a Highlander from a lowly family. Moreover, James V rather than Richard II is a more appropriate historical model for the figure of the king disguised as Mador, the minstrel, because it was James V who, according to a popular legend, used to conceal his real identity

⁶⁹ Cf. Thomson, *The Works of the Ettrick Shepherd*, II, pp. 104-105. Thomson, the notoriously main responsible for the bowdlerisation of Hogg's works, judged the poem in very unfavourable terms, and strongly criticised Hogg's manipulative use of history and epic such as the choice of two ordinary people as heroes, of a heroine who 'is nothing more than an ordinary belle, a coquette and ultimately something worse', and of a hero who '[...] instead of being a king in disguise [...] is not only a mere minstrel, but a very vulgar fiddler [...]' (p. 104).

under the mask of a beggar or bard. With typical disregard for historical accuracy, Hogg chose historical characters and events that could be adapted to his personal rendering of history and be blended with his interest in folk tale and epic romance. In *Mador of the Moor* he is the 'king of the mountain and fairy school', whose perspective of history is dictated by the characteristics of the oral rather than the literary tradition, so that historical facts are described 'in order of significance, rather than in a rigid diachronic fashion'.⁷⁰ This also holds for later poems in which content and form waver between epic tradition and fairy-tale -- a typical example is the long poem 'Mora Campbell' (1834) about the romance between a Highland girl and an English knight after the Ballad of Culloden.⁷¹ In certain passages of *Mador of the Moor* Hogg seems almost to make use of a form of reductive idiom applied to traditional epic in order to lighten the narrative flow and give rise to humorous effects.

A similar treatment affects other literary conventions and imagery. Certainly, the poem includes Romantic passages devoid of any satirical intent; for examples the scenes in which the poet contemplates the sublime landscape of the Highlands or the verses of the Conclusion in which he nostalgically evokes the past and regrets that the Harp -- symbol of the poetry of 'auld lang syne' and eternal song -- has left the Border valleys:

Return, my Harp, unto the Border dale.
 Thy native green hill, and thy fairy ring;
 No more thy murmurs on the Grampian gale
 May wake the hind in covert slumbering;
 Nor must thy proud and far outstretched string
 Presume to renovate the northern song,
 Wakening the echoes Ossian taught to sing;
 Their sleep of ages still they must prolong,

⁷⁰ Valentina Bold, 'Traditional Narrative Elements in the *Three Perils of Woman*, *Studies in Hogg and His World*, 3 (1992), 42-56, (p. 46).

⁷¹ The poem appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 35 (1834), 947-954.

Till son inspired is born their native hills among.

[...]

Or that the sounds and energies sublime,
That darkly dwell by cataract and steep,
Would rouse anew thy visionary chime,
Too long by southland breezes lulled asleep [...].
(Conclusion, pp. 226-227)

Hogg projects his love of Scotland in the picture of the Grampians. The image of the river Tay is a metaphor both of human life and of Scottish culture as Hogg intends it: the river is a meeting point for different creeds and traditions, a place where Christian and pagan beliefs form a syncretic unity. An example of Romantic sublime occurs in Canto First, when the king contemplates a landscape imbued with signs of an imminent tempest:

On grey Macduich's utmost verge he stood,
The loftiest cone of all that desert dun;
The seas afar were streamed o'er with blood!
Dark forests waved, and winding waters run!
For nature glowed beneath the evening sun;
The western shadows darkening every dale,
Where dens of gloom, the sight of man to shun,
Lay shrouded in impervious magic veil;
While, o'er them poured the rays of light so lovely pale. (I, p. 162)

The poem incorporates also two Romantic quests: Ila's journey to Stirling and her father's peregrinations in order to find her. Another Romantic episode occurs when Ila meets the charismatic figure of Palmer, a half-human, half-supernatural character who can communicate with the 'otherworld'. He looks forward to the

figure of Cela in *Pilgrims of the Sun*, since he similarly has strong links with mankind -- he is a hermit out of choice after fulfilling a tragic existence among men. Hogg's definition of love in Canto Third -- where love is personified and the poet addresses it as if it were one of the characters -- strikes another Romantic chord:

Child of the moistened eye and burning brain,
Of glowing fancy, and the fervid vein,
That soft on bed of roses loves to rest,
And crop the flower where lurks the deadly bane! (III, p. 191)

Yet a few verses later Hogg's anti-romance intervenes to stop his sentimental brooding:

Cease, thou wild Muse, thy vague unbodied lay!
What boots these wanderings from thy onward tale?
I know thee well! when once thou fliest astray,
To lure thee back no soothing can avail. (III, p. 193)

In other words, first Hogg deals with certain Romantic themes and then, by means of self-reflective remarks, he criticises the over-sentimental and mellifluous style of certain Romantic poets. Hogg's Romantic and anti-Romantic attitudes are often juxtaposed components of his writing; like Byron, he was a Romantic writer with an acute sense of irony and self-irony. And like Byron's, Hogg's epic is simultaneously mock-epic. As Nelson Smith writes, 'Hogg's anti-romance is a function of his realistic outlook -- he undercuts the idealism with glimpses of the human and actual.'⁷²

Before *Mador* Hogg published another epic poem -- or a fragment of an epic poem in two books-- which essentially aims to parody classical epic. This poem is *The Russiadde* which was included in the 1822 edition of Hogg's works.⁷³ Unlike

⁷² N. Smith, *James Hogg*, p. 172.

⁷³ I have used the 1838 edition. Here *The Russiadde* is part of vol. IV, pp. 228-264.

Mador, *The Russiadde* is an entirely comic poem in the same vein as 'Connel of Dee', describing the hero's -- perhaps anti-hero's -- journey through the otherworlds with Venus as his guide. Like Connel, Russell also undergoes a submarine voyage which coincides with his initiation into love -- Thomson omitted this part and the whole Book II from his edition because of its straightforward treatment of sexuality which Thomson considered indelicate. Hogg's parody is here targeted not only against Virgilian epic, but also against the excesses of Romantic literature -- hence the poem's link with *The Poetic Mirror* -- and against his own poetic idealistic vision in ballads such as 'Kilmeny' or *The Pilgrims of the Sun*. Thus the whole poem is imbued with parody and self-parody rather than satire.

Hogg's parodic intent is evident from the subtitle: 'A fragment of an ancient epic poem, supposed to have been written by Gilbert Hume, a sutor of Selkirk'.⁷⁴ Like Hogg's other epic poems, *The Russiadde* is essentially a tale with the characteristics of the oral tradition, which Hogg follows and mocks at the same time. Hence his parodic treatment of the traditional incipit of the oral tale and folk tale: Well then; as all old tales began,/ 'In Selkirk once there lived a man.' (I, p. 229). Half-mockingly the poet appeals to the 'Genius of Virgil' whom he admires 'For saying most, and telling least' (I, p. 230); in other words, Hogg intends to imitate Virgil's descriptive style and avoid introspective digressions which may encumber the narrative. The telling of a story and the description of facts and characters -- real and fictional at the same time -- is Hogg's central preoccupation, which he paradoxically emphasises by having his Muse first ensnared by 'description's meagre art' (I, p. 235) and then reproaching her, so that she returns to the actual tale. This form of self-criticism runs throughout the poem. The poem begins *in medias res* with the portrayal of John, the sutor of Selkirk, and his heroic temper. John is obviously Hogg's *alter-ego*, a working-class man with a strong inclination to singing and story-telling for the evening entertainment of his friends. Hence his story of Russell, the hero of Mercia. His 'heroism' is described in the following lines:

⁷⁴ *The Russiadde*, p. 228. Further references to the poem are indicated within the text by book and page number.

But Russ, this great and wondrous man,
 A hero was more ways than one:
 Perhaps no mortal e'er so far
 Excelled in that called Venus's war.
 Through all the country flew his fame,
 Myriads of fair he overcame;
 And then for children (precious things)
 He beat the Turks or Persian kings! (I, p. 237)

Hogg lampoons the superhuman heroism of the protagonists of the traditional epic; not only is Russ accused of dishonouring his sisters, he is also extremely short-sighted, thus imperfect as any other human being. On the other hand, his physical handicap symbolically suggests that Russell's vision of life is distorted, even topsy-turvy, and certainly eccentric.

Russell is also a figure of exile; because of the accusations he is compelled to leave Scotland and seek refuge in England. Indeed, despite the overall humorous situation, he also stands for the social outcast, proscribed by the community wherever he goes because of his physical and ethical eccentricities. Russell is a parody of Hogg; Russell's personal war against the infuriated crowd is a mock-heroic magnification of Hogg's own controversies with the *literati*. As the critic John Carey points out,

[Hogg] was always concerned with outcasts, from the winsome vagabond Duncan Campbell to Baron Guillaume de Iskar in his underground casino, and he rightly considered himself one. His ambitions necessarily isolated him from his peasant background.⁷⁵

Russell's fondness for wine is a comic version of Hogg's renowned conviviality. By having Russell rescued by the Queen of Love, Hogg presents the

⁷⁵ John Carey, 'Introduction', *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, ed. by J. Carey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. xi-xxiii (p. xvi).

myth of love as a liberating force opposed to the absurdity, yet inevitability, of war. Certainly it is another of his paradoxes to express anti-militaristic ideas in a tale of heroic gestures. At the end of Book First, due to Russell's concern for 'the effects of female charms' (I. p. 250), the poet reassures his hero on the sincerity of a woman's heart:

[...] the lovely creatures
 Have nought malicious in their natures.
 If woman's gentle heart you gain,
 True to the last she will remain;
 Nor danger, nor poverty, nor pride,
 Nought, nought will drive her from thy side
 Though *fickle* 's buckled to her name,
 Our sex for ever are to blame. (I, p. 251)

Book Second is a long eulogy of love -- [...] pure as purest cryst'lization/ The sweetest, fondest, admiration (II, p. 253) -- but also of a sensual and physical enjoyment of life's pleasures -- 'Wild pleasure Russell's bosom shook,/ 'Twas more than human heart could brook' (II, p. 254). The book includes occasional sexual innuendoes which were likely to shock more prudish readers and censorious critics:

But [Russell] clasped the sea-maid in his arms,
 Caressed her fondly on his knee,
 Hung on her lips in ecstasy. (II, p. 254)

Hogg conceived *The Russiadde* as a fragment, an open book, and it is essentially in the lack of a definite structure and a narrative conclusion that the interest of this poem lies. According to some critics, *Queen Hynde* should have remained such; in fact Hogg did not want to but had to interrupt it, whereas it is arguable that he intentionally left *The Russiadde* incomplete. This difference in authorial intentions is an important factor to take into consideration. However thin and one-dimensional the

content of the poem may be, its overall form, with its Ossianic echoes and indirect allusion to a fragmented oral tradition, conceals an important question: Hogg saved John's fragment from oblivion; in his turn, John preserved Russell's story by narrating it. By telling a tale within a tale with a Chinese-box effect, Hogg defines himself as the champion of oral culture -- possibly with Macpherson and Scott in mind.

The epic framework of *Mador of the Moor* is more complex. It encompasses different traditions: the oral and the literary tradition, the classical and the Romantic -- in particular Ossianic -- tradition. Scott's *The Lady of the Lake* may have provided a model for the poem (1810). Ila's origins and destiny resemble those of Ellen, 'the lady of the lake' -- both of them are from the Highlands, and similarly involved in a sentimental triangle, wherein their landlord and pursuer is the antagonist of their lover. Moreover, both of them set out on a journey to Stirling in search of their lover. Albert of the Glen is the double of Scott's Roderick Dhu, while Mador looks like Fitz-James when he resorts to the expedient of disguise -- although this aspect characterises also traditional ballads such as *The Gaberlunzie Man* and *The Jolly Beggar*. Finally, both poems begin with the description of a chase. Nonetheless the metre is not that of *The Lady of the Lake*. Hogg adopted instead the metre of *Don Juan*: the Spenserian stanza (or ottava rima with an extra ninth line) -- eight iambic pentameters followed by an alexandrine -- which was employed also by William Tennant in the mock-epic *Anster Fair* (1812).

Mador is also a national epic, if a rather eccentric and whimsical contemporary version of the older Scottish traditional epic from Barbour and Blind Harry to Fergusson and Ramsay. In *Mador* heroic events of Scottish history and the loyalty of past generations are highlighted in contrast to present degeneration:

Ah! how unlike the bland voluptuous frame

In this unthrifty age, that takes delight

To doze in qualms by day, and revel out the night! (I, p. 164)

This serious component is counterbalanced by the presence of comic characters and situations. Here Hogg is at his best. An example occurs when Hogg introduces Ila's

mother -- that 'good sagacious dame', as Hogg ironically calls her (III, p. 194)-- a female icon diametrically opposed to her daughter. The antithesis between them avoids the usual Kilmeny-versus-the witch of Fife pattern, because Ila's mother does not stand for earthbound, instinctive femininity as opposed to an angelic, spiritual image of womanhood. Rather she is the personification of fanatical religion and superstition. The poet depicts her in these partly eulogistic -- though merely in relation to her physical traits -- and partly misogynist lines:

She was unweeting, plump, and fair to see;
Dreadless of ills she ne'er before had seen;
Full of blithe jolliment and boisterous glee;
Yet was her home not well bedight or clean;
For, like the most of all her sex, I ween,
Much she devised, but little did conclude;

[...]

Her tongue was fraught with matter wondrous crude,
And, in her own defence, most voluble and loud. (II, pp. 172-173)

Ila's mother is the vehicle for Hogg's double attitude towards popular superstitions: defensive when they simply represent a harmless component of Scottish culture; hostile and censorious when they are the product of ignorance and the source of fanatical ideas and actions, such as Ila's mother's belief that her daughter's illegitimate child must be sacrificed to the fairies, or the immolation of the virgins in *Queen Hynde*. On the other hand, she is also a genuinely humorous character, in particular when she is depicted in her wifely role, which inspires Hogg's anti-Romantic comment: 'When sponsaled pairs run counter, soul to soul,/ O, there's an end to all the sweets of love!' (II, p. 180).

Another comic figure is the Abbot of Dunfermline, who offers Hogg another opportunity to ridicule hypocritical churchmen, even if his churchman is a

compassionate character, and his tone remains good-humoured throughout. When the abbot is struck by Ila's beauty, the poet comments:

[...] For churchmen aye observant eye do keep
 On female beauty, though devotion keep
 And homilies behove the holy mood;
 From rostrum still in wily guise they peep --
 For why? -- by them 'tis wisely understood,
 That to admire the chief of all Heaven's works is good. (V,
 pp. 217-218)

Mador of the Moor is an uneven work, yet apart from tedious -- perhaps redundant -- parts and narrative lapses, it does contain some interesting aspects and pages of beautiful poetry. For example, a remarkable aspect is that Hogg continuously engages the readers in the narrative by addressing them and leaving many questions open and mysteries unsolved. In Canto First the king disappears for nine days without revealing his destination. The author comments:

Where he had been no tongue did e'er unfold, --
 List to my tale! -- if thou can'st nought divine.
 A slow misfashioned mind, a moody soul is thine! (I, p. 171)

Only later on will the reader be able to solve the riddle, and to connect the disappearance of the king with his relationship with Ila. The poem is full of this kind of anticipations and things left unsaid, which enhance the readers' eagerness to discover what comes next until the ultimate denouement. Even the patchy, or collage-like, form of the poem might be interesting from a postmodernist point of view. The inclusion of songs or short lyrics within the poem -- for example, the Argument at the beginning of each canto, Ila's song at the end of Canto Third (III, pp. 198-199), and 'The Palmer's Morning Hymn' in Canto Fourth (IV, pp. 208-209) -

- gives rise to a Chinese-box effect, and to a *bricolage* of themes and styles which many postmodernist enthusiasts would admire.

Eleven years after the publication of *Mador of the Moor*, another epic poem appeared with similar formal and stylistic characteristics. It immediately occasioned controversial critical responses. In fact, Hogg had started it many years before -- in 1817 -- but he abandoned it and turned to the more popular genre of fiction because it provided a more reliable source of income. In 1824 he resumed the poem and brought it to completion. I refer to *Queen Hynde*, whose genesis is described in Hogg's *Memoir*:

I had [...] commenced an epic poem on a regular plan, and I finished two books of it, pluming myself that it was to prove my greatest work. But seeing that the poetical part of these dramas excited no interest in the public, I felt conscious that no poetry I should ever be able to write would do so [...]. So from that day to this, save now and then an idle song to beguile a leisure hour, I determined to write no more poetry.⁷⁶

Many critics share the view that Hogg should not have desisted from this resolution, but fortunately he did.

In general, the poem was better received by Hogg's contemporaries than by twentieth-century critics. Even John Wilson, whose critical judgements were notoriously ruthless -- like those of his friend and fellow writer John Lockhart, who was appropriately nicknamed 'Scorpion' -- reviewed the poem quite favourably:

There is a more sustained vigor and force over the whole strain than he ever could hit before; and though, perhaps, there is nothing quite so charming as Bonny Kilmeny that was but a ballad by itself --

⁷⁶ Hogg, *Memoirs of the Author's Life*, p. 40.

while here, sir, here, we have a real workmanlike poem -- a production regularly planned, and powerfully executed.⁷⁷

William Blackwood in 1824 wrote:

I have read the whole of *Queen Hynde*, and I am quite sure it will make a sensation. There are as fine things in it as you have ever written, and there are as green ones that will be good for the critics.⁷⁸

In 1825 an anonymous reviewer (Wilson?) of *Queen Hynde* wrote in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*:

We have read it over six times backward and forward, up and down, round and round - [...] sideways, angularly, topsy-turvy, upsides up; and yet for the life of us, we have not been able to discover what it is about [...] yet was our pleasure not in the slightest degree diminished. We have at all times risen from the Shepherd and his Hynde delighted and instructed, without knowing why or wherefore.⁷⁹

Finally, one cannot pass over Hogg's own evaluation of the poem. He defended it against those critics who saw it as an inferior work to *The Queen's Wake*, and in his *Memoir* he wrote boastfully: 'I offered to bet the price of the edition with any or all of them that it was the best epic poem that ever had been produced in Scotland' (*Memoir of the Author's Life*, p. 41). It may be that Hogg pronounced this verdict in

⁷⁷ Quoted in Strout, p. 265.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Mrs M. G. Garden, *Memorials of James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd* (Paisley: A. Gardner; London: Paternoster Row, 1885), p.195-196.

⁷⁹ 'Scotch Poets, Hogg and Campbell, Hynde and Theodric, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 17 (1825), 109-113 (p. 111).

favour of *Queen Hynde* half-ironically as a means of self-promotion, yet the work presents aspects of unquestionable interest.

Contemporary critics are more sceptical and generally quite unpersuaded of the merits of the poem. Even a puritanical critic like Thomson was apparently more well-disposed towards the poem than post-Victorian critics. His unusually positive judgement is that although 'it is the largest and most complicated' of Hogg's works, it is 'by no means the least meritorious' and its 'beauties will well repay a careful and patient perusal' (*The Works of the Ettrick Shepherd*, II, p. 186). On the other hand, Edith Batho claims that it is

as half as long again as *The Queen's Wake* and not half so amusing [...] there are [...] gleams of beauty, but it is hardly worth while to hunt for them; and more than any other of Hogg's poems, *Queen Hynde* is a weak following of Scott (p. 76).

Similarly, Nelson Smith observes that 'Hynde remains for the most part a poem which could have remained unfinished without serious loss'.⁸⁰ And here is Louis Simpson about Hogg's experiments with the long poem:

Encouraged by the success of *The Queen's Wake*, he attempted the medium again in *The Pilgrims of the Sun*, *Mador of the Moor*, and *Queen Hynde*. These poems were failures. His talent was not for telling a long story in verse [...] ⁸¹

In his 1970 selected edition of Hogg's poems, Douglas Mack wrote that *Queen Hynde* 'shows H[ogg] at his worst',⁸² but he has recently reviewed this judgement and admitted that the poem deserves critical attention, in particular because of the intertextual character of several passages, and also because of the peculiarity of

⁸⁰ N. Smith, *James Hogg*, p. 65.

⁸¹ Louis Simpson, *James Hogg: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1962), p. 82. The critic thinks that the poem is a 'monstrosity' (p. 201).

Hogg's tone.⁸³ Douglas Gifford, except for some reservations on the metre, admits that the poem 'entertains and is easy to read, probably because the plot is so simple to follow, though complex, and there is real evidence of Hogg's fantastic imagination underneath' (*James Hogg*, pp. 220-221). Despite its flaws, due to its exuberant size and patchy form, *Queen Hynde* deserves more attention than it has received so far.

In Book First the poet says:

Maid of Dunedin, thou may'st see,
Though long I strove to pleasure thee,
That now I've changed my timid tone,
And sing to please myself alone;
And thou wilt read, when, well I wot,
I care not whether you do or not.⁸⁴

These lines, which echo Horace's hedonistic principle of art, look forward to the louder and more assertive verses of *The Monitors* (1831):

Hurra! The day's my own -- I'm free
Of statesmen's guile, an' flattery's train;
I'll blaw my reed of game an' glee,
The shepherd is himself again! (p. 194)

In fact Hogg did not write *Queen Hynde* to 'please [himself] alone' but with the ambitious aim to produce a work which would receive general approval -- yet also guarantee a financial income which he particularly needed after the unsuccessful reception of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824).

⁸² Mack, 'Chronology of James Hogg', in *James Hogg. Selected Poems*, pp. xxvii-xxix (p. xxix).

⁸³ Mack has publicly repudiated his 1970 judgement during the last James Hogg Society Conference held in Stirling (27-29 June 1997).

⁸⁴ James Hogg, *Queen Hynde. A Poem in Six Books*, ed. by Suzanne Gilbert and Douglas Mack (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), I. 1060. The poem was first published in London by Longman Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green in 1824, but some

Hence the choice of the epic genre. Yet there is no doubt that in *Queen Hynde* the poet is 'himself again', speaking his own voice, changeful and eccentric like the author himself, shifting from serious to comic expression, from literacy to orality, from epic tradition to folk tale, from history to romance.

Owing to its stylistic and thematic heterogeneity, *Queen Hynde* deserves particular attention. In many respects it represents an epitome of Hogg's poetry, a collage-work encompassing Hogg's diversified range of styles, forms and themes. The novelty is that Hogg seems to be more at ease with this heterogeneous material than in earlier works, and more capable of handling the various dualisms and apparent inconsistencies of the poem. Elaine Petrie refers to the 'patchiness' of *Queen Hynde*⁸⁵, that is, a mixture of components drawn from miscellaneous sources. After all, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, published in the same year as *Queen Hynde*, is similarly characterised by an eccentric and modern amalgam of comedy and tragedy, realism and fantasy. Several dualisms are encompassed in the poem, but three of them are especially remarkable: history and Romance; literacy and orality; serious and comic modes.

One of the main aspects of this medley is the coexistence and interpolation of aspects which belong to history on the one hand and to Romance on the other.⁸⁶ The plot is simple but it includes an intricate net of recurrent themes and motifs. After her father's death, Hynde becomes the Queen of Scotland (Albyn). She is supposed to choose a sovereign among the lords of the kingdom, but an imminent danger defers her decision: Eric, the king of Norway, invades, in order to conquer both Scotland and its queen. Saint Columba resorts to the help of Eiden, prince and legitimate heir of Scotland, who was adopted by the king of Ireland after his father's death and the

copies were dated 1825. Further references to the Stirling/ South Carolina edition are given after quotations in the text, and documented by book and line number.

⁸⁵ Elaine Petrie, 'Queen Hynde and the Black Bull of Norroway', *Papers given at the second James Hogg Society Conference, Edinburgh 1985*, 8 (1988), 128-143 (p. 138).

⁸⁶ Hogg himself makes use of the term in the poem: '[...] List the last lay/ Of the green braken brae,/ The song is a medley, and modcl of thee.' (V. 36).

usurpation of the throne on the part of Hynde's father, his uncle.⁸⁷ Eiden reaches and succours Scotland under different disguises. After various general and personal combats, Eiden and his army defeat the Viking force; Eiden marries Hynde and becomes the new king, while Haco, a valorous Norwegian prince bewitched by Wene, Hynde's maid, marries his seductress and becomes king of Scandinavia. On the surface there is a happy ending, just like that of a romantic fairy-tale.

In this synopsis a historical anachronism captures the attention immediately: Eric and Haco reigned in Norway seven centuries after Saint Columba; in fact Haco (or Hakon) was king before Eric, at the time when Scotland was under Alexander III, whose daughter was married to Eric in 1263. As in *Mador of the Moor*, Hogg does not seem to be concerned with historical inaccuracy, and indeed may, as elsewhere, revel in mocking the rules of historicity, because his main purpose in *Queen Hynde* is not to produce an epic work which respects historicity but 'a long narrative poem, on a grand scale, about the deeds of warriors and heroes [...] a polygonal, "heroic" story incorporating myth, legend, folk tale *and* history [*italics is mine*]'. Interestingly this is the definition of epic given by The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms.⁸⁸ Thomson was for once right when he wrote that the poem is set in '[...] the mythic period where poetry has free scope, and facts may be invented at pleasure';⁸⁹ Hogg was not interested in factual, diachronic history but in telling a tale which could blend verisimilitude and fantasy. Historical characters such as Saint Columba, Eric and Haco move in the same world as Romance characters such as Hynde, Wene and the Palmer. However, even the imaginary figures are not types but characters of flesh and blood, changing and evolving as the story unfolds. Moreover all of them are entangled in the romantic plot of the poem, which displays many similarities with Scott's 'Romances' -- in particular *Lord of the Isle* (1815) -- such as love intrigues,

⁸⁷ It is perhaps worth remarking that Hogg always had a great interest in Irish culture and history. He wrote some poems drawing on Irish literature and history. A typical example is the tragic yet finally optimistic ballad 'Cary O'Kean' (*The Poetical Works of the Ettrick Shepherd*, IV, pp. 269-280)

⁸⁸ J. A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary terms and Literary Theory*, 3rd edn (Penguin Books Ltd, 1982), pp. 284-293 (p. 284).

⁸⁹ Thomson, *The Works of the Ettrick Shepherd*, II, p. 184.

family feuds, disguises, and the antisyzygy of realism and fantasy. All move in a world where the earthbound and the uncanny intermingle.

After an *incipit* echoing a conventional *topos* of the fairy-tale -- 'There was a time -- but it is gone!' (I. 1) -- Hogg establishes the temporal and local setting. He takes the reader back to Scotland's past,

When he that sat on Albyn's throne
Over his kindred Scots alone
Upheld a father's sway. (I. 2)

These lines evince Hogg's intention of writing a national epic, or a narrative poem about Scotland when it was an independent country, but he never directly refers to historical dates and places, since he overtly declares that it is not his task to write another page of history:

Adieu, dear maids of Scotia wide,
Your minstrel's solace and his pride,
[...]
To thee he bows with lowly bend;
His ancient tale is at an end.
More would he tell, but deems it best
That history's page should say the rest. (VI. 1558, 1562)

He goes on to say that the story of Eiden and Hynde, and of Haco and Wene can be read on that page, thus once again deliberately confusing history and fantasy. Even if he quite sternly underlines that he does not intend anymore to 'indulge' in the 'folly' of 'fabulous lore' (VI. 1259, 1258), perhaps in response to those who criticised the supernatural strain of his works -- including Scott -- *Queen Hynde* is permeated by a fairy-tale atmosphere throughout. Stith Thompson's definition of Märchen perfectly suits the content of the poem:

[...] a tale of some length, involving a succession of motifs or episodes. It moves in an unreal world without definite locality or definite characters and is filled with the marvellous. In this never-never land humble heroes kill adversaries, succeed to kingdoms, and marry princesses.⁹⁰

According to Elaine Petrie, it is possible to interpret the poem in the light of Propp's structural analysis of the fable (Petrie, pp. 128-143). The general narrative pattern is analogous to Propp's division of the Märchen into different functions -- the initial unfavourable situation, the journey motif, the adventures of the hero, the contest against the villain, the return home in various disguises, the punishment of the villain and the final triumph of the hero. The latter is a sort of masculine version of Cinderella, starting off as a humble peasant flouted by courtly society, yet finally borne in triumph. The armour that Eiden wears during the battles against the Norse functions as a kind of magic object, or donor, which empower him with superhuman authority and strength.⁹¹ Like the typical protagonists of the fairy-tale, various characters have symbolic names. The name 'Hynde' evokes terms such as 'hind' or 'hyne' -- perhaps an allusion to her humble origins but also to her fairy-like appearance, since in Scottish supernatural tales fairies often appear metamorphosed into hinds. 'Wene' echoes 'wean', the Scots name for a child, which indicates that Hogg is particularly sympathetic towards the witty maid in spite of her 'wickedness'. The name 'Eiden' calls to mind Dun Eideann, the Gaelic name for Edinburgh (meaning the town of Eidean). According to historical sources, Edwin was the Saxon who founded Edwin-burgh to defend the English border against the Scots.⁹² Yet, unlike most fairy-tales, the characterisation of *Queen Hynde* does not include a clear-cut division between heroes and villains, and the supposed villain, King Eric, is actually described by the poet as a valorous and heroic sovereign:

⁹⁰ Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York; Chicago; San Francisco; Toronto; London: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1946), p. 8.

⁹¹ According to Petrie this function is accomplished by Christianity, which Saint Columba introduces to Eiden.

⁹² James Mackenzie, *The History of Scotland* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1890), p. 46.

A prince he seem'd of courage high,
 Of mighty frame and lion eye,
 With something generous in his face,
 A shade of noble courteousness
 Mixed with a stern and jealous part,
 Th' effect of caution, not of heart. (II. 682)

The presence of numerical symbolism is another feature which the poem shares with the fairy-tale. In particular, the numbers 7, 10, 3 and multiples, such as 9, are recurrent: the main combats and the warriors fighting them are three, so are Hynde's dream visions; 9 are the Christian virgins sacrificed to Odin by the Norwegian priests; during the war the two armies have a seven-day truce. The conclusion of the poem eludes the conventional protocol of the fable. Despite the final union of the protagonists, the story ends with the dramatic episode of the immolation to Odin of nine Christian virgins. The apparent happy ending is therefore indelibly undermined; the "all's well that ends well" of most fairy tales does not appear on the page. In its dénouement the poem is definitely closer to the catastrophe of classical tragedy than to the idyllic finale of the traditional Märchen.

On the other hand, the Märchen-like quality of the poem relieves the gloomy tone and atmosphere of certain mystical and prophetic episodes, it acts as a palliative against the darker moments, such as the intervention of the evil and good forces in the war between Christians and pagans at the end of the poem -- a sort of psychomachia, or Christian magic, similar to that described in Canto Fourth of *Mador of the Moor*. Folk traditions and legends of the supernatural have a similar function. The poem includes a few examples of this aspect. The arrival of the enemies is interpreted by the local folk as the intervention of fairies in their life, but the poet slyly winks at the reader from behind the verses to suggest that the fairies -- like those in the ballad of 'Old David' (*The Queen's Wake*) -- are part of folk imagination. The bull which appears to Hynde in a dream is a symbol of Satanic forces drawn from Scottish folk tales such as *The Black Bull of Norroway* (Petrie, p. 131). At the same time, it

resembles the symbolic evil animals of the fairy-tale. It also recurs in Hogg's comic short stories, in the poem *The Russiadder*, and in *The Justified Sinner*.

The disguise motif is another aspect of this fairy-tale framework. Apart from Wene's disguise as the queen, the other main identity shift involves the figure of Prince Eiden, the male protagonist. He appears in the poem at first under the cloak of a seaman, later of the peasant ('hind') M'Houston, and finally of a Highlander. In his princely garb Eiden is mistaken for Haco -- an interchange of identity which parallels that between the two heroines. Interestingly, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* was published one year before *Queen Hynde*. Clearly there is a link between the *Doppelgänger* motif in the novel and the interchanges of identity in the poem, but the latter is a light-hearted, almost parodic version of the former. The doubles in *Queen Hynde* are a travesty of reality; they lack the psychological complexity and the uncanny quality which characterise Robert Wringhim's experience of inner dissociation.

The second central dualism of the poem is the interplay of aspects belonging to literacy, or established literary tradition, and aspects belonging to orality, or folk culture (in particular, old popular ballads and legends). In a sense, the poem embraces the central division in eighteenth-century Scottish literature between a vernacular poetry of refined sensibility exemplified by Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd* and a vernacular poetry more closely linked with the oral tradition such as Ross's *Helenore* (1768). *Queen Hynde* is both in line with the epic tradition pioneered in Scotland by John Home's *Douglas* (1756) and indebted to the culture of orality and the rich mine of Scottish ballads and folk legends. Moreover, Hogg's epic -- and mock-epic -- somehow brings together aspects of southern and northern cultures, of the Latin epic tradition and Scandinavian mythology. Hence Eric, the Norwegian king, is compared to Hector, while Eric believes that the Scottish prince Eiden is Loki, the Norse evil god of fire and air. In a complacent but also self-ironic tone the poet describes the *gesta* of his heroes as 'more illustrious' than the deeds performed 'on Ilium's classic plain' (V. 1253, 1254). The war theme and the related episodes of the combats and games -- javelin, running race, 'pitching of an iron mace,/ From

buskin'd foot' (V. 1621), boat race and wrestling -- also call to mind some episodes of classical epic, such as the combats described in Book V of the *Aeneid*, and the games in the *Iliad* during the funeral of Patroclus. In Hogg's poem the games scene corresponds to the truce for the burial of the dead which is described by James Mackenzie in *The History of Scotland* (p. 96). In fact, a very similar scene -- though in comic terms -- also occurs in Tennant's *Anster Fair*, when a contest is organised to decide who will marry the protagonist, Maggie Lauder. But Hogg's epic also contains aspects which undermine the classical tradition. For example, the hyperbolic heroism of some warriors in the single combats evoke the comic protagonists of the Italian Renaissance mock-epic poems, such as Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* and Luigi Pulci's *Il Morgante*. Indeed these poems display very similar thematic and formal characteristics: the motif of the journey and the quest; didacticism and amusement as parallel purposes; a fusion of literary and popular cultures; the technique of the 'entrelacement', or variety and sudden shifts from action to reflection, interwoven with many digressions; identity shifts and disguises; tone shifts from 'grave' to 'acute' as in Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. The light-hearted tone of certain war scenes enlivens and counterbalances the poet's polemical attitude towards belligerent nations -- 'O what a waste of mortal life!' says the narrator (V. 960).

Apart from the aforesaid links with some traditional ballads, the oral quality of Hogg's epic is embedded in the metrical pattern and rhythm of versification. The rhyming iambic tetrameter, which Scott adopted in *The Lady of the Lake*, is not very common in classical epic, whereas it is typical of satirical, humorous verse, and comic drama in ancient Greek literature. Furthermore, the iambic is the metrical form which best imitates the rhythm and cadence of oral speech. This is a particularly significant aspect of the poem, and it is blended with the rhetorical devices of the traditional ballad, such as lexical repetition, alliteration and assonance, as well as with the register and tone typical of the story-teller. Here is a sample passage with Wene and the king as protagonists:

Nor can I half the projects sing

Which Wene contrived to plague the king;
 So much she drove him from his wit,
 No suit from her he would admit;
 He spent his days 'mid thousands round;
 His nights where he could not be found;
 And thus the lovers had their leisure
 For grief, for strife, for pain, or pleasure.
 But darker paths are to be trode,
 For darker doings are abroad;
 And secrets strange are on the wing,
 Which you must list and I must sing. (V. 473)

Another central aspect of *Queen Hynde* is the dialectic of comic and serious modes. The comic component is twofold: on the one hand, targeted satire similar to Dryden's and Byron's lampooning; on the other, light-hearted humour and burlesque in the manner of Butler's *Hudibras*. About the variety of modes in *Queen Hynde* Elaine Petrie points out:

Queen Hynde gives us a good story, subtly refined from the Märchen pattern and a burlesque, part comic, part angry, of the literature of refined sensibility [...] We do know from the *Chaldee MS* and from *The Poetic Mirror* that Hogg had great parodic gifts. We also know from the *Confessions* that he could present himself as the rustic innocent while creating elaborate webs of artifice and structural complexity. Why should this not be the case with *Queen Hynde*? (p.138)

The poem encompasses two main brands of satire: 'literary satire' against the excesses of sentimental literature; 'religious satire' against extreme and fanatical religious views. Literary satire is generally marked by a strong ironic component: the poet fakes a sympathetic attitude towards authors and readers of sentimental

literature, while at the same time he mocks them. An example occurs in Book First after the description of Hynde's nightmare about a savage bull attempting to kill her. Hogg apostrophises his addressee, the 'Maid of Dunedin', thus:

Ye who, in these o'erpolished times,
 Can shed the tear o'er woeful rhymes;
 O'er plot of novel sore repine,
 And cry for hapless heroine.
 O ye dear maids of forms so fair,
 That scarce the wandering western air
 May kiss the breast so sweetly slim,
 Or mould the drapery on the limb;
 If in such breast a heart may be,
 Sure you must weep and wail with me!
 That full set eye, that peachen chin,
 Bespeaks the comely void within;
 But sure that vacancy is blent
 With fuming flaming sentiment!
 Then can you read ye maidens fair,
 And neither weep nor rend your hair?
 Think of a lady all alone!
 The beauteous Hynde of Caledon!
 Tossed up the air a hideous height,
 On point of blood-stained horn to light!
 And if to wail thou can'st delay,
 Have thou a bard's anathema. (I. 456)

The same criticism appears in Book Third, when the poet opposes Hynde's maid's unpretentious manner to the affected air and hypocrisy of contemporary women. In particular, he jeers at their literary tastes and their distortion of literature, but his satire is also indirectly targeted at the Calvinist antagonism towards the arts:

No book, however pure each thought,
 Though by divine or matron wrote,
 Dar'st thou essay aloud to read,
 Till every page is duly weighed;
 And each equivocation eyed,
 And con'd, and all constructions tried,
 And then thou skip'st whole pages o'er
 Of Galt, of Byron, and of Moore.
 This have I seen, and grieved anew
 At thy constructions so untrue. (III. 392)

A similar brand of satire is to be found in the later poem which Hogg prefaced to *The New Poetic Mirror*, 'The Bards of Britain', where he ironically comments:

Of all the poetations,
 In the monthly publications,
 And the sickening verbalities,
 That fill up the annualities,
 The best that we can say.
 They are poetry of the day.⁹³

In *Queen Hynde* Hogg evinces a greater self-reliance and self-confidence than in previous works.

[...] let me frolic while I may,
 The sportive vagrant of a day;
 Yield to the impulse of the time,
 Be it a toy, or theme sublime,

⁹³ 'The Bards of Britain', in *James Hogg: 'Poetic Mirrors'*, ed. by David Groves, pp. 107-109 (p. 107).

Wing the thin air or starry sheen,
 Sport with the child upon the green,
 Dive to the sea-maid's coral dome,
 Or fairy's visionary home,
 Sail on the whirlwind or the storm
 Or trifle with the maiden's form,
 Or raise up spirits of the hill --
 But only if, and when I will. (I. 1076)

The voice emerging in the above lines is outspoken and self-confident, but it is especially in Book Fifth that Hogg's surprising aplomb comes to the fore. Literary satire becomes increasingly mordant, and the poet's words more and more acrimonious. He replaces the first-person narrative with the more distant third-person narrative -- more distant and yet by no means less effective in giving voice to his subversive thoughts. Hogg is particularly bitter towards those editors who thwarted his career:

Next, he debars all those who sew
 Their faith unto some stale review;
 That ulcer of our mental store,
 The very dregs of manly lore;
 Bald, brangling, brutal, insincere;
 The bookman's venal gazetteer;
 Down with the trash, and every gull
 That gloats upon their garbage dull! (V. 2222)

The language, yet not the underlying message, is humorous. This attack is followed by a scathing address firstly, to 'All those who read and doze by day,/ To while the weary time away' (V. 2236) -- a harsh denigration of all wastrels; secondly, to the over-sentimental, who 'sit alone and weep' (V. 2244) without reason; thirdly, to those who prefer foreign melodies to the Scottish tunes -- an indirect censure of

Anglicisation; fourthly, to the sophisticated and affected; and finally, to 'Warm friends profest, yet covert foes!' (V. 2287), which is an obvious hint at Wilson and Lockhart. Lines such as 'Their sport was marr'd -- lost was the game --/ The halloo hush'd -- and, eke the name!' (V. 2296) are undoubtedly comic but they conceal the poet's bitter grudge against false friends. At the end of Book Fifth it becomes clear that Eiden, the hero of the poem, is the poet's *alter-ego*. Hence, when Hogg says that the victim of mockery will finally sit on the throne -- Eiden is mocked by the Lords as Hogg was by his own 'warm friends, yet covert foes' -- he refers both to the crowning of the hero as king and to his own as officially recognised poet. However pompous, the tone of the passage is humorous throughout.

There is another brand of satire in the poem, at times shading into a jocular spirit or into ridicule. Its target is a category of religious fanatics professing a distorted faith which leads them to commit deplorable acts. One of the main victims of the poet's attack is Saint Oran. He is one of the monks of Iona, the most fanatical and misogynist among them, who hides his weaknesses behind a facade of intransigence and austerity. Hogg exposes his flawed moral integrity by turning him into a vulnerable man unable to escape Wene's -- Hynde's maid -- wiles. The portrait of the monk contrasts with his reaction to Wene's bewitching behaviour. At first he is depicted as a lion-like figure -- 'He sat down on his chair of stone,/ Shook his grey head and gave a groan' (l. 714) -- but the image of the stone, symbol of his resoluteness and firmness, is then dismantled by the effects produced by Wene's appearance:

[...] Wene, full silently,
Had slid up to Saint Oran's knee,
And ogled him with look so bland
That all his efforts could not stand;
Such language hung on every glance;
Such sweet provoking impudence.

At first he tried with look severe,
That silent eloquence to sear,

But little weened the fairy's skill,
 He tried what was impossible!
 His flush of wrath, and glance unkind,
 Were anodynes unto her mind. (I. 812)

The pun on the maid's name -- 'ween'd' -- comically emphasises the consequences of the siren's influence over the austere monk. Certainly when Saint Oran asks to be flagellated, one begins to doubt his dogmatic doggedness.

In addition to a satirical component, the poem includes examples of pure comedy. A touch of humour marks the scene of Hynde's awakening from her prophetic nightmare. Hogg makes use of a kind of reductive idiom to bring down to earth the overblown heroism of the queen who, in her dream, dives in the ocean to escape from the symbolic bull. Hence the two contrasting stanzas in Book First, the former describing Hynde's actions in her dream, and the latter reporting what actually happened:

Still is there one resource in view;
 For life one effort still is due;
 It is, to plunge with desperate leap
 Into the far resounding deep,
 And in the pure and yielding wave
 To seek a refuge or a grave. (I. 478)

High looks that chamber o'er the sea,
 And firth, and vale, and promontry;
 [...]

And that fair form you there behold,
 That statue of majestic mould,
 Leaning two beauteous maids upon,
 Is Hynde the Queen of Caledon!
 The leap was from a couch of down,

The rest a dream for ever flown! (I. 526, 530)

In this way Hogg distances himself from classical epic and re-asserts his eccentricity by putting on stage not extraordinary heroes and heroines but round characters who personify the contradictions of nature. Another example of reductive idiom and anti-conventional, anti-heroic epic occurs in Book Fifth, in the episode where Wene appears at the enemy camp disguised as the queen. Eric, the fierce Norwegian king, seems to be tamed by female beauty:

Such a man to play the lover!
Mid such array, and such a scene,
And to such elf as Wicked Wene! (V. 312)

In fact, most of the comic scenes in the poem have Hynde's maid, Wene, as protagonist rather than the Queen. Wene's wit comes to the fore when she is confronted with the gloomy austerity of Saint Oran. The poet good-heartedly and ironically calls her 'wicked Wene'; in fact, she is one of the most sympathetic characters. On introducing her he writes:

There was one maiden of the train
Known by the name of wicked Wene;
A lovely thing, of slender make,
Who mischief wrought for mischief's sake,
And never was her heart so pleased
As when a man she vexed or teased.
By few at court she was approved,
And yet by all too well beloved;
So dark, so powerful was her eye,
Her mien so witching and so sly,
That every youth, as she inclined,
Was mortified, reserved, or kind,

This day would curse her in disdain,
And next would sigh for wicked Wene. (I. 722)

In Wene Hogg showed his talent for mimicry and parody. This comes forth particularly when she disguises herself as Queen Hynde in order to be captured by Eric, the Norwegian king, in her stead. It is not an act of sacrifice but an occasion to put into practice her histrionic skills, and simultaneously amuse herself behind the king's back. She enacts a parody of the Queen which successfully deceives both Haco, the Norwegian warrior whom she will eventually marry, and Eric. Hynde and Wene form another feminine dichotomy in Hogg's world. The romantic, more reserved woman set against the witty and demonstrative type is a recurrent pattern in Hogg's works. In particular, it emerges in *The Three Perils of Woman* (1823), where Gatty fulfils the first and Cherry the second role, and in *The Three Perils of Man* (1822), where the polarity is repeated in the figures of Jane and Margaret respectively.

On the other hand, the poem incorporates also a serious component which consists in the presence of visionary and prophetic episodes. Hogg handles this aspect of *Queen Hynde* with ambiguity, because, if on the one hand he admits that some uncanny power or some great revelation can emerge from ordinary events and dreams, on the other he looks with scepticism at those who call themselves seers. Hogg does not seem to question the uncanny and prophetic significance of Queen Hynde's sibylline dreams about the forthcoming war between Scotland and Norway, or of Saint Columba's prophetic dream about how to face the national situation. His tone betrays neither mockery nor irony when he writes:

[Queen Hynde] saw a foresight had been given
To her of future things by heaven,
But yet so shadowy and so dim,
On reason's surf it seemed to swim,
And all the struggling of the mind,
Its form and substance could not find.

But plain it was to every sense,
 That some sublime intelligence,
 Beyond the power of mind to scan
 Existed between God and man. (II. 630)

St Columba's dream represents an insight for him -- and the reader -- into the Shakespeare-like drama of the royal family's past: Hynde's father usurped the throne immediately after his brother's death, which throws suspicion on his integrity and makes one even wonder whether he was the perpetrator of 'a foul and most unnatural murder'. Ballad-like motifs, such as the revenant theme, and literary echoes, are intermingled in the eerie apparition of Hynde's uncle to Saint Columba, to whom he suggests that 'something is rotten in the state' of Albyn and that the way of rescuing the nation is to go to Ireland, look for Eiden, his son and legitimate heir, and allow him to become king of Albyn. Yet in Book Third the poet warns the reader against Saint Columba's prophecies:

But trust not all that prophets say;
 The best may err, and so may they.
 Predictions are but ticklish gear,
 Though specious, logical, and clear,
 Condensed, and penned in language strong,
 Where once aright, they're ten times wrong.
 This sage experience hath me taught,
 Whilst thou hast hooted, railed, and laughed.
 Alack! the credit due to seers,
 Too well is known to my compeers! (III. 1498)

These verses refer to the episode in which Saint Columba prophesies the intervention of divine justice against the demonic powers summoned by the enemies. Thus it clearly appears that, although Hogg believed that the uncanny can reside in ordinary

life, he also thought that man has no control whatsoever of it, and therefore that the so-called seers should always be looked at with scepticism.

Religion is one of the central themes of *Queen Hynde*, and it presents similar features to Hogg's religious vision in *The Pilgrims of the Sun*. At the centre of the poem there is the religious antinomy between Saint Columba's Christianity and Norwegians' paganism. Yet the poet envisages also a third case, which unites some aspects of both creeds: the peculiar pantheism professed by Colmar, the King of Ireland. Hogg does not take sides with any religion in particular, but he reveals an overt abhorrence of bigotry and fanaticism. Hence his contempt both for Saint Oran and the priest of Odin, and for their overenthusiastic Christianity and paganism respectively. As far as Colmar's religion is concerned, Hogg remains rather evasive. Colmar expounds his creed to Saint Columba, who has gone to Ireland to look for Prince Eiden.⁹⁴ To the Saint's question on whether or not he believes in the Saviour, Colmar answers:

'No, not one jot!' [...],
 'I worship, as my fathers did,
 The king of Heaven omnipotent,
 And yon bright sun his viceregent;
 And when HE hides his face from me,
 I kneel beneath the green oak tree'. (III. 1024)

Colmar does not believe in Christ, although he mentions a supreme He and Heaven; his religion is fundamentally based on a pantheistic vision of nature. Prince Eiden plays a very important role, in that he acts as medium between Colmar's and Saint Columba's beliefs. Even if he converts to Christianity, he does not desist from worshipping the sun. Therefore he paradigmatically personifies Hogg's religious syncretism.

⁹⁴ Eiden's journey to Albyn to rescue it from the Norse invasion is reminiscent of Fingal, the Scottish hero who, contrariwise, travelled to Ireland to fight against the Norse enemy. Indeed Ossianic echoes pervade the whole poem.

At the end of Book Second Hogg, still addressing the Maids of Dunedin, summarises the significance of *Queen Hynde* within his whole poetic production:

I've sung of wake and roundelay
 In beauteous Mary's early day;
 Of charms that could all hearts command;
 Of maiden borne to fairyland;
 Of worlds of love, and virgins bright;
 Of pilgrims to the land of light;
 [...]

Now I've called forth a patriot queen,
 Of generous soul and courtly mien;
 And I've upraised a wayward elf
 With faults and foibles like thyself.
 And these as women thou shalt see
 More as they are, than they should be. (II. 1006, 1016)

In other words, Hogg especially underlines that the themes and characters of *Queen Hynde* depart from the Romantic idealism of some of his previous works, and adhere to a more human -- hence more pragmatic -- vision of life, encompassing praises but also 'faults and foibles'. Veitch's opinion about Hogg's poetic genius undervalues the poet's ability to deal with realism, whereas, according to him, Hogg is an idealist, 'a man who lived far more under the power of the world of vision [...] than in that of ordinary reality'.⁹⁵

Veitch's comment follows his praise of 'Superstition', according to him 'one of the most perfect of his compositions' (p. 243). 'Superstition' was originally conceived as the third poem of *Midsummer Night Dreams*. It is another example of

Hogg's motley compositions, yet written in a shorter form. It does not contain the web of characters and motifs which characterise Hogg's narrative poems, but, curiously enough, the meter is the same as that of *Mador of the Moor* -- the Spenserian stanza. Moreover, it presents a religious -- and generally existential -- vision which recurs in the long epic poems on an elaborate and magnified scale. Superstition, the personified and mythical protagonist of the poem, is depicted by Hogg as a compound of both Christian and pagan components, and as intimately linked with religious faith as well as with imagination and creativity. The disappearance of Superstition because of the contemporary wave of increasing scientific scepticism and rationalism is seen by the poet as a destructive force leading to the annihilation of the power of imagination and the richness of human fantasy. The departure from the human imagination of even traditionally evil supernatural agents such as witches and demons can, according to the poet, turn out to be disastrous for human spirituality, because man needs spiritual darkness in order to appreciate spiritual light, and the Satanic in order to embrace the divine. Essentially, Hogg intends to show that Superstition is much more harmless than modern fanaticism, and that its eradication would cause a substantial component of Scottish culture to fade.

The notion that Christian religion is more linked with pagan ritual than one might think looks forward to James Frazer's study of folk mythology and ritual in *The Golden Bough*. Hogg connects Christian beliefs with primitive pre-Christian rites; both are surrounded by a mystery that the poet -- here 'visionary bard'⁹⁶ -- suggests or hints at yet never attempts to unveil. The poet's tone is nostalgic when he writes that Superstition used to be 'A Sovereign of supreme unearthly eye' but now

[...] gone is her mysterious dignity,
And true Devotion wanes away with her;
While in loose garb appears Corruption's harbinger. (p. 89)

⁹⁵ Veitch, *The Feeling for Nature in Scottish Poetry*, II, p. 244.

⁹⁶ 'Superstition', in *Selected Poems and Songs*, ed. by Groves, pp. 89-95 (p. 89).

The past -- 'the times for holiness of frame;/ [...] the days when fancy wandered free' -- is opposed to the present -- now 'o'er our hills has dawned a cold saturnine morn'(p. 91). Half-ironically, half-seriously Hogg expresses his regret and nostalgia for the time of the Stuarts, when the belief in witchcraft and other supernatural agencies was deeply rooted in the Scottish folk's imagination. Once again Hogg appears contradictory, since in 'Kilmeny' and in *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* he does not defend but rather criticises the Jacobites. But contradiction is part of his mental frame, a creative force which the poet employs to prove his point that 'the days of vision' (p. 94) are over, even though this may contrast with his political ideas.

Hogg attacks the 'sceptic leveller' (p. 89), the cold rationalist and empiricist who cannot look beyond the bonds of physicality, and, unlike the visionary poet, 'cherish hope of visions yet to be' (p. 90), since they only live in the here and now. Apparently Hogg appears to contradict his *carpe diem* philosophy; in fact, his love of nature and present life does not clash at all with a 'faith that spurns the bourn of time', and a 'soul whose eye can future glories see' (p. 90). Superstition was a source of family gatherings inside the cottage, of at times violent yet enlivening emotions, a linking force, whereas modern rationalism can only divide people as it dissects the elements of nature, unable to grasp them in unity and encompass opposites.

It is in 'Superstition' that Hogg asserts that his faith is one 'diverging to extremes' (p. 92), inclusive of opposite -- or apparently opposite -- beliefs, all-embracing and tolerant towards differences in creed and ritual. In an impressionistic style, he lists some of the most popular superstitions to conclude that they do not involve any real 'ills' but only an innocuous 'train of airy dreams' (p. 92). Hence the epigraph at the beginning of *Midsummer Night Dreams* taken from Wordsworth's *Excursion* (Book IV):

A Pupil in the many chambered school
Where Superstition weaves her airy dreams.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ *Selected Poems and Songs*, p. 31.

A Queer Book (1832) does not attempt to adhere to a particular poetic tradition. At the same time it is not merely 'a medley of ballads, serious and half-serious, descriptive and sentimental poems, and two or three political allegories'.⁹⁸ The volume occupies an important position in the *corpus* of Hogg's works despite being a miscellaneous and heterogeneous collection of twenty six poems, of which only a few are particularly worth attention, and each of them is eccentric in its own peculiar way. The volume appeared in 1832 but the poems had already been published individually in contemporary magazines. They do not differ much from the traditional material that Hogg had previously marshalled in *The Mountain Bard*. Although local oral culture still exerted a strong influence on him, in 1832 Hogg was certainly a more mature writer, with a stronger self-confidence, and a particularly witty sense of humour.

A Queer Book is appropriately named, because in many respects its content and form are new, strange, and eccentric. Contemporary reviewers suggested that 'queer' is used in its English sense of 'odd' and 'strange' rather than its Scottish sense of 'comical' and 'witty',⁹⁹ but I believe that Hogg was aware of both meanings and chose this term because of its semantic ambivalence. As usual, contemporary critics were divided in assessing of the work. Some saw the eccentric nature of the book as positive:

It is, nevertheless, *A Queer Book* -- so wild, and yet so natural -- so strange, and yet so true to popular belief, that we are inclined to rank many of its pages with the most successful of all the poet's attempts [...].¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Batho, p. 140.

⁹⁹ Peter Garside, 'Introduction' to James Hogg, *A Queer Book*, ed. by Peter Garside (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. xi-xxxvii (p. xii).

¹⁰⁰ Anon, *Literary Gazette*, 5 May 1832, p. 275.

On the other hand, some judged *A Queer Book* as 'a book filled with much rank nonsense and ridiculously bad writing'.¹⁰¹ Undoubtedly, the book is an odd medley of tones and registers but it conveys a sense of 'peculiar' unity, of *concors oppositorum*.

The dedication of the volume to 'Christopher North' and 'Timothy Tickler', two of the characters of the *Noctes Ambrosianae*, is clearly ironic: a work indebted to the Scottish oral tradition and written in the 'ancient stile' is dedicated to two *literati* of the Enlightenment. On the other hand, it is also ironic that they are the ideal addressees for an eccentric book, in that they were odd and eccentric themselves, divided between bourgeois respectability and an opposite love of tavern meetings, between Tory ideology and decadent attitudes. In the book Hogg hides behind the mask of the Ettrick Shepherd to sneer at his false friends. He deliberately wrote the poems in the 'ancient' style, mockingly admitting that 'It will be a grand book for thae Englishers for they winna understand a word of it'.¹⁰² Unfortunately Hogg could not predict that this admission was one of the reasons why Blackwood required him to replace most of the Scots words with standard English expression for the book-form publication.¹⁰³ About the multifariousness of his collection Hogg wrote:

This motley work, made up of all the fowls' feathers that fly in the air, from the rook to the wild swan, and from the kitty wren to the peacock, as the shepherd's vademecum, as the varied strains in which his soul delighteth, he dedicates most respectfully to Christopher North and Timothy Tickler, esquires.¹⁰⁴

'Motley', 'vademeum', and 'varied' are the key-words which summarise the composite and simultaneously synoptic nature of *A Queer Book*. As Peter Garside points out,

¹⁰¹ Anon, *Monthly Review*, n. s. 2 (1832), 247.

¹⁰² National Library of Scotland, MS 30312, pp. 154-155.

¹⁰³ For information about Hogg's controversies with his publisher see Peter Garside's introduction to *A Queer Book*. This new edition is particularly useful because the poems are printed in their original form. References to the poems are internally documented by section (when present) and line number

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, unnumbered page.

Hogg also found freedom to mix different genres, combining pathos with dark humour, physical and spiritual levels of experience, the supernatural and the satirical, sometimes creating a kind of 'magic realism' not dissimilar to that now seen in postmodern fiction. (p. xvi)

Most of the poems included in the volume are hardly definable as comic or serious; they rather deal with a motley range of themes. Poems such as 'The Wyffe of Ezdelmore', 'The Miser's Warning', 'Allan of Dale', and 'The Perilis of Wemyng' paradigmatically exemplify this interplay of comic and serious aspects. Nonetheless there are also poems either chiefly serious and gloomy, such as 'Elen of Reigh', 'A Lay of the Martyrs', and 'The Carle of Invertime', or more light-hearted, such as 'The Goode Manne of Allowa', 'Ringan and May', and 'The Origin of the Fairies'.

The protagonist of 'The Wyffe of Ezdelmore' is an eccentric witch. She is not uncannily gruesome but, unlike the witch of Fife, she is not hudibrastic either. Even though she is endowed with preternatural powers, her character evinces human weaknesses and limitations. She is a witch, yet also a woman with a past which constantly haunts and lurks inside her like a plague. In the poem she tells her story to the Laird of Gilbertoun, a comic, naive man who during a hunting expedition accidentally ends up in her dwelling place -- 'half ane housse, and half ane caife'.¹⁰⁵ The episode calls to mind the meeting between the hero of *The Lady of the Lake* and the eponymous protagonist. The gloom and sadness of the witch's tale -- a marvellous 'taille of storte and stryffe' (II 14) -- contrasts with the Laird's reaction to it. The conventional relationship between men and supernatural agencies is subverted: instead of eliciting terror, the story leaves the Laird utterly heedless and detached, while the witch expressly shows her desperate need to be listened to.

The witch's story is another supernatural tale about a journey to the Otherworld, and also another example of syncretism of pagan and Christian traditions. The witch unveils the secret of her previous life as a human, when she was the victim

of her authoritarian father, but her callous listener is totally disinterested and falls asleep. Hogg describes with humorous words the moment when it dawns on the witch that the Laird is indifferent to her tale:

For this strainge quene had foamit and ravit
 And wafit hir armis so feirfullye
 Sho neuir noted that the lairde
 Wals sounde asleipe als manne colde bee

Until he gaif ane goodlye snore
 That soundyt lyke ane postmanis horne
 Then the wytch gaif him soche ane flegge
 Als hee neuir gatte since hee wals borne

Sho gaif him ane skyffat on the cheike
 That maide him spryng to the bauke tre. (II. 183)

The Laird is the personification of the contemporary scepticism towards the existence of supernatural agents and agencies:

Soche tailles als that I hope are fewe
 They maike a manne bothe sycke and sadde
 And if one colde belife them trewe
 Theyre fyttte to put ane body madde. (III. 203-206)

Hogg projected in the character of the Laird the ambiguous attitude towards belief in supernatural agencies that he also showed in *The Mountain Bard*, and that recurs in the ballad of *A Queer Book* called 'The Origin of the Fairies'. 'The Wyffe of Edzelmore' presents continuous shifts in tone and style; in particular, while the whole poem revolves around the humorous figure of the Laird and his apathy, the ending adds a

¹⁰⁵ 'The Wyffe of Edzelmore', in *A Queer Book*, pp. 1-28, l. 89.

tragic element to the story, thus producing an anti-climax. The witch metamorphoses the Laird into an horrible crow which is shot by a man who believes it to be Satan's messenger. Superficially, the moral of the story is that the sceptic is defeated while the uncanny triumphs -- a kind of vengeful conclusion against the sceptic whom Hogg debars in 'Superstition' -- but since the poet's sympathy is with the Laird, while the witch and the shooter are dismissed with contempt, the ending remains ambiguous and open to different readings. By allowing the supernatural to prevail and simultaneously associating it with violence, Hogg affirms his love-hate relationship with the folk beliefs and superstitions of his native country.

'The Origin of the Fairies' strikes a different chord altogether. Both the tone and atmosphere are lighter and brighter. The narrator says that he has heard the story of the origin of the fairies but nothing is mentioned about the source from which he derived it. Hence the ubiquitous mystery until the end. The speaking voice clearly is that of the author himself, or his *alter-ego*, who from the very first stanza underlines that his attitude towards the supernatural has changed from childhood wonder to adult scepticism:

I have heard a wondrous old relation,
How the Fairies first came to our nation;
A tale of glamour, and yet of glee,
Of fervour, of love, and of mystery.
I do not vouch for its certain truth,
But I know I believed it in my youth;

[...]

I will tell it now and interlard it
With thoughts with which I still regard it,
And feelings with which first I heard it.¹⁰⁶

Throughout the poem Hogg describes Fairies and Fairyland in an unusual way. In 'Old David' (*The Queen's Wake*) his tone betrays nostalgia for folk beliefs which are

dying out, and, at the same time, he criticises the increasingly sceptical tendency of the time. In 'The Origin of the Fairies' the perspective is reversed: the union of a knight with the fairies is depicted as a mishap, and the man's flight to Fairyland lacks the eerie beauty of Kilmeny's journey as well as the fable-like aura of the witch of Fife's flight. It seems to bring about only a sense of alienation and frustration when the knight plummets back to the earth. Nevertheless, the narrator is delighted to tell the story,

[...]an old story, and a queer one;
But free of fear, and free of fetter,
I'll tell it out even to the letter --
The wilder 'tis I love it better.(l. 168)

The speech of the Fairies at the end of the poem encapsulates one of the poet's central concerns. The Fairies address their half-human, half-supernatural babies in the following words:

The mingled existence we leave to you!
There is part of virtue and part of blame,
Part of spirit and part of flame.
Part of body and passion fell,
Part of heaven and part of hell.(l. 472)

'The mingled existence', defying any Manichean division between evil and good, is human existence as well; Hogg's fairies are therefore the mouthpiece of his own vision of human life and mankind. They are his fictional *alter-egos* born from his own imagination. Hence the latent significance of the title: the 'origin' of the fairies is man's subconscious universe. In other words, the fairies exist but only in the imagination of men. They are the expression of the uncanny as Freud and Todorov would later define it -- the products and objectification of human fantasies and fears.

¹⁰⁶ 'The Origin of the Fairies', in *A Queer Book*, pp. 157-169, l. 1, 9.

The earthly and the uncanny are intimately related in Hogg's *Weltanschauung*, and the fairies are an anthropomorphic image of the inexplicable and mysterious impinging on human existence. Thus, despite his scepticism towards the real existence of the fairies, Hogg seems to suggest that they symbolically incarnate man's psychological instincts, as Gil-Martin in *The Justified Sinner* can be interpreted as the imaginary externalisation of a disturbed mind. Hence the final -- half-ironic -- acceptance of the fairies and of what they represent:

From such unhallow'd love as this,
With all its splendour and all its bliss,
Its end of terror and its bane,
May Heaven preserve us all! -- Amen.(l. 495)

Hogg condemned modern rationalism when it suffocates the power of imagination and, consequently, creative inspiration.

For example, in the poem 'Real Vision' (not included in *A Queer Book*) -- the oxymoron of the title ideally expresses the magic-realistic quality of Hogg's supernatural -- the poet defends the belief in uncanny and rationally inexplicable phenomena against the modern education and upbringing of children which bans even the mere mention of terms connected with the supernatural. The result is that children are brought up like 'mere machines;/ Pruned vegetables -- flowers of formal cut',¹⁰⁷ totally kept in the dark about the existence of links between earthbound and metaphysical entities. A man 'thus instructed', writes the poet, is 'A Cockney -- a mere grub!', unable to walk along 'the path that led/ Where they with angels might communicate,/ Holding high intercourse with God himself/ Through all of his creation' (p. 63). In order to substantiate his beliefs, Hogg reports an uncanny event that happened to him 'some forty years ago' (p. 63): the vision of 'a female form' rising 'slowly from the earth' (p. 64), who turned out to be one of his acquaintances 'in the throes of death' (p. 65) and appealing to him to accomplish a 'solemn task' (p.

¹⁰⁷ James Hogg, 'A Real Vision', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 28 (1830), 63-65 (p. 63).

64). Without calling her by name, the poet refers to her as his 'beloved and venerable friend' and his 'monitress' (p. 65); nor does he explain to what the 'solemn task' exactly refers, but leaves the mystery unsolved and the suspension of disbelief maintained till the end.

The supernatural theme recurs in 'The Goode Manne of Allowa', a comic poem in the same vein as *Comel of Dee*, that is, blending burlesque with aspects of black humour. 'The Goode Manne of Allowa' is preceded by a ballad which is its reverse both in subject-matter and style. 'Elen of Reigh' revolves around a peculiar version of the *Liebestod* motif by presenting the story of the eternal friendship between two girls even after their deaths. The collocation of the two poems might be deliberate: the two extremes meet to convey the sense of totality of human experience. 'The Goode Manne of Allowa' represents the farcical side, even though it comprises moments of black humour.

The protagonist, 'ane queere ould manne,/ Ane verry strainge manne',¹⁰⁸ one day is visited by a fairy who puts his moral strength to the test by means of different ordeals, and finally gives him his deserts. Without explaining why he is such an odd character, the poet says that since he lost the fortune accumulated for years, the old man has become 'wearie of this worlde' (l. 19); hence he is divided between a yearning for eternal peace and a desire to hoard new riches. The title of the poem is ironic. When the fairy guides him to a place under water where a treasure is buried, he loads himself with as many riches as he can, and, instead of respecting his promise that he would give them away to the poor, he keeps them all for himself. Consequently, he is sent on a one-way journey to hell. The poet's moral reads as follows:

O, neur griewe or vex your hertis

For the ryches of this worlde;

For they bring nouthur healthe nor pece

Unto thy spyritis frame;

And there is ane tressure better farre,
Which mynstrelle daris not name.

Hast thou not herit ane oulden saye,
By one who colde not lee? --
It is somethyng of ane greate bygge beiste
Ganging through ane nedilis ee. (l. 407)

The man's journey to the nether world resembles the flight of the witch of Fife, but his terror at diving -- 'I feiree these ryches for which I greine/ Shall coste mee very deire' (l. 147) -- calls to mind also Connel of Dee's descent under the river. In order to prove the veracity of the story, in a footnote the poet/ narrator provides empirical evidence for the following uncanny episode: 'Ane hundred and threttye bordlye whailis/ Went snoryng up the tydde,/ And wyde on Allowais fertylle holmis/ They gallopit ashore and died.' (l. 361).¹⁰⁹ Originally the poem was entitled 'The Goode Manne Of Allowa. Ane Most strainge and treuthfulle Ballande Made by Mr Hougge'.¹¹⁰ In fact, the poet is not totally identified with the narrator; Hogg is able to maintain an ironic distance from his subject-matter by putting on the mask of a gullible narrator, which allows him to present the supernatural from a different viewpoint than that of the narrator of 'The Origin of the Fairies'. Hogg's perspective is often polyvalent because it reflects his polyhedral and relativistic vision of life. He often leaves the reader with open questions or a general impression of incongruity. In this respect, Hogg looks forward to John Davidson's notions of irony and contradiction as inherent components of the essence of life.

¹⁰⁸ 'The Goode Manne of Allowa', in *A Queer Book*, pp. 55-68, l. 1.

¹⁰⁹ Here is what he writes in the footnote: '[...] with one tide in the month of March, one year lately, there were no fewer than 130 whales left ashore in the vicinity of Alloa [...] on testifying my wonder one day to the men of Cambus why the whales should all have betaken them to dry land, I was answered by a sly fellow, "that a mermaid had been seen driving them up the Frith, which had frightened them so much, it had put them all out of their judgements"'. (*A Queer Book*, p. 66)

¹¹⁰ *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 24 (1828), 561-569.

The poem entitled 'Elen Of Reigh' -- the best I ever wrote', declared Hogg in a letter to Blackwood¹¹¹ -- is strategically positioned between two poems dealing with supernatural agencies -- witchcraft in the case of 'The Wyffe of Ezdel-more', and Fairyland in 'The Goode Manne of Allowa'. Unlike the other two ballads, 'Elen of Reigh' is written in English. It focuses first on the earthly friendship between the two protagonists and later on its after-life when Maria, Elen's inseparable friend, dies. Hogg expresses the Christian feelings inspired by the two Kilmeny-like girls but, at the same time, he bestows on them a supernatural, fairy-like beauty. This is how he pictures them:

Like two young poplars of the vale,
Like two young twin roes of the dale,
They grew; and life had no alloy, --
Their fairy path was all of joy'.¹¹²

Moreover, like 'Kilmeny', the poem presents typical aspects of folk traditions, such as the green spot in which Elen is eventually found, but the poet adds that her body was laid there by 'an angel's hand' (l. 353). A religious significance pervades the poem, and, as Garside suggests, it is also 'implicit in the title of the [...] poem -- with "Reigh" representing a form of the Gaelic word (*righ*, *ree*) for King or God.' (*A Queer Book*, p. 233n)

The protagonist of 'The Perilis of Wemyng' is a totally different female icon. The title is an echo of another title: *The Three Perils of Woman*, published in 1824. Yet the ballad's central theme is closer to *The Three Perils of Man*. As in the novels, romance themes are treated half-comically, half-seriously. Moreover, the poem engages the reader in metaphysical questions like the last volume of *The Three Perils of Woman*. In 'The Perilis of Wemyng' Hogg suggests that human knowledge is too limited to grasp and decipher the metaphysical. Ironically he deals with the metaphysical in relation to folk superstitions about supernatural phenomena: the

¹¹¹ National Library of Scotland, MS 30312, pp. 154-155.

¹¹² 'Elen of Reigh', in *A Queer Book*, pp. 45-54, l. 153.

people of the Moril Glenne associate May's obscure origins with uncanny agencies. The events are mostly seen from the viewpoint of the Moril Glenne community, filtered and distorted by their imagination. The truth is never revealed and the reader is left with the unsolved mystery concerning May's life. As mysteriously as she had appeared, May finally disappears without the poet suggesting where she is going; he leaves the finale open and permeated by the same sense of uncanny which characterises the whole poem.

The poet's voice is more audible when he refers to religious fanaticism and hypocrisy with bitter satire and sarcasm. One of these moments occurs when he portrays the bedesmen who anathematise May as witch and imp of the devil. He clearly suggests that they are bigots and not truly Christian believers. Likewise, the king, who at first abuses and shuns the girl, becomes one of the targets of Hogg's mockery when he falls in love with May and ends up turning into one of her wooers. The description of the chivalric world in the poem is an echo of Hogg's anti-Romantic representation of the same social class in *The Three Perils of Man*. His satirical intent climaxes in the deliberately overdone episode of May's suitors' mass suicide. Instead of eliciting pity for those poor rebuked suitors, victims of hysteria and foolishness, the scene ridicules them, becoming a piece of black humour treating ironically such degenerate aspects of Romanticism.

The ballad entitled 'Ringan and May' offers the most significant example of Hogg's 'ancient stile'. It has been suggested that the title itself is drawn from Henryson's 'Robin and Makene', and that the language is the closest to that of the medieval Makars. Louis Simpson sees the poem as one of Hogg's most successful achievements because of the realism of its diction and characters. He comments:

It is as though the admixture of colloquial Scots -- slight though it is -- enables Hogg to find his 'natural gate'. As the literary conventions are removed, his confidence in his own knowledge of human nature, and his vivacity, are renewed (Simpson, p. 95).

Ringan's interpretation of the laverock's song is a disguised scheme of seduction; despite May's apparent prudery, her wooer hits the target by exploiting Romantic imagery and symbolism such as the bird's song seen as a natural expression of universal love. However, Hogg's central concern here is not to make use -- half-seriously and half-mockingly -- of Romantic clichés, but to project a pastoral and yet realistic romance situation, in which he turns the condemned snares of seduction described in 'Connel of Dee' into an innocuous and genuine aspect of love. Hence May's conclusion:

But for all the storte and stryffe I maide,
 For all I did, and all I saide,
 Alas! I feire it will be lang
 Or I forgette that wee burdis sang!
 And langer stille or I can flee
 The lad that tellit that sang to me!¹¹³

Hogg strikes a completely different chord in the poem 'The Carle of Invertime', which, in many respects, looks back to both 'Kilmeny' and *The Pilgrims of the Sun* because of its central visionary component. The poem's pivotal image is that of the otherwordly pilgrimage, which is part of a Christian allegory with Hope as protagonist. The eponymous Carle is the supernatural porter 'who carries the key/ That opens the gate to a strange countree';¹¹⁴ he stands 'at the junction or gateway of time' (Garside, p. 243n) -- as the term 'Invertime' suggests -- and he is 'uncouth' (l. 1) and dreaded by the 'myriads' of men who 'pour in at his gate' (l. 32). The vision of the timeless 'strange countree' and the diversified range of people entering it has both Dantesque and Biblical echoes, including intertextual references to Corinthians and the Psalms.¹¹⁵ Yet, apart from this visionary quality which is not a novelty in Hogg's work, 'The Carle of Invertime' is characterised by philosophical insights

¹¹³ 'Ringan and May', in *A Queer Book*, pp. 106-109, l. 108.

¹¹⁴ 'The Carle of Invertime', in *A Queer Book*, pp. 90-95, l. 5.

¹¹⁵ See Peter Garside, p. 243n.

which bestow on it modern significance. The heterogeneous parade of people showing up at the gate points to the image of death as metaphysical leveller, whereby earthly distinctions of rank are abdicated:

Some come in sorrow, they think in sooth
 It hard to be summoned in strength and youth.
 There lady and losel, -- peasant and lord,
 Men of the pen, the sermon, the sword;
 The counsellor, leach, and the monarch sublime,
 All come to the Carle of Invertime. (l. 35)

The 'grim Gudeman of Invertime' (l. 4) is touched by the song of personified Hope, who has brought him another soul: a old woman worn out by life's vicissitudes and family tragedies, whom Hope and her sisters 'Pure Love, true Faith, sweet Charity' (l. 78) have accompanied throughout her life and now Hope prays God to welcome her - 'I never can bid a form arise/ With purer heart than her's to the skies' (l. 175). A mixture of echoes underlie the figure of Hope. She is certainly reminiscent of both Kilmeny and Mary Lee -- she is 'A Form so pure and so lovely' (l. 54) and her strain is 'too holy, too sweet, and wild/ And charming to come from an earthbound child' (l. 63) -- but she also re-enacts the part that Cela plays in *The Pilgrims of the Sun* of supernatural seraph guiding the Pilgrims to the otherworld. Hope's account of the old Dame's life is a philosophical, yet also sensitive, down-to-earth, insight into the 'pilgrim's progress', and, on a larger scale, into man's existential process and personal development. However sentimental, the lines referring to the woman's tragic motherhood are suffused by profound humanity. This is Hope speaking:

Throughout her life of wedded wife,
 I weaned her soul from passion's strife;
 But Oh! what fears and frequent tears
 For the peril of childhood's tender years!
 And when her firstborn's feeble moan

Was hushed by the soul's departing groan;
 In that hour of maternal grief,
 I pointed her way to the sole relief.
 Another sweet babe there came and went --
 Her gushing eyes she fixed and bent
 Upon that mansion bright and sweet,
 Where severed and kindred spirits meet. (l. 145)

By admitting that the woman has experienced sin, the seraph Hope alludes to the possibility of a purgatorial process, and thus she allegorises Hogg's Christian thought.

A similar Dante-like notion of the progression of souls, yet in a humorous vein, emerges in the poem entitled 'Johnne Graimis Eckspeditioun till Heuin'. It is entirely written in Hogg's archaic Scots style, and it essentially tackles a subject which he had already expounded in *The Pilgrims of the Sun*: the concept of eternity and the spiritual progression of souls towards perfection. The poem is centred on a dream vision: the protagonist dreams about journeying to heaven, where he meets the soul of a lady 'Quha once hadde fallen into ane snayre/ Whilke led tille euil deidde'¹¹⁶ -- clearly Hogg is here making use of a periphrasis to respect social decorum. Although he avoids bawdiness in order not to disturb the social protocol, Hogg's message is unambiguous: the fanatical miser is instructed by a sexually 'fallen' lady on the meaning of repentance and the possibility for all human souls to rise towards spiritual perfection. Here is how the woman elaborates on this notion:

Ane thousande yeris or thousandis tenne
 Notte reckonit once can bee
 The immortyl spyrit rysis onne
 To all Eternitye
 It rysis on or morre or lesse
 In knowledge and in happynesse
 Progressyng stille to purer blisse

That ende can neur se (l. 33)

The woman also raises another essential moral and ethical issue: the potential fallaciousness and boundaries of human judgement. When Johnne comments that her doctrine appears to him as 'ane plesaunt doctoryne/ For wychit hertis' (l. 49), which 'sutis the lordly lybberdyne' (l. 51), the woman reproachfully, yet smilingly, replies:

[...] 'How judgest thou?

Is it for symperying sordid sotte

Ane heipocryptick craiven

To saie quhais wycked and quhais not

And wythershynne with heaven?

Do you not knowe in herte full welle

If there had beinne ane byrning helle

That you deservit the plaise yourselle

Als welle als any leiving? (l. 56)

She surveys his whole life in the attempt to spur on his own self-judgement and realisation of his own faults. The moment he starts pleading forgiveness is also when he realises that his self-tormenting sense of guilt occurred to him in a dream from which he was awakened by his earthly wife. When he dies, the poet, partly sympathetically, says:

This carle was haited whylle he levit

Unwept quhan hee wals gone

But quhaire he wente or how recievit

To me wals notte maide knowne

But on this truth I can reclyne

That he's quhare mercyis rayis combyne

¹¹⁶ 'Johnne Graimis Eckspeditioun till Heuin', in *A Queer Book*, pp. 147-152, l. 7.

In better handis nor his or myne

Whilke menne wille notte disowne (l. 185)

A Queer Book, together with the long epic poems, is the most comprehensive collage of Hogg's diversified and multifarious poetic production. It encompasses forms, subjects, and themes which owe much to the different traditions -- literary and oral -- in which his work is embedded; by using the ancient style to deal with traditional material, Hogg gave proof of his eclectic Muse, and produced one of the best examples of his motley artistic accomplishment, in which his eccentricity and otherness from both English Romanticism and the Edinburgh Enlightenment emerge as marks of a highly original genius.

The next section focuses on Byron, who, despite being only half-Scottish by birth, can be seen as another Scottish eccentric, and as an outstanding representative of the tradition of otherness in Scottish poetry. Byron frequently stood aside from the conventional Romantic literary agenda, and it is very likely that Hogg's admiration of his work depended essentially on Byron's anti-dogmatic and unorthodox thought, as well as on his ability to subvert some of the tenets of Romanticism while remaining in touch with that tradition. The dialectic of Romantic and anti-Romantic aspects at the core of Byron's work must have appeared to Hogg as indicating an answer to his own ideological and cultural dilemmas.

PART II

The play of comic and serious, or 'whaur extremes meet': Byron and his
Scottish heritage

Not for thy crabbed state-creed, wayward wight,
Thy noble lineage, nor thy virtues high,
[...] do I this homage plight;
No -- 'tis thy bold and native energy;
Thy soul that dares each bound to overfly,
Ranging thro' nature on erratic wing --
These do I honour -- and I would fondly try
With thee a wild aërial strain to sing:
Then, O! round Shepherd's head thy charmed mantle fling.¹¹⁷

In his lifetime James Hogg became acquainted with the major exponents of English Romanticism, and their influence on his writing, either through unconscious emulation or conscious parody, is certainly undeniable. Pro-Romantic critics would probably argue that the actual significance of the verses prefaced to the *Midsummer Night Dreams* is that they prepare the reader for the romantic or pseudo-romantic echoes of the following poem (*The Pilgrims of the Sun*). These critics would therefore add that a similar address to any other Romantic poet would have the same impact on the reader and achieve the same purpose. But the question is, would they be right in doing so? Can Byron actually be considered together with Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and Shelley as one of the chief representatives of English Romanticism? This kind of interrogation calls to mind the myriad of critical commentaries and articles on the anti-Romanticism of Lord Byron; the question is not new, neither would be any attempted answer.

¹¹⁷ James Hogg, 'To the Honourable Lord Byron', in *James Hogg. Selected Poems and Songs*, ed. by Groves, p. 31

My present concern is to investigate not so much the romantic/ anti-romantic dualism in Byron's poetry but the reasons why Hogg decided to preface to the planned volume *The Midsummer Night Dreams* a poem dedicated to Byron. What if he did so, not despite, but because of Byron's acting as a profligate sceptic within and towards the established literary tradition of the time? If this is the case, then Byron's position in the contemporary cultural scenario resembles very much Hogg's own -- keeping one foot inside and one foot outside the literary establishment, by indulging in a degree of involvement with it, and, simultaneously, keeping his distance from it by means of specific attitudes and poetic strategies. Both of them therefore present an essential split at the core of their personality as well as of their work, and what intrigues me mainly is to see whether the affinity between their eccentric positions depends on their non-Englishness, or their link with the Scottish tradition. This argument perhaps applies only partly to Byron, though he himself asserted that he was 'half a Scot by birth, and bred/ A whole one',¹¹⁸ although if one turns from the biographical data to his literary output, what I have named non-Englishness appears more pervasive and ingrained in it than one might at first think.

Elusive terms such as 'Englishness' and 'Scottishness' become even more slippery when the tension between them originates from issues concerning the individual as such -- not only his writing persona. Byron is such a complex case. It is my intention to use these two controversial terms in their most innocent, transparent meaning, so that they can be taken as objective epithets describing a specific set of values and characteristics. By 'Englishness' I mean the obvious links between Byron the poet and the English tradition, his presumed and demonstrable indebtedness to some of his English predecessors.¹¹⁹ By 'Scottishness' I refer to the ubiquitous presence in Byron's poetry of certain formal aspects and thematic motifs which evince an innate and strong bond with Scotland and its literature. I would rather confine my argument to literary considerations and 'visible' connections between Byron and

¹¹⁸ *Don Juan*, in *Lord Byron. The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann and Barry Weller, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-1991), V, 10. 135. Further references are from this edition, and indicated internally by canto and line number.

Scotland rather than embarking on thorny speculations about his psychological traits in relation to the multifarious theories on the divided 'Scottish psyche'. It is the 'visible', what we can actually see in his poetry, rather than the 'invisible' Byron that I am concerned with.

Byron's depiction or mentioning of Scotland and the Scottish landscape occurs in various parts of his works, from his *juvenilia* collection *Hours of Idleness* (1806) to *Don Juan* (1819), but the significance and effects conveyed by these images evolve throughout his career, parallel to the gradual change in his poetic tone and style. The general image of Scotland which comes up from such poems as 'Lachin y Gair', 'I Would I Were a Careless Child', 'When I Roved a Young Highlander', and other early poems conforms to the romantic vision of Scotland as an Eden which has been corrupted by progress and civilisation; thus when the poet addresses issues connected with Scotland and its people, he adopts a nostalgic perspective. This sentimentalised perspective which is part of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century representation of Scottish landscape is gradually replaced by another vision of and attitude towards the country, which reaches its apogee in *Don Juan*. Even in this outstanding poem there are passages which convey a slightly melancholic feeling, evoked by the Scottish landscape, but the prevalent tone and attitude contravene the conventional pre-Kailyard picture of Scotland. Addressing Francis Jeffrey, the poet says:

And though, as you remember, in a fit
Of wrath and rhyme, when juvenile and curly,
I railed at Scots to show my wrath and wit,
Which must be owned was sensitive and surly,
Yet 'tis in vain such sallies to permit,
They cannot quench young feelings fresh and early:
I 'scotched, not killed,' the Scotchman in my blood,

¹¹⁹ A very illuminating essay on this topic is Philip Hobsbaum, 'Byron and the English Tradition', in *Byron: Wrath and Rhyme*, ed. by Alan Bold (London: Vision; Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1983), pp. 37-56.

And love the land of 'mountain and of flood'. (10. 145)

What we find here is one of Byron's most significant expressions of his own 'Scottishness'. The reference to childhood -- 'when juvenile and curly' -- unavoidably calls to mind Rousseauesque images of lost Edens and noble savages -- but the two adjectives 'juvenile' and 'curly' instantly comically undermine conventional Romantic values. Certainly the passage bears a resemblance to various episodes in *The Island* (1823) -- especially Canto II, stanza 12 -- a poem permeated with romantic mythology. But however far the two pictures look the same, the hidden sense of the verses from *Don Juan* stretches far beyond the poet's brooding on the wild purity of the Scottish scenery, the land of 'mountain and of flood'. There is much more behind that 'Scotchman in my blood' -- an implication that Byron, despite -- or maybe because of? -- his internationalism, never completely suppressed nor rejected his Scottish origins.

Critics such as Alan Bold, Roderick Speer, and Tom Scott have written extensive essays on the relationship between Byron and the Scottish tradition.¹²⁰ My own argument draws in part on them, and pursues some of their claims. Two such claims are particularly meaningful and relevant to my general thesis: Byron's estrangement from the cultural and literary context of the time, and what may be seen as one of the essential ingredients of all his works -- the coexistence of antithetical components, the meeting on the poetic level of various kinds of extremes.

Byron was born in London, but at the age of four his mother took him to Aberdeen, her native town, after being deserted by her husband. This happened in 1792, and after only seven years he would leave Scotland forever, physically but not spiritually. From then onwards Byron lived in England, but in 1816, due to his scandalous relationship with his half-sister Augusta and to his increasingly unorthodox political ideas, he abandoned Britain and began his peregrinations around Europe, ending his life in Greece, fighting for a cause which he could only partly support since

¹²⁰ See Alan Bold, 'Introduction' in *Wrath and Rhyme*, pp. 7-14; Roderick S. Speer, 'Byron and the Scottish Literary Tradition', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 14 (1979), 196-206; Tom Scott, 'Byron as a Scottish Poet', in *Wrath and Rhyme*, pp. 27-36.

he never trusted nor believed in the government of the masses. His rejection of England was thus literal, but it also became moral and spiritual as he came to perceive the hypocritical and corrupt aspects of English society, and the bigotry of its political and religious establishment. It is not coincidental that his most non-English -- partly anti-English -- poems were written after he left Britain and travelled in other countries. From a distance the whole English scene revealed more clearly those flaws and inner inconsistencies which Byron mocked in *Beppo* (1817), *The Vision of Judgement* (1821), and *Don Juan*. His travels through Europe allowed him to spot more easily the faults of English society, and in his poems he seems to urge us towards a similar recognition by means of what Robert Crawford calls a 'comparative method to juxtapose societies and their mores, provoking the reader to compare and evaluate them [...]'.¹²¹ In his already quoted essay Tom Scott sees Byron as one of the Ishmael figures of Scottish literature, an outsider wherever he goes, belonging nowhere because of his confused identity but also because of his general conflicts with social codes and conventions (p. 20). In this respect Don Juan is Lord Byron himself, but he is less 'Byronic' than the heroes of his earlier poems, those brooding, sin-burdened souls who, in many respects, are in a sense the product of Calvinism and its antinomian doctrine, although not so much Justified Sinners but members of the damned party. The Spanishness of Don Juan is like Byron's Scottishness in that it parallels the cause of his alienation from English society,¹²² but it also enables him to observe that world from the objective perspective of a foreigner. In a sense, Byron was a stranger in contemporary English society. He stood 'out of the centre' because neither his personality nor his writing complied with English established cultural codes. Byron is the absent 'Scottish eccentric' among Hugh MacDiarmid's gallery of Scottish misfits, but even if MacDiarmid does not directly mention him, and chooses in fact to depict another Lord George Gordon, it would be fair to suggest that the spirit of Byron in a sense haunts the whole volume.

¹²¹ Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 175. According to Crawford this is the most Scottish feature of *Don Juan*.

¹²² See in particular the last four Cantos of *Don Juan*.

Byron's identity, because of his alienation from English society, offers a paradigmatic exemplification of the post-structuralist notion of 'otherness' applied to individual identity. His personality is defined by what he is not rather than by what or who he is; it is his non-Englishness, his nonconformist stance, which distinguishes him from his literary peers, perhaps even more than his being partly Scottish. This is the reason why one should hesitate to assert that Byron's eccentricity can be attributed solely to his half-Scottish heritage. He was rather an international figure, similar in this to Walter Scott, whom he deeply admired,¹²³ but certainly much less at ease and less integrated into the predominantly conservative atmosphere of the time. The rebellious spirit and partly radical posture of the Byronic hero or the narrator of Byron's poems are closer to Burns's carnivalesque humour and anti-officialdom than to Scott's pro-Tory views of society. Scott's sentimental Jacobitism crops up in Byron's early lyrics, but later on in his life the romantic aura cast over his depiction of Scottish nature and customs gives way to the more sharply ironic voice of Byron's satiric persona. Byron was affected by a sense of alienation not only from England but also from Scotland, which gave rise to his dualistic view of his mother's country, a love-and-hate relationship associated with a sense of non-belonging and aloofness in the social context.¹²⁴ This feeling was shared by many Scottish writers during the nineteenth century to such an extent that it can be considered one of the characteristic traits of Scottish literature in that period.

Alexander Smith, James Thomson, and John Davidson experienced similar states of internal and external contradiction, and all of them offer examples of what Tom Scott identifies as the condition of Scottish genius 'finding itself as best it may in the alien medium' (p. 21). In short, in Tom Scott's view, Byron is the victim of a split between head and heart which is reflected in the many 'doubles' in his writing such as, for example, the contrast between his 'aloof, intellectually superior persona' and the 'tormented, turbulent feelings in his heart' (p. 19). Without making use of the actual terms, Scott describes Byron as another example of 'Caledonian Antiszygy' and the

¹²³ In his journal entry for November 1813, Byron drew up a triangular *Gradus and Parnassus* and he placed Scott at the peak. See *Byron. A Self-Portrait. Letters and Diaries*, ed. by Peter Quennell, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1950), I, p. 221.

dissociation of sensibility. Angus Calder pursued the same argument by maintaining that Byron '[...] could not feel 'inward' with the language he used [...]', that he chose to write in a language which he could not feel as his own.¹²⁵ Although Edwin Muir's theory of a central dissociation in Scottish literature seems to be very appropriate when it is applied to Byron, the chameleon quality of his writing escapes any simplistic theory of division. Byron's poetry, especially his longer poems, confronts the reader with so many divisions and antitheses that it is hardly possible to interpret it in the light of any theoretical approach which tends to pin it down to recurrent patterns and characteristics. Thus it is difficult both to categorise it and to see it as the reflection of a precise ideological system.

Indeed any kind of system, either political or religious, represented for Byron a violence against his ideal of freedom, as he shows in many passages of *Don Juan* and *The Vision of Judgement*. Byron rejected any kind of constraint which would limit physical and metaphysical freedom. In *Don Juan*, the theme of freedom is associated with the conception of love. Byron rejected the Platonism of his contemporaries, and defended a more earthly and physical expression of love. In Canto I he attacks Plato directly:

Oh Plato! Plato! you have paved the way,
 With your confounded fantasies, to more
 Immoral conduct by the fancied sway
 Your system feigns o'er the controlless core
 Of human hearts, than all the long array
 Of poets and romancers: -- You're a bore,
 A charlatan, a coxcomb -- and have been,
 At best, no better than a go-between. (l. 921)

In *The Vision of Judgement* Byron deals with political freedom. The spokesman of his ideology is Satan - or Sathan -- himself who blazons freedom against George III's

¹²⁴ T. Scott, p. 19.

¹²⁵ Angus Calder, *Byron* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1987), p. 58.

political tyranny. He claims to the Archangel Michael that the king is one of his subjects:

[Sathan] merely bent his diabolic brow
 An instant; and then raising it, he stood
 In act to assert his right or wrong, and show
 Cause why King George by no means could or should
 Make out a case to be exempt from woe
 Eternal, more than other kings endued
 With better sense and hearts, whom history mentions,
 Who long have 'paved hell with their good intentions.'¹²⁶

In a letter to Scott dated 12 January 1822, Byron alludes to his estrangement from contemporary English society. Here he is speaking about the impact that Scott's novels had on him:

[...] to me those novels have so much of 'Auld Lang Syne'. (I was bred a canny Scot till ten years old) that I never move without them
 [...] I need not add that I would be delighted to see you again --
 which is far more than I shall ever feel or say for England or [...] any thing that it contains [...] But my 'heart warms to the Tartan' or to any thing of Scotland.¹²⁷

Byron could not bear living in England forever. He had to escape from what he felt was a prison-society, and allow his exuberant and passionate spirit freedom from social restrictions and bigoted behaviour. In England he felt like his Prisoner of Chillon inside the claustrophobic prison walls, yearning for desperate freedom, a

¹²⁶ *The Vision of Judgement*, in Lord Byron. *The Complete Poetical Works*, VI, pp. 309-345 (l. 289). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text by line number.

¹²⁷ Quoted in P. H. Scott, 'Byron and Scott' in *Byron and Scotland. Radical or Dandy?*, ed. by Angus Calder (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), pp. 51-64 (p. 58).

liberal cause which he pursued throughout his life even if politically he was divided between an instinct for revolution and a sceptical feeling towards democratic government. Therefore he moved to Italy, which, to a certain extent, resembled Scotland, both nations being still in a pre-industrial phase without a powerful materialistic middle-class keeping a tight rein upon the rest of the population. Moreover Italy personified an ideal of freedom, even of misrule, which did not exist in contemporary Scotland, where not only his personality but also his poetry became the target of a scandalising press. The 'Scotch reviewers', as Byron patronisingly calls them in the famous flyting *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809), saw his temperamental changes as obnoxious and obscene, which, translated into poetry, resulted in frequent shifts of tone, style and literary discourse. Byron responded to them in the same way as MacDiarmid or Whitman -- and indeed so many of the 'eccentric' Scottish poets of the century -- might have responded, that is, holding that inconsistency and self-contradictoriness cannot be considered offensive because they are the kernel and essence of life itself. We can capture Byron's existential convictions by reversing the message conveyed by some ironical passages of *Don Juan*. In Canto II he writes:

I hate inconstancy -- I loathe, detest,
 Abhor, condemn, abjure the mortal made
 Of such quicksilver clay that in his breast
 No permanent foundation can be laid. (2. 1665)

It is not difficult to perceive behind these verses a skilful actor reciting his part with a half-sarcastic, half-sardonic smile stamped on his face.

What an antithetical mind! -- tenderness, roughness -- delicacy,
 coarseness -- sentiment, sensuality -- soaring and grovelling, dirt
 and deity -- all mixed up in that one compound of inspired clay!¹²⁸

This might look like a verbal portrayal of Byron, but, in fact, it is Byron himself writing a journal entry about one of the writers he mostly valued -- Robert Burns. His portrait focuses on the dynamic force running through Burns's poetry, its degree of thematic and formal variety, its motley nature, which the author of *Don Juan* -- such a perfect example of literary medley -- estimated very highly.¹²⁹ Byron makes use of the term 'mind' in its all-embracing significance, as a synthesis of mental and emotional attributes which coexist despite their antagonism. The critic Paul West has very effectively expressed Byron's chameleon nature in the following portrait, which offers a mirror to Byron's definition of Burns's 'antithetical mind':

Inconsistent he certainly was; by fits, turns and permutations, also sensitive, hardboiled, shy, supercilious; indolent and industrious, euphoric and morbid, gross and fastidious, quixotic and self-centred, romantic and unspiritual, feminine and brave, vindictive and generous [...]¹³⁰

Burns's mind is antithetical because it is capable of recognising discrepancies in life and accepting them without any urge or wish to find a solution for them. 'Intermingledons' is an expression which Burns himself coined in order to express in one word the complex, contradictory nature of reality. What John Galt once said about Byron as regards his inner split between the 'sociable day Byron' and the 'abstracted solitary night Byron'¹³¹ echoes Burns's vision of life in 'Poem on Life', in particular the following lines:

Dame life, tho' fiction out may trick her,

¹²⁸ Byron's Journal, 31 December 1813, in *Byron's Letters and Journals*, III, p. 239.

¹²⁹ The formal and thematic complexity of the poem is such that Jump raises a very fascinating issue: do we have to consider *Don Juan* as one long poem or as an 'anthology'? The question is interesting also in relation with a long tradition of longer Scottish poems which involve a similar dilemma. See J. D. Jump, *Byron's Don Juan. Poem or Hold-All?* (Swansea: University College, 1968).

¹³⁰ Paul West, *Byron and the Spoiler's Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1960), p. 11.

¹³¹ Quoted in Edwin Morgan, 'Voice, Tone, and Transition in *Don Juan*', in *Byron: Wrath and Rhyme*, pp. 57-77 (p. 58).

And in paste gems and frippery deck her;

Oh! flickering, feeble, and unsicker

I've found her still,

Ay wavering like the willow wicker,

*'Tween good and ill.*¹³²

[my italics]

In other words, the Shakespearean play of darkness and light, with its metaphorical overtones, represents one of the threads linking Byron not only with Burns but also with Hogg, who, probably unconsciously, reinforced it by positioning the poem dedicated to Byron at the beginning of his pseudo-Shakespearean volume *Midsummer Night Dreams*.

Nonetheless, there is an important difference between Hogg's vision in this collection and Byron's kaleidoscopic picture of life in his long poems, in particular *Don Juan*. The metaphorical day and night sides of human existence are kept separate by Hogg by the representation of two different journeys: Connel of Dee -- the eponymous anti-hero of one of the poems in *Midsummer Night Dreams* -- undergoes a process of initiation by means of a downward journey into the dark heart of life, whereas Mary Lee in *The Pilgrims of the Sun* goes through a quest whereby she comes close to the mystery of life and the truth, although -- as human -- she cannot grasp them fully. Mary can be seen as a female version of Everyman who reaches the superior Socratic awareness that man must be content with knowing that he does not know. On the other hand, *Don Juan* encapsulates the tension between spiritual and earthly, metaphysical and physical, within its framework. This is partly achieved by means of a specific device which engenders frequent linguistic and stylistic shifts with consequent bathetic effects. I refer to the plurality of perspectives and the multiple viewpoint of the poem which are all encompassed and contained by its digressions and the dominant voice of the narrator. The dichotomies of comic and serious, brightness and gloom, optimism and pessimism are generally propelled by the

¹³² Robert Burns, 'Poem on Life', in *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. by James Kinsley, 3 vols (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1968), II, pp. 809-810 (p. 809).

separation between the figure of the protagonist and the persona of the narrator. This does not necessarily mean that the narrator always voices Byron's 'night side' whereas Don Juan embodies his 'day side', the burlesque and humorous facet of his personality. The division is never so rigid. There are many episodes in the poem in which the narrator and the author are juxtaposed, because, in many respects, the narrator is Byron's alter-ego. His language is colloquial, and never artificial unless aiming at particular targets in order to ridicule them. He is also a very alert observer and an entertaining talker. The sense of humour he displays is not too far away from the comic or satirical vein of eighteenth-century Scottish vernacular poetry, with its constant ability to send serious messages to the reader by means of drollery.

One example is offered by the treatment of the *ubi sunt* theme which has also been very central in Scottish poetry since the medieval Makars. It is tackled in various parts of *Don Juan*, but the narrator's meditative mood surfaces particularly frequently in the English Cantos. In Canto V he deals with the *ubi sunt*, or *vanitas vanitatum*, theme by using a colloquial language which 'reduces' the conventional metaphysical austerity of this motif. An example occurs in the following lines:

[...] Here we are,
 And there we go: -- but *where*? five bits of lead,
 Or three, or two, or one, send very far!
 And is this blood, then, form'd but to be shed?
 Can every element our elements mar?
 And air -- earth -- water -- fire live -- and we dead?
We, whose minds comprehend all things? [...]. (5. 305)

The tone here is more sombre than amusing, but there is nonetheless a striking affinity between Byron's religious scepticism and Leopardi's notion of universal Nothingness. It may be interesting to point out that it is in his *Operette Morali* (*Moral Tales*, 1827), rather than in his poetry, that Leopardi handles certain metaphysical themes in a humorous, at times satirical, style. In their narrative works -- and Byron's long poems can certainly be described as such -- the two writers exhibit a very similar anti-

romantic and burlesque attitude towards life. They share also another characteristic which is strongly linked to their fatalistic vision of the world. It has to do with their own reaction confronting such a mechanistic universe, and with the notion of heroic endurance which later on in the century will find a vivid personification in the figure of Melancholia in Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874). In short, both Byron and Leopardi entertain visions of the universe touched with pessimism, but, against this gloomy scenario, they oppose their own human endurance and their Promethean energy. There is thus a certain degree of Byronism in Leopardi, although the protagonists of both his poems and tales are not so *outré* in their Faustian rebellion as Byron's heroes. The dualism is there in both of them: the night side of the world can partly be tempered by the day side of man. This more optimistic dimension of their writing is the key to understanding their indebtedness to eighteenth-century rationalism and Enlightenment.

What part does Don Juan play then? The narrator can be both serious and comic. He is the one who manipulates the story, while Don Juan is the actor embodying the author's *carpe diem* philosophy, his Bakhtinian vision of the world. Jump was therefore right to point out that the cohesive element of the poem is the narrator himself³³ -- a comment repeatedly made in regard of MacDiarmid's *Drunk Man*, and also of poems of Hogg, Thomson, Davidson, and Geddes. He is often Juan's antagonistic double, his negative consciousness which ridicules and distorts Juan's views -- as, for example, Juan's vision of London in Canto X. The protagonist's enthusiasm for urban life is discredited and lampooned by the narrator's sardonic views. The narrator in *The Vision of Judgement* is his twin. He is able to hit such targets as Anglican orthodoxy, Christian hypocrisy, and political fanaticism by means of effective satirical and, at times, purely comic tone. The earth is here represented *sub specie aeternitatis*, so that Heaven and Hell become allegorical images of our own world. The poem is in line with the Scottish visionary tradition which is ubiquitous throughout the history of Scottish literature, from the works of the medieval Makars until the Makars of our century, in particular MacDiarmid. James Young Geddes's *The New Inferno* (1879) belongs to the same poetic strain; it

has many Byronic echoes, and conveys similar unorthodox ideas on society. Geddes's position in Victorian society was characterised by the same sense of alienation which affected Byron in Romantic Britain. Furthermore, there is a visionary element in *Don Juan* which strongly links Byron and Hogg. The critic Michael Gassenmeier has written on Byron's image of the city in which he particularly focuses on the episode in *Don Juan* where the protagonist looks down to the city of London from Shooter's Hill.¹³⁴ From the hill Juan can perceive the division of the town between a gloomy industrial side and a picturesque beautiful one. Therefore he is like Kilmeny in Hogg's eponymous poem, who likewise is allowed to glance over the world -- or worlds -- and perceive its polarity of evil and good. London in *Don Juan* can be considered the microcosmic image of the whole universe.

It is extremely difficult to ascribe to Byron's long poems defining labels concerning poetic genre and style, since, in a sense, they lack a monolithic 'identity' just like their author. The anonymous critic of *Blackwood's Magazine* of August 1819 described *Don Juan* as '[...] the most admirable specimen of the mixture of ease, strength, gayety [*sic*] and seriousness extant in the whole body of English poetry [...]'.¹³⁵ Paul West has described the form of Byron's poems 'a vessel, not a matrix, something fixed where all is moving'.¹³⁶ They are almost *in fieri* because any time we read them we discover new meanings and new possible interpretations behind the formal structure. J. W. Croker, Tory spokesman and founding editor of *The Quarterly Review* defined Byron's style in *Don Juan* as 'Protean',¹³⁷ a single word which speaks volumes. Byron's poetry contains 'multitudes', to adopt Whitman's term; it is polyphonic, it comprises various polarities which invest both form and content, it lies 'whaur extremes meet' without discrediting one or the other. In this

¹³³ J. D. Jump, p. 9.

¹³⁴ Michael Gassenmeier, 'Augustan Satires and Panegyrics on London and Byron's Image of the City', in *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, ed. by Andrew Rutherford (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 136-164.

¹³⁵ '*Blackwood's Magazine's* "Remarks on *Don Juan*". August 1819, V, 512-18', in *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Andrew Rutherford (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; New York: Barnes and Noble Inc, 1970), pp. 166-173 (p. 167).

¹³⁶ West, p. 40.

¹³⁷ 'Croker on Cantos III and IV. March 1820', in *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 192-195 (p. 192).

respect Byron's poetry, as well as Hogg's and MacDiarmid's, is more realistic than we may think; it offers a mirror image of life itself, and suggests that man should face his existence as it really is, with all its incongruities. Yet Byron's realism, like Scott's or Hogg's realism, is of a particular kind which does not exclude its 'polar twin',¹³⁸ the supernatural mode both in its superstitious and in its metaphysical variants.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, whereas Scott, and at times Hogg, tended to look for some kind of compromising solution in order to reconcile the opposite parties and have harmony eventually triumph, Byron always preferred to keep the paradoxes and antitheses in being, and to let the reader decide his own position.

Very often the oppositional scheme of themes and styles is replaced by another and more general picture of greater complexity. As I said, Byron's poetry contains multitudes, it is a kaleidoscope encompassing all sorts of hues. Let us take as an example Byron's depiction of the Otherworld in *The Vision of Judgement*. Here is how the poet describes Heaven:

Besides there were the Spaniard, Dutch, and Dane;
In short, an universal shoal of shades,
From Otaheite's Isle to Salisbury Plain,
Of all climes and professions, years and trades,
Ready to swear against the good king's reign,
Bitter as clubs in cards are against the spades[...] (l. 473)

Contrary to Southey's English Heaven, Byron's otherworld is a cosmopolitan realm, comprising all types of mankind. Hogg comes to mind again. What, after all, is the central image in his 'Pilgrims of the Sun'? It is that of a multifarious universe inhabited by men 'of all creeds/ Features and hues'¹⁴⁰. It may be that Byron's

¹³⁸ See G. G. Smith, *Scottish Literature. Character and Influence*, p. 20.

¹³⁹ See for instance Byron's unfinished drama *The Deformed Transformed* (1822) in which one of the main characters is a Doppelgänger reminiscent of Hogg's Gil-Martin. It may be of interest to notice that the two works were both published the same year, in 1824. I found this information in Anne Barton, 'Don Juan Transformed', in *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, ed. by Andrew Rutherford (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 199-220.

¹⁴⁰ Hogg, *The Pilgrims of the Sun*, in *Selected Poems and Songs*, p. 45.

universalistic vision gave Hogg yet another reason to open his *Midsummer Night Dreams* with a poem dedicated to him. It is indeed arguable that the 'universalistic theme' is a recurrent motif in Scottish literature. We can detect it in some poets of the Victorian period such as James Thomson and John Davidson, and it features centrally in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, where there is a magnification of themes and perspective from the lowest and most local to the highest and universal.

Supported by scholarly investigations such as those of Angus Calder, Tom Scott, and T. S. Eliot,¹⁴¹ I perceive two major links between Byron and the Scottish poetic tradition. They are somehow complementary, representing another polarity of his writing, two different yet perfectly coexisting strains. First, at the core of his writing there is a tension between orality and literacy. The colloquialism and familiarity of the language he adopts is counterbalanced by the presence of a more sophisticated style, a mode of speech which appears to be thoroughly spontaneous but, in fact, is characterised by the frequent use of rhetorical devices. In other words, Byron's poetry often succeeds in capturing the movement of the speaking voice in a manner that can hardly be found in his contemporaries, including Coleridge and Wordsworth. The Romantic ballad pretends to be a popular genre but, in fact, it is the result of a sophisticated process whereby the author tries to reproduce ordinary speech, and convey an *impression* of reality. Yet we can still perceive the skilful hand and artifice of the poet attempting to produce such an effect. Conversely, the language Byron employs in poems such as *The Vision of Judgement*, *Beppo*, and *Don Juan* is genuinely familiar, and the pleasure of reading we derive from them depends essentially on the fact that they are stories told by a very entertaining narrator in colloquial style. The narrator also indulges a consistently amusing verbal wit. He knows that long narratives can be tedious, and therefore he exploits as many devices as he can to keep his readers alert, to kindle their enthusiasm and inflame their desire to carry on reading. Hence the numerous Swift-like digressions in Byron's poems,

¹⁴¹ See T. S. Eliot, 'Byron', in *On Poets and Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1957), pp. 194-206.

the frequent interference of the narrator which does not impede the narrative pace of the whole poem.

Secondly, Byron is linked with Scottish folk literature through his interest in traditional songs and ballads, evoked in many poems included in his juvenile collection *Hours of Idleness*. 'Lachin y Gair' and 'So we'll go no more a roving' pay an obvious tribute to Scottish popular songs and ballad.¹⁴² Some critics have underlined the 'passion and energy'¹⁴³ of Byron's poetry, thus echoing Hogg's words in his dedicatory poem. The same kind of extrovert energy and sensational power characterises many Scottish ballads, in particular those ballads where the physical, earthly component is very strongly present, and yet admits the intervention of the uncanny, so that their collision arouses a very intriguing tension within the poem. When we read Byron's poems, we experience a similar tension between different kinds of reality.

But there is another facet in Byron's poetry which must be taken into account. If it is true that it looks back to the Scottish oral tradition, it also presents striking similarities with eighteenth-century vernacular poetry which encompassed and revived that tradition. Like Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns, Byron was a poet with divided allegiances: he wanted a realistic symbiosis between life and art to be restored as opposed to more idealistic and mystical contemporary notions of literature, but, at the same time, he made use of the artifice of rhetoric in order to express and launch his biting attacks against what he saw as social and cultural hypocrisies. Hence, like his Scottish predecessors, he exploited the potentialities of humour and satire, but he preferred to match them with either the Spenserian stanza or the *ottava rima* rather than with the traditional ballad metres. In Chapter 1 I argued that the distance between the eighteenth-century Scottish vernacular tradition and the poetry of the *Literati* is bridged by the presence in the former of a certain degree of literacy. It is a fallacy to believe that the language employed by Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns exactly coincided with the ordinary language of the people, despite its apparent

¹⁴² See Angus Calder, Tom Scott, *passim*. See also Ronald Stevenson, 'Byron as Lyricist: The Poet Among the Musicians', in *Byron: Wrath and Rhyme*, pp. 78-99.

¹⁴³ See in particular T. Scott, pp. 17-18.

'naturalness'. I also argued that the divisions of eighteenth-century Scottish literature are much more complex and interwoven than they appear. A similar consideration applies to Byron. His poetic achievements manifest compatibility both with the 'popular' tradition and the Enlightenment of eighteenth-century Scotland, as well as with the ties between them. There is genuine vernacular humour as well as premeditated satire in Byron, but there is also just such a tension between the romantic and the realistic, and the emotional and the rational, as marks the poetry of Thomson and Beattie. In *Don Juan*, for example, just as in *The Seasons*, there are references to history and the sciences as well as romantic descriptions and meditative sections. Tom Scott has very interestingly suggested that this compound of purely literary and scientific elements recurs in many Scottish texts, and reaches a peak in MacDiarmid's all-comprehensive poems (p. 28).

It has often been pointed out that Byron's satire is closer to the Scottish tradition of flyting than to English Augustan satire, thus implicitly calling, before MacDiarmid, for a return to Dunbar, although there is no evidence that he read that poet.¹⁴⁴ On the other hand, Byron certainly knew Burns and his contemporaries, and very likely it was from them that he became acquainted with flyting. T. S. Eliot considers this aspect the most significant mark of Scottishness in Byron's writing.¹⁴⁵ The poem *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* belongs to this tradition. The flyting is here addressed towards those Scottish critics who patronised and unfairly attacked his early poems. *The Curse of Minerva* (1811) is a flyting against Lord Elgin for dismantling the Greek Parthenon, while *The Vision of Judgement* is Byron's satiric response to Southey's denigration of his 'Satanic' poetry in the preface to *A Vision of Judgement*, a poem on the death of King George III. In a letter to Landor dated 20th February, 1820, Southey recognised the connection between Byron's poetic mode and the poet John Hookham Frere, who first introduced into England the burlesque genre of Italian Renaissance poetry with *Whistlecraft* (or *The Monks and the Giants*) (1817), and whose poetry, according to Southey, was marred by the fact that 'the

¹⁴⁴ See Calder, *Byron*, p. 57.

¹⁴⁵ See the already mentioned essay 'On Poets and Poetry', p. 206.

transition from what is serious to what is burlesque was capricious'.¹⁴⁶ Byron fights back against Southey in the ironic dedicatory verses of *Don Juan*, wherein he intended to hit general targets such as the Toryism and the egotism of the Lake Poets.

There is one interesting hint in Southey's letter, that is, the remark about Byron's presumed indebtedness to Italian Renaissance verse, in particular Boiardo, Pulci and Ariosto. The carnivalesque component of *Beppo* is unmistakably related to them, but I consider equally valid some critics' claim that this poem exhibits a kind of humour which resembles strikingly Burns's and Fergusson's comic vein in their Holiday poems.¹⁴⁷ Anyway, whether Byron derived the burlesque, transgressive mode directly from the Italian poets or through reading of Ramsay, Burns and Fergusson, the point I want to make does not change. In Bakhtinian terms, carnival represents a totally different world from the orthodox, official culture, a world bereft of religious and political dogma, a world where people wear masks not because of their hypocrisy and subterfuge, but because they want to incorporate carnival into everyday life, and the multifarious masquerade stands for the possibility of alternatives to disrupt the monolithic system of authority. The paradox inherent in carnival is that originally it was a religious festival, but already in the Middle Ages there were carnivals symbolising the subversion of the establishment such as the Feast of Fools and the Abbot of Misrule. Strict Calvinists would certainly be shocked by *Don Juan* and *Beppo*, which, with their polyphonic range of figures, themes and styles represent perfect poetic versions of what Bakhtin called 'carnivalisation'.¹⁴⁸

Might not James Hogg's mimicry and histrionics be seen in a similar way? His identity was certainly protean and he often put on the masks of the satirist and the parodist to counterattack the mockery of his contemporaries. At times he also played the part of the fool, but deliberately and ironically, and it was not his fault if his detractors simply mistook his apparent naiveté for lack of wit and intelligence. The

¹⁴⁶ 'Robert Southey on *Don Juan* and the Satanic School of Poetry. 1820-1', in *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 179-181 (p. 179). For a discussion of Frere's works see 'Introduction' to *The Monks and the Giants*. By John Hookham Frere, ed. and with an introduction by R. D. Waller (Manchester: At the University Press; London, New York, &c.: Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd., 1926), pp. 1-57.

¹⁴⁷ See for example T. Scott, p. 30.

truth was exactly the opposite. Burns and Ramsay (and even Boswell), as we have seen, also played various roles in society.¹⁴⁹ Can the same argument also be referred to other poets in the following century, outstandingly MacDiarmid? Byron's whole life looks like a long play wherein he tried all the possible roles he could choose. Was it a form of self-defence or a deliberately subversive act against any sort of absolutism?

To be 'other than', different from what is taken as acceptable and legitimate, is doubtless disruptive behaviour, and, pursuing it, a person often becomes alien to the society in which he lives, an eternal exile without roots anywhere. Hogg's compromising attitude sporadically helped him to avoid this risk, whereas Byron and several Scottish writers after him experienced more dramatically their estrangement from any social context -- John Davidson represents an extreme case. Yet Byron was not an utter misanthrope. He came to recognise that a risk is always implied whenever the individual pursues personal freedom at whatever cost. As Paul West has observed, '[...] a man has to reconcile presence with absence, combine humanity to others with respect for himself', and Byron certainly lived out the struggle between 'romantic agony and social cipher' (p. 125); the problem of combining personal and social identity haunted him everywhere. He could not find a solution for it but he faced and learned how to cope with his dilemma, always standing 'whaur extremes meet'.

Some late nineteenth-century Scottish poets inherited Hogg's and Byron's eccentric vision, and similarly sensed their displacement from mainstream culture; yet not all of them were able to exploit the creative possibility involved by the condition of otherness, or fully understand and develop the degree of their difference from contemporary society and artistic production. Alexander Smith's work is a paradigmatical expression of the writer who treads on the contemporary literary scene like a tightrope walker, at times unable to keep the balance between the pressure of

¹⁴⁸ See Mikhail Bakhtin, 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 41-83.

the external world and his own individual needs. When the former prevails, his artistic results deserve the disparaging label of 'Spasmodic', but a careful study of the peculiarities of Smith's otherness helps to shed new light on his whole work, and recognise his true achievement.

¹⁴⁹ For a fuller discussion of the recurrent eighteenth-century habit of literary rôle-play see Simpson, *The Protean Scot*.

CHAPTER 3

THE RE-ASSESSMENT OF A SPASMODIC: THE POETRY OF ALEXANDER SMITH

PART I

The man and his ideas

29 May 1989: a plaque commemorating the poet Alexander Smith was unveiled in Queen Street, Glasgow, by the poet's 78-years-old granddaughter, Mrs Marion St Johnston, in the same lane where he worked as a pattern drawer for a firm of muslin manufacturers, during the years when he should have received his school education or studied to become a minister, as he would have wished. This initiative was a sign of recognition of one of the neglected literary sons of the Anglo-Scottish Muse.

Alexander Smith was born in Kilmarnock, Ayrshire on 31 December 1829, but he did not live there long enough to absorb deeply and be influenced by the geographical and cultural components of his native setting; in 1832 his family moved to Paisley in order to find more work, and presumably the same reason led them to change residence again in 1839 and settle in Glasgow. The information about Alexander Smith's early education is scarce and inaccurate, yet we know that in Glasgow he received a few years' education, which was however interrupted when he was eleven years old, because the family needed him to bring home the money to support them. Hence his working as pattern-designer, a profession learnt from his father, in different ware-houses, which explains his label of 'Glasgow mechanic', similar to that of the 'Ettrick Shepherd' or 'the Heaven-taught ploughman' before him. The phrase was sometimes used with a derogatory implication, sometimes with a well-intentioned purpose -- either to blame or to justify the flaws of his poetic style and composition.

It is possible to summarise succinctly Smith's life as a writer. Owing to the attention and interest showed by George Gilfillan, the dissenting minister of Dundee, and also the critical advocate of the Spasmodics,¹ Smith could move to Edinburgh, where he obtained the place of Secretary to the University of Edinburgh. *A Life Drama* had already been serialised in *The Critic* in 1852, and later included in the 1853 London edition of his poems. In Edinburgh Smith became acquainted with several representatives of the literary society of the city, and became a member of the Raleigh Club. The cultural atmosphere in Edinburgh was much more promising and stimulating than that of Glasgow, even though Smith would never forget the city in which he spent his formative years, and which always retained a certain fascination for him, despite its smoky and gloomy appearance. It was in Edinburgh that he met Sydney Dobell, the author of *The Roman* (1850) and *Balder* (1853); two representative examples of the notorious Spasmodic School of poetry. The result of their meeting and friendship was the joint enterprise of writing the *Sonnets on the Crimean War* (1855).

1857 was a crucial year in the life and literary career of Alexander Smith. He married Flora Macdonald from Skye, a descendant of the heroine of the Jacobite movement, and in the same year his poems were published in a volume including 'Glasgow', the poem for which Smith is mostly remembered nowadays and to my mind one of the milestones of Victorian poetry. After two years he settled in Wardie, near Granton, in Edinburgh, from where he made his contributions to literary magazines such as *Blackwood's Magazine*, *Macmillan's Magazine*, the *North British Review*, and *Good Words*. His next achievements were the epic poem *Edwin of Deira* (1861), the collection of essays entitled *Dreamthorp* (1863), the travel book *A Summer in Skye* (1865), the serialised publication of his unique novel *Alfred Hagart's Household* (1865) and the posthumous *Last Leaves; Sketches and Criticisms* (1868). After 1865 he began to lose his health steadily; his physical condition was aggravated by a parallel mental deterioration and psychic obsessions, until he died from a typhoid fever in 1867.

¹ See Mark A. Weinstein, *William Edmondstone Aytoun and the Spasmodic Controversy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 81-88.

Because of his brief scholarly education and his individual, private self-learning, Smith can be included among those Scottish writers who made up for their lack of formal education by being an autodidact and embarking on an individual, solitary form of literary training.² Yet it is from his first steps towards the world of letters that we are able to note an element which essentially distinguishes him from his Scottish self-taught antecedents. Although he was well-acquainted with Hugh Macdonald -- a botanist and one of the more enthusiastic and dogged followers of Burns -- and wrote the introduction and glossary for the 1865 Golden Treasury edition of Burns's poems, Smith was not deeply touched by the mythical aura surrounding his famous fellow countryman. The writers he had been particularly fond of since he was very young belonged to the English tradition -- both classical and romantic. Chaucer and Shakespeare were among his favourites, alongside Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, Shelley and Tennyson. He read and appreciated also the work of Ebenezer Elliott, the Corn-Law Rhymer, whom he probably saw as his own double, due to the similarity between their family background and their ideas. Smith's early interest in English literature was shared by some other young artisans, whom he used to meet regularly in Glasgow at the debating sessions of the so called 'Glasgow Addisonian Literary Society', of which Smith was the leading light. This took place when he was seventeen, and piecemeal it led him into the literary milieu, due to his popularity as speaker and lecturer.

When he was twenty-one he saw his first poem published in the *Glasgow Citizen*, the assistant editor of which was his friend Hugh Macdonald, although Smith's biographer Brisbane mentions another poetic composition belonging to his early juvenilia, a poem entitled 'Black Eagle'.³ It is a poem about an American Indian warrior, a thematic choice which testifies to his youthful passion for the civilisation of the native Americans, via his reading of Cooper's novels. There was an adventurous component in his personality when he was very young, a fervour and an inclination to strong passions which later on underwent a process of change, evolving first into the

² All biographical information is taken from T. Brisbane, *The Early Years of Alexander Smith, Poet and Essayist* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1869), and from a series of articles listed in the bibliography.

sentimental mode of the Spasmodic verse, tinged with an element of Byronism, and finally turning into the quieter sensitivity and pathos of his later years. Nonetheless, from his youth onwards, his character was also marked by an innate propensity to meditation and brooding, often compelling him to eschew other people's company. This side of his personality conflicted with his desire and necessity to attend cultural and literary circles. It was because of his odd retreat into his private sphere that his shopmates used to name him 'Daft Sandie', the same workmates that Smith magnificently describes in the poem 'Horton'.

While Smith's editor, Patrick Proctor Alexander, describes him as a simple, quiet and modest man,⁴ his biographer Brisbane finds his appearance, though not his behaviour, somehow affected, similar to the manner of Byron or that of Keats.⁵ Brisbane was one of the most intimate of Smith's friends, so that his figure very likely lies behind Walter's confidant and bosom friend in the long poem *A Life Drama*, where the description of their wanderings and meditations, either in the country or in the city, is the poetic version of the excursions through the Highlands they made together from 1848, thus following the footsteps of Macpherson, Scott, and Hogg. Yet it was as tourist rather than as antiquarian or as collector of Highland cultural remains that Smith visited Celtic Scotland, since his mould and mental frame belonged to the Anglo-Scottish world-view, and he was not interested in nor much fascinated by a romanticised or sentimentalised Highland past and culture; on the contrary, he was very critical of that popular but flawed tradition.

Though bred and grown up within a Scottish family setting, evangelical in religion and of rural origins, one must search for a long time before finding in Smith's poetic and prose works aspects which can be described as typically Scottish, apart from the recurrent Kailyard-like description of the village and its rural community as symbols of a vanished, nostalgically revisited past. In his review of the 1853 edition of Smith's *Poems*, E. S. Dallas points out that Smith very rarely depicts or refers

³ Brisbane, p. 18.

⁴ See 'Memoir', in *Last Leaves. Sketches and Criticisms, with a Memoir by Patrick Proctor Alexander*, ed. by Patrick Proctor Alexander (Edinburgh: William P. Nimmo, 1868), pp. v-cxxiii (p. x).

⁵ Brisbane, p.35.

directly to Scottish scenery, or Scottish habits, nor does he reveal any trace of Scottish patriotic and national feeling, and even in those sporadic cases when this does occur, the representation is given by means of English characters' view of it.⁶ Dallas is certainly not unbiased and objective when he asserts that Smith's 'allegiance to the Rose rather than to the Thistle [...] is significant of that gradual identification of Scotland with England intellectually, which has been so long in following the political and commercial union of the two countries' (p. 341), but, on the other hand, his statement explains the position of several Scottish writers contemporary to Smith.

Like the poetry of David Gray and James Thomson, Alexander Smith's works are the expression of the Anglicising tendency of the nineteenth century, which is the continuation of an attitude and a frame of mind already occurring during the previous century. They adopted English as poetic medium, both because their works meant to reach a larger audience than the exclusively Scots-speaking one, and because their existential circumstances and experiences led them to loosen the links with their native soil and get in touch with a wider literary context -- either the cosmopolitan, culturally heterogeneous world of Edinburgh or the alien intellectual establishment of London. As Richard Cronin rightly pointed out, Alexander Smith's poetry is one of 'displacement'.⁷

The Victorian period in Scotland is generally characterised by the dominance of the English language. In a society which saw the increasing world power of England and the consequent universalisation of its cultural, political and economic components, the present and the future appeared as destined to carry its linguistic stamp; Scottish linguistic forms and traditions, on the other hand, were more and more relegated to the past, Scots being considered the language of childhood, to be replaced by English, the language of adulthood. In the essay 'The Minister-Painter' included in *Last Leaves*, Smith unveils his own subconscious desire to be considered a British rather than a Scottish writer, and in the words 'Scotland has overflowed its boundaries, and it has no longer a separate existence in thought or geography', we

⁶ E. S. Dallas, 'Review of *Poems. By Alexander Smith. London, 1853*', *North British Review*, 19 (1853), 330-344 (pp. 339-340).

can hardly perceive any nostalgic sense of loss, but we can recognise a sense of acceptance confirmed by his statement that 'Scotland and England have melted into each other and become Britain'⁸ -- this anticipates John Davidson's embracing of the notion of Britishness.

Before giving illustrations of Smith's poetic skill by examining some of his poems, it is necessary to spend a few words on, and re-assess, the relationship he established with the 'Spasmodic School'. Smith himself mentions the term 'Spasmodist' in his essay on Sydney Dobell, one of the main exponents of the school.⁹ One of the most curious aspects of this essay is that he never speaks of himself as another of its members, and the second most curious thing is that here he appears to criticise what is more overtly 'spasmodic' in Dobell, so that his own ideas seem to divert from the basic principles of the ill-fated school.¹⁰ Proctor Alexander does not give us the exact date of publication of the essay, but he says that it was 'the very last thing he wrote',¹¹ and thus it can be inferred that, by that time, Smith had developed and matured different ideas about the essence of poetry from those he professed in *A Life Drama*, the poem which, together with Philip James Bailey's *Festus* (1839) and Dobell's *Balder* (1853), gave William Edmondstone Aytoun the motive and inspiration to write the mock-parody of *Firmilian* (1854). Furthermore, Gilfillan, the first scholar who supported Smith in his early literary attempts, stopped showing him approval and providing aid when Smith turned to a more realistic kind of poetry and to prose.¹²

Among the various definitions and interpretations of 'Spasmodic poetry', I find P. Alexander's version particularly illuminating, because first of all, it warns us

⁷ Richard Cronin, 'Alexander Smith and the Poetry of Displacement', *Victorian Poetry*, 28 (1990), 129-145.

⁸ Alexander Smith, 'The Minister-Painter', in *Last Leaves. Sketches and Criticisms*, pp. 140-170 (pp. 142-3).

⁹ See Smith, 'Sydney Dobell', in *Last Leaves*, pp. 171-209.

¹⁰ Whenever the term 'spasmodic' refers to the ill-famed School, it is capitalised, whereas I have kept to the lower case 's' when the epithet is used in its generic meaning of 'characterised by irregular changes and rapid mood swings'.

¹¹ P. Proctor Alexander, 'Memoir' prefaced to *Last Leaves*, p. cxxii.

¹² See Weinstein, p. 88.

against the dangerous and misleading effects that such nicknames can generally produce, and secondly, it makes a distinction between good and bad 'Spasmodic' poems, as we can, for instance, discern valuable Kailyard verse among much that is worthless. If Carlyle used the same adjective to describe the eccentricity of Byron's poetry, surely there must be a way of applying it with a favourable significance, like that which Alexander suggests in defining this kind of poetry as

the Poetry of unrest and despair; of irregular struggle; of baffled effort, wild, bewildered, and mistaken -- the Poetry, in one word, of Scepticism, not cool in the intellect, as Hume's, but raging, like mutiny of passion in the blood, with the whole perverted might of the heart and the moral emotions.' (p. lxvi)

Alexander then goes on to show that the epithet can be applied also to the characters of Hamlet and Faust, as both of them are persistently obsessed by lingering doubts and cannot subdue their tormenting passions to the command of the intellect. This means admitting the persistence of a Romantic element in the poetry of some Victorians; in particular, the perpetual oscillations of moral concepts, the tendency to assert a value and refute it immediately afterwards by acknowledging the potential truth of its opposite, and hence the quick shifting from one mood to another beyond any rational control. Facing a world affected by change and flux, many Victorian writers assumed an ironic and sceptical attitude to confront the contradictions and paradoxes of the world. The critic Clyde de Loache Ryals points out that this kind of irony represents a link between Romantic and Victorian writers, their common response to a world governed by Heraclitus's principle of '*pantha rei*'.¹³

It is in this sense that the poetry of the Spasmodic school, with the idea of an intermittent, ever-changing, protean life at its core, can be best identified, and if we add to this a consideration of the social origins of some of the school's practitioners, we may be able to understand why the school was attacked so fervently by the literary

¹³ Clyde de Loache Ryals, *A World of Possibilities: Romantic Irony in Victorian Literature* (Ohio State University Press, 1990), *passim*.

establishment as a cultural force threatening its stability. Alexander Smith worked as a mechanic for several years, Dobell's father was a wine-merchant. The Spasmodics' poetry did not convey a picture of psychological and social steadiness, but one marked by doubt, scepticism, insecurity. Those who wanted the Victorian system of values to be unshaken and undisturbed saw these aspects as dangerous sources of turmoil. Yet there is of course a different version of the whole story -- that of the Spasmodic school seen as snobbish and affected, as an escapist form of writing, in that it prefers the representation of isolated, egotistic individuals to the picture of social aspects, and because it often depicts the beauties of an unrealistic pastoral setting instead of offering a concrete, truthful image of the contemporary world. On the literal, superficial level, there is truth in these charges, but if one looks further, there are also other things expressed in these verses, which is the reason why Arthur Clough favoured Smith's instead of Arnold's poetry in his 1853 review of *A Life Drama* in *The North American Review*.

The message that Clough read in Smith's poems in 1853 is probably the same we read today, one which betrays the dualistic essence of the Victorian frame of mind, with its conflicts between conformity and heterodoxy, materialism and idealism, mechanicism and organicism, to name only a few. This is the central argument of the essays collected in *Dreamthorp* -- the expression and representation of the contradictory and dialectic nature, of the 'antysyzygy', which undermines the generally accepted view of the Victorian age as a period of economic, political and cultural success. Smith's description of the English village is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is a condensed picture of the positive values, habits, and beliefs of a community-based kind of life, in opposition to the individualistic, estranged existence in a city; on the other hand, there is a morbid, Kailyard element in its representation, invested with a negative overtone, as if the writer wanted to say that even the few still existing villages had a different appearance from that they used to have in the past. Everything changes, everything flows, according to Smith, so that the village inhabitants' obstinacy in respecting certain stern rules imposed by their Protestant creed takes on an antiquated flavour. And here is Smith commenting on their austere habits:

In an ungainly building, filled with hard, gaunt pews, without an organ, without a touch of colour in the windows, with nothing to stir the imagination or the devotional sense, the simple people worship. On Sunday, they are put upon a diet of spiritual bread-and-water. Personally, I should desire more generous food.¹⁴

From the biographical summary, Smith emerges as a writer who experimented in a range of literary forms. The question that arises is: was he naturally inclined to diverse literary experimentation or did he shift from one genre to the other because of external, practical reasons? Until 1861 his interests seem to lie in the direction of poetic composition, but this year represents a turning point in his career, away from poetry and towards prose, both in the form of contributions to periodicals and as independent essay and fiction writing. Was it maybe the accusation of plagiarism after the appearance of *Edwin of Deira* in 1861 which convinced him to move away from the intricate and demanding world of poetic production, and enter the more sympathetic, open realm of prose writing? Aytoun himself, who was at least partly responsible for the gibing description of Smith as one of the 'Spasmodists', prompted him to turn his attention away from the poetic towards prose composition. Without denying Smith's merits as essayist -- indeed some of his essays are extremely fascinating and entertaining -- I believe that he switched to the essay form because of the public hostility to his poetry. It was the pressure of the 'Spasmodic' label, plus the endless accusations of plagiarism levelled against him that made him lose his enthusiasm for poetry, yielding to the hostility of the external world. Not even the non-Spasmodic *City Poems* freed him of the unwanted label. If Smith had been more stubborn and more self-confident as an artist, he would have undoubtedly offered his readers further reasons to convince them of his poetic talent. One needs only to look at a beautiful poem like 'Spring Chanson', which, together with the fragment 'Edinburgh', constitute the only verse creation of his last years, to realise that

¹⁴ 'Dreamthorp', in *Dreamthorp* (London: Andrew Melrose, 1906), pp. 1-19 (p. 18).

Alexander Smith deserves more than appearing in collections of Scottish minor poets. In including him in his volume thus entitled, though, William Sharp certainly intended not to diminish but to highlight Smith's too often neglected genius.¹⁵

The essayist and the poet very often shake hands in the case of Smith: certain thematic aspects which he tackles in his poetry acquire a particular significance if held in relation with the ideas expressed in his prose. The importance and value of specific poetic images are often enhanced by confronting them with similar representations in his essays. Moreover, his prose being a later achievement than his poetry, it offers us several clues to delineate and analyse his literary and moral development, and to realise that *A Life Drama* is not his *magnum opus*, but simply represents his literary début. His biographer was thus right when he observed that this work 'is so unlike his other works, unlike the man himself, and reflects his own spirit less than anything else that he has written'.¹⁶ It is only after he decided to loosen his link with the Spasmodic school, and to turn to a separate literary path that he managed to give voice to his real self -- a complex, often undecided identity -- both in his poetry and in his prose. From the *City Poems* onwards, the parallels between the two forms become more and more discernible; the poet and the essayist continued to operate simultaneously but along different lines for several years, until the essayist took on the role of the poet almost totally, which explains the poetic style of many prose pieces both in *Dreamthorp* and in *Last Leaves*. Several themes and images recur both in his poetic and prose compositions, and together they convey the image of a deeply meditative writer, who, nevertheless, never lingers or broods upon abstract thoughts devoid of circumstantial meaning. On the contrary, in his more mature works, his reflections reveal a profound sensitivity, his emotions are under control, and his moods are not overtly spasmodic. In short, the man lurking behind the verses of *City Poems*, the later poems, and the essays is very different from the hero of *A Life Drama*.

¹⁵ I refer to the volume *Scottish Minor Poets*, ed. by William Sharp (London: The Canterbury Poets, 1891).

¹⁶ Brisbane, p. 146.

One of the themes which recurs most frequently both in his essays and poems concerns Smith's problematic and ambiguous response to the social and cultural changes of his time, which had sprung from technological progress and industrialisation. If there are occasions in which he underlines the disadvantages and the evil consequences brought about by the advance of technology, there are also other occasions when he seems to be able to find ways of coping with the new life and the new aspects -- both physical and moral -- that progress has produced. The beginning of 'A Boy's Poem', 'An Evening at Home', and the essay 'Winter' in *Last Leaves* offer examples of the former attitude; 'Glasgow' and the closing scene of 'Squire Maurice' substantiate the latter position. In many cases, the image of a rural setting or of a country village either looks like a fancied vision or it belongs to the memory of the narrator, as occurs in 'Horton', for instance. Only in these cases does the poet reveal a romantic nostalgia for the simple, natural life of the old village communities, and a Wordsworthian longing for the beauty and the sublime which the poet is able to perceive in the simple, even ordinary aspects of life, by means of his acute sensitivity. Connected with this theme is the contrasting pair of 'outside and inside', the best instance of which occurs in the essay 'Christmas' in *Dreamthorp*, and is indirectly alluded to also in 'An Evening at Home', his 'lonely room' representing a shelter against the rainy, hostile atmosphere outside.¹⁷ In a situation like this, the poet is isolated from the social context, and apparently enjoys his solitude, although there is an ironical element in his misanthropic behaviour, a sense of frustration which he does not admit in a straightforward way until he depicts his changed attitude in the poem significantly entitled 'The Change', the last poem in *City Poems*. In the 'Dreamthorp' essay the poet's behaviour towards his fellow creatures undergoes a gradual change too: at the beginning he appears to be a man content to live in the cosy isolation of his house, which is located at a certain distance from the village, but gradually we see other people entering his previously undisturbed privacy, like the doctor and the minister in the essay 'Books and Gardens' (*Dreamthorp*),¹⁸ and the

¹⁷ 'An Evening at Home', in *Poems by Alexander Smith* (London: David Bogue, 1853), pp. 205-218 (p. 205).

¹⁸ 'Books and Gardens', in *Dreamthorp*, pp. 246-267.

volume ends with an essay which speaks exclusively about other people, in particular the category of artists, which shows that the poet has finally come out of his shell and abandoned his solipsistic isolation.

The recognition of the important role that the sphere of personal relationships plays in human life marks also an essential move away from the self-centred, egotistic behaviour of Walter, the protagonist of *A Life Drama*, who partly mirrors the poet's young aspirations and ambitions. His proneness to egocentricity, his individualistic tendencies are reminiscent both of the titanic pre-Nietzschean egotism of the Romantics and of the secluded, aloof existence of the heroes of the Spasmodic school. In the essays 'Men of Letters' and 'On Vagabonds' (*Dreamthorp*), Smith points out the eccentricity of the literary and the artistic human type, his predisposition to brood upon things, and, for this reason, to look for a solitary space, distanced from social and public affairs. Similarly, the question of the egotism of the man of letters crops up in the essay 'Of the Importance of a Man to Himself', also included in *Dreamthorp*, but this time the emphasis is put on a particular kind of egotism, one which does not entail self-praise and vainglory, but corresponds to a self-esteem that makes our relationships with other human beings easier. In *City Poems*, Smith does not refrain completely from speaking about himself, yet he allows many other figures to enter the narrative, and simultaneously focuses on aspects which involve the reader much more than a study of an egotistical individuality. The concern with the historical context in *Edwin of Deira* is another hint at the development of a more externalised moral outlook.

Despite some critics' negative judgement of *Edwin of Deira* because of its being 'remote from 19-Century Scotland [...] and from Smith's own life',¹⁹ which one may or may not agree with, the poet's interest in Christian history and legend is an important element to take into consideration -- in addition to the idea of Britishness and Scotland's inclusion therein, which is central to the poem. The already mentioned poem 'An Evening at Home' includes a tale anticipating the subject-matter of the epic poem, and indeed religion and religious meditations are central themes in the work of

¹⁹ Mary Jane W. Scott, 'Alexander Smith: Poet of Victorian Scotland', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 14 (1979), 98-111 (p. 107).

Alexander Smith. Doubtless, he was influenced by the Evangelical ambience of his family milieu, with its emphasis on the spiritual transformation of the individual by conversion and a Christian life based on the idea of duty, its stress on the importance of personal experience, and of the awareness of human limits. Yet his submission to and observance of the rigorous moral rules imposed by the creed became more and more problematic as he developed his own personal ideas on human ethics. As far as the understanding and treatment of metaphysical aspects are concerned, he almost came to an agnostic position, shared by many Victorians, such as Herbert Spencer, Leslie Stephen, and of course Darwin, to name only a few. From essays such as 'A Shelf in My Bookcase' (*Dreamthorp*) and 'Sydney Dobell' (*Last Leaves*), we know that Smith was not much interested in reading the metaphysical poets; Milton's works do not stand in his favourite bookshelf, and what he particularly dislikes in his friend Dobell is the metaphysical pretentiousness of his writing, which is full of 'ingenious theories, whimsies, and conceits', but in which 'he is beyond the sympathies of his readers'.²⁰ If there are spiritual themes at all in Smith's poetry, they are manifested as the poet's consciousness of the presence of a divine essence in nature, but are far from any strict philosophical definition or logical expression.

In his 'Memoir' of Smith, Proctor Alexander draws attention to his non-fanatical religious belief (p. cvi), an opinion ratified by several passages in *Dreamthorp* and in *Last Leaves*. In his special bookshelf, the poet keeps a volume of German hymns, in which he has found the idea of religion which better suits his spiritual concepts; the author of these hymns, he says, professed a religion which was not 'a Sunday matter only, it had its place in week-days as well', and he adds that 'a healthy human cheerfulness pervades many of them, and this is surely as it ought to be'.²¹ In other words, against the gloomy, excessively austere mien of some forms of Protestant religion, he proposes a religious belief which does not forbid men to enjoy their lives, or to devote themselves to some kind of artistic expression, if they wish, like the eponymous minister-painter of the essay in *Last Leaves*. Smith's poetry will offer further evidence of this, of his conviction that there is a spiritual as well as a

²⁰ 'Sydney Dobell', pp. 186, 187.

²¹ 'A Shelf in My Bookcase', in *Dreamthorp*, pp. 178-199 (p. 186).

comic side in human life and in nature, and that it is man's duty to find a balance between the higher and lower realms of human experience.

The failure in achieving this was one of the main accusations that contemporary critics addressed to the Spasmodic school. It is indeed undeniable that the hero of *A Life Drama* often confuses the two components, or bathetically passes from deeply meditative moments to instinctive, uncontrollable reactions, giving rise to a contrast which annoys rather than amuses the reader. Nevertheless, there are many other cases in Smith's poetry and prose in which the *chiaroscuro*, shadowy appearance of life is properly conveyed, as in his meditations on death. When he was still very young he witnessed his sister's death and among his early readings there were Leigh Hunt's essay 'Deaths of Little Children' and Longfellow's 'Footsteps of Angels', which suggests that the thought of death haunted him from his childhood. Growing up he partly learnt to dominate this fear, sustained by his sincere religious belief, although he very humanly admitted that men cannot get rid of it completely, for the same reason men cannot put aside anxieties or dilemmas until they have found solutions to them. The people in 'A Lark's Flight' (*Dreamthorp*) who go to witness an execution symbolise every man's desire to know something about the inscrutable, the transcendental, to grasp some secret apprehension of death from the faces of the condemned.

A series of mental associations between death and other kinds of experience relates Smith's poetry to the European literary context. Death bears a fascination comparable to that of the ending of the day, of a sunset, or of twilight, and it highlights also the beauty of life by contrast, for, as Smith tells us, 'it is on the tapestry of a dim ground that the figures come in out the boldest relief and the brightest colour'.²² One can hear echoes of several Romantic poets here, and on reading 'On Death and the Fear of Death' (*Dreamthorp*) one can hear Giacomo Leopardi's *Zibaldone* (1821-1823), his collection of miscellaneous thoughts and reflections. Smith's 'it is characteristic of pleasure that we can never recognise it to be pleasure till after it is gone' or '[...] our happiness, such as in its degree it has been,

²² 'On Death and the Fear of Dying', in *Dreamthorp*, pp. 44-62 (p. 53).

lives in memory'²³ recalls Leopardi's meditation on the human impossibility to enjoy life in the present, and thus his longing for 'dead' things, that is, things which no longer exist physically but in our memory. A similar pondering on death and the dead characterises poems such as 'Horton', where death is the ubiquitous topic, since its hero is a dead man, and 'A Boy's Poem', in which death is called 'a greater poet far than Love'.²⁴ What essentially distinguishes Smith from Leopardi is that whereas the Italian poet's cosmic pessimism was the extreme consequence of his gradual loss of faith, Smith's sense of death and existential decay was constantly supported by his strong religious belief. If there are some traces of pessimism in Smith's works, they are anyway counterbalanced by his perception and expression of the joy that life is potentially full of, so that we are continuously reminded of nature's ambivalence: 'Joy is continually worked on sorrow, sorrow on joy; riot is framed in peace, peace in riot'.²⁵

In many respects Smith's works fit into the Romantic tradition. The theme of death and decay itself recurs in both Romantic and classical poetry, beside the conception of life as a continuous flux, perpetually subject to change, and always flowing to the same final destination. Facing such a vision of reality, human struggles would appear useless, the quest for fame an idle, worthless strain; in fact, ideas such as apathy, spleen, or passive stoicism never occur in Smith's works, as the message he intends to convey is a positive one, aiming at enhancing our awareness of the limits which constrain human nature and, simultaneously, our capacity to cope with this truth, without any loss of the moral fortitude necessary not to succumb. In this, he distances himself from the pessimistic philosophy of some of his contemporaries; despite its stoic component, the message which Thomson sends in *The City of Dreadful Night* is, for instance, completely different. As for the question of literary fame, Smith was attacked from all sides because of its apparent glorification in *A Life Drama*. In fact, the mythological, almost pagan air surrounding Fame in the poem should have uncovered the irony it was concealing.

²³ Ibid., p. 57.

²⁴ 'A Boy's Poem', in *City Poems* (Cambridge: Macmillan & Co., 1857), pp. 105-183 (p. 112).

²⁵ 'A Lark's Flight', in *Dreamthorp*, pp. 89-107 (p. 104).

In later poems and in the essays, Smith provides us with a more explicit view of literary success, as in 'On the Writing of Essays' (*Dreamthorp*), where he says that 'fame is but an inscription on a grave, and glory the melancholy blazon on a coffin lid'.²⁶ This new position can be seen as a resentful reaction to the critics' disfavour towards his works after *A Life Drama*, and certainly contrasts with his early yielding to the literary fashion of Promethean, or Ulysses-like figures descending from the Byronic hero. In *City Poems* Smith is writing for himself, turning away from the appealing eyes of Fame and her clichéd themes, in the attempt to find the poetic 'beneath the plumes of factory or furnace smoke',²⁷ as Ebenezer Elliott did before him.

Two other themes in Smith's works are reminiscent of the poetic production of the first half of the century: love and the phenomenon of dreams. The former appears under different forms, from simple friendship, as in 'A Boy's Poem', to platonic and passionate love, as again in 'A Boy's Poem', in 'Squire Maurice', and in *A Life Drama*. The visionary theme and the representation of dreams characterise both 'Horton' and 'A Boy's Poem', the protagonists of which undergo an imaginary journey to the underground world. These episodes establish the link between Smith's poetry and a long tradition, both Scottish and English, of visionary poetry.

²⁶ 'On the Writing of Essays', in *Dreamthorp*, pp. 20-43 (p. 20).

²⁷ 'A Shelf in My Bookcase', p. 199.

PART II

The Man and the Poet.

i. The 'Spasmodic' years: *A Life Drama* (1852)

The contemporary criticisms of Smith's *A Life Drama* were essentially divided into two opposing parties: on the one hand, there were those who praised the poem as a work of genius and the achievement of a precocious literary talent; on the other, there were Smith's detractors, who could not detect any originality in the poem, and accused its author of plagiarising his most famous predecessors. That Smith was the victim of an anxiety of influence is unquestionable, yet when on reading Smith's essays, one realises that he was far from unconscious of the problematics of literary models. In 'Books and Gardens', for instance, he comes to the conclusion that it is sometimes better to be a spectator than an actor on the world stage, especially in an age like his, when any personal attempt always ends up being compared with and set against the work of more illustrious men -- he mentions Tennyson as the leading figure among them. Moreover, in 'Sydney Dobell' (*Last Leaves*) he conceives a notion of originality which sounds quite convincing, even though it may sound as a self-defence against the charge of plagiarism:

[...] not infrequently the features of an ancestor recur in a descendant today. Absolute originality, even were it possible, would be of no effect. [...] Originality is not a thing which a man can put on like a cloak to masquerade in. It is [...] the pure outcome of his personality [...] that which is to himself special and peculiar, like the tone of his voice and the play of his features [...].²⁸

²⁸ 'Sydney Dobell', pp. 176-7.

Hence the emphasis he put on style rather than content as the more subjective element of the two, the stamp of the writer's individuality on his work, or, as he says, 'a secret window through which we can look in on the writer'.²⁹

The publication of *A Life Drama* in book form at the end of 1852, after being serialised over the year in a London literary journal, gave rise to numerous literary debates and contrasting critical judgements. Between the two extremes mentioned, there stood some who expressed mixed opinions about the poem, and these are often the most illuminating. Significant examples are provided by the letters of two of the most representative poets of the age: Arthur Clough and Matthew Arnold. They were indeed affected by Smith's work probably more than critics generally think. Clough wrote a review of both Smith's and Arnold's poems in *The North American Review* in which he praised *A Life Drama*, despite its stylistic flaws, such as the lack of a consistent tone, its loose structure, and an abundance of clichéd metaphors.³⁰ Nonetheless, Clough was obviously undecided in his judgement of the poem, as he shows in his letters to Blanche Smith, his fiancée. In one of them, he expresses a favourable opinion concerning it: 'Do you know, dear, I am very much taken with Alexander Smith's Life-drama -- it is really what I have had in my own mind [...]'.³¹ In a later letter he addresses her in these terms: 'You may read Alexander Smith [...] if you like; the first half isn't good but the last is, I think [...]'. The next time he wrote to her: 'If you haven't read Alexander Smith don't trouble yourself; 'tis hardly worth the while [...]'. And finally: 'I am rather sorry I recommended Master Alexander Smith to you'.³² Equally interesting is what Arnold tells Clough in a letter dated 1 May 1853:

As to Alexander Smith I have not read him -- I shrink from what is so intensely immature -- but I think the extracts I have seen most remarkable -- and I think at the same time that he will not go far.

²⁹ 'Literary Work', in *Last Leaves*, pp. 126-139 (p. 131).

³⁰ See 'Recent English Poetry', *North American Review*, 77. 160 (1853), 1-11. The review appeared anonymously.

³¹ See Robindra Kumar Biswas, *Arthur Hugh Clough: Towards a Reconsideration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 197.

[...] This kind does not go far: it dies like Keats or loses itself like Browning.³³

Arnold could not favour a poetry which did not reflect his own poetic theory, and which seemed to deny constantly what he was asserting in those years, that is, that poetry must rest on a solid, compact composition, and not result from a loose assemblage of different parts. The basic precepts of the Spasmodic school amounted to the exact opposite.

Before appearing in its definitive form, the poem underwent a process of elaboration. In 1851 Gilfillan published in *The Eclectic Review* a review of a poem of Alexander Smith in manuscript form. The poem's title is *A Life Fragment*, and, from what the reviewer and Smith's biographer say, it can definitely be considered as the first draft of *A Life Drama*.³⁴ The general 'plot', the literary echoes, the use of imagery, the name of the protagonist are the same, but the main similarity is that both pieces lack what Arnold conceived as one of the basic requirements of poetry, that it 'must press forwards to the whole' (Gilfillan, p. 124). 'A Life Drama' very often conveys the impression that the poet composed it in different moments, then made use of the separate pieces and joined them together. The proof consists in a letter he wrote to his friend and biographer Brisbane, in which he mentions a lyric that he wrote previous to the long poem and that was then inserted into it:

My dear T____,

I hereby send you a poem, a phantom of heart and brain, composed very rapidly, in a most diabolical mood, when I might have said, regarding my inner man,

'Hell is empty

And all the devils are here'

³² Ibid, pp. 197-198.

³³ *The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. by Howard Foster Lowry (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 136.

³⁴ George Gilfillan., 'Recent Poetry', *Eclectic Review*, 30 (1851), 458-462. See also Brisbane, pp. 130-131.

[...] It is not very long. The rhymes may be bad, but [...] it was writ
in two hours.³⁵

The lyric referred to describes an angelic child in a garden, an episode which Smith incorporated in Scene VI of *A Life Drama*.

Such a term as 'plot' is not very appropriate for a poem the interest of which lies in its style and imagery rather than in its content, although there is the underlying story of the moral development of the hero, of the successive stages he has to undertake before reaching a complete self-awareness and a knowledge of the reasons for his existence. Thus what we have is a pseudo-*Bildungsroman* in verse, in which the hero's formation does not occur by means of factual, external events, but is interiorised entirely within his consciousness. Altogether the poem has a dramatic form consisting of twelve scenes: the opening and the closing scenes represent the beginning and the outcome of Walter's spiritual development, from his high, titanic ambitions to the humble acceptance of his limitations. The chief aspiration of the protagonist is revealed from the very start: Walter dreams of becoming a famous poet, but he also knows that Fame, represented as a sort of mythological Sphinx, is something hardly attainable. Hence his frustrations, his 'tears of impotence',³⁶ which derive from the discrepancy between his desires and his actual abilities. In his solitary antique room, with his head bent over his manuscript: this is how Walter is introduced in the first scene of the poem, already giving us evidence of his solipsistic inclination.

There is a sudden shift from the first to the second scene: the protagonist is no longer now in his secluded room within a suffocating town, but in the open space of a forest. The Romantic and Victorian contrasting pair of city and country life is here evoked, and Walter represents the meditative man who now and then needs to escape from the 'thousand-streeted and smoke-smothered town' (p. 9), and seeks refuge in nature. Like Keats's 'Endymion', Walter is sleeping when an Amazon-like woman arrives at the spot where he is lying, although the representation is so dream-like, so

³⁵ Quoted in Brisbane, p. 73.

³⁶ Alexander Smith, 'A Life Drama', in *Poems by Alexander Smith*, pp. 1-202 (p. 3). Further references to the poem are indicated internally by page number.

suffused that, at this early stage of the poem, we may even think that she appeared in his sleep. The sense of confusion, and almost of *mise en abîme* is enhanced by the introduction of other characters, not directly into the main narrative, but into the lady's and the hero's speeches: the woman sings about a poet who died for love; Walter recites the song of a bard whose destiny resembles that of Smith himself, being born in a rural region and obliged to leave it and move to a city. At the same time, one cannot doubt that the bard is, in fact, Walter's poetic *persona* or his alter-ego, since the presence of such a multiple identity is not an infrequent device in Victorian Scottish poetry. What is more important, anyway, is that this figure and his song anticipate one of the central themes of Smith's *City Poems*, that is, the possibility to perceive love and beauty among the ugly aspects of the city. Here are his meaningful verses:

Once I saw a blissful harvest-moon, but
not through forest leaves;
'Twas not whitening o'er a country,
costly with the piled sheaves;
Rose not o'er the am'rous ocean, trembling
round his happy isles;
It came circling large and queenly o'er yon
roof of smoky tiles,
And I saw it with such feeling, joy in
blood, in heart, in brain,
I would give to call the affluence of that
moment back again,
Europe, with her cities, rivers, hills of prey,
sheep-sprinkled downs, ___' (p. 29)

The second scene ends with Walter revealing to the lady his intention to write a poem on the history of mankind. His words offer also a hint of his sincere religious faith.

In the third scene, Walter is the characteristic Spasmodic hero, with his sentimentalism, his dramatic monologues, his protracted brooding on the subject of his future poem. Particularly in this episode, Smith distances himself from his hero; the poet never did compose the pastoral poem his hero would like to write, neither did he ever express this intention. Walter is looking for a poetic form which will allow him to talk about a reality different from that of the 'swelterers in towns', about an age opposed to the present one, an age of 'by-gone minstrels' (p. 43). Alexander Smith did not go on to produce escapist literature, whereas *A Life Drama* itself contains several clues to the kind of writing he would achieve with *City Poems*, concerned with and not removed from the pros and cons of contemporary society, with man's lot within the world of the ever-changing.

Love and devotion to love might have represented for Walter an alternative to poetry, but his Lady is promised to another man. This is the second source of his frustrations after the impotency of his writing ambitions, and once again he tries to give vent to them by fleeing from the city and plunging into the rural setting, where he can establish contacts with simple people. This occurs in scene V; the poet is now surrounded by peasants and their children, immersed in an idyllic atmosphere, pervaded by an air of primitivism and paganism. Despite his simplicity, the peasant engages in metaphysical conversations with Walter. Life, death and the human lot are the subjects of their talk, in relation to which they assume two opposite positions symbolising two of the general Victorian responses to the question of religious belief and unbelief. Walter's reliance on a better life after death makes him prefer to die instead of enduring an existence of disappointments and delusions; the vision of life is for him more purgatory than that of death. Contrariwise, the peasant embodies a philosophy of life against the *contemptus mundi* idea, the philosophy of 'carpe diem', which puts life before death, and yet simultaneously he personifies the spiritual doubt and scepticism of many Victorians, as when he says: 'Black is this world, but blacker is the next;/ There is no rest for any living soul' (p. 89).

Back in London, Walter turns to the fictional world of books again, and he starts reading from a manuscript. Nothing tells us that it comes from his own pen, except the fact that it seems to allude vaguely to his unfortunate love experience. The

reader falls again into a narrative maze; the speaking voice in the manuscript is that of an old man -- is he the *persona* of Walter in his old age? -- who remembers his past life in England, before his departure for India. There his life used to be delighted by the presence of a Kilmeny-like child, 'too fair for earth' (p. 101), whom he found dead at his return -- this figure foreshadows Matilda, the girl loved by James Thomson who was struck by untimely death, and who to his eyes represented religious faith. If it were not for Walter's words, one would think that the story is an allegory of the death of innocence provoked by the imperialistic, materialistic interests of contemporary society -- in a sense also an allegory of old Scotland which is disappearing and causes the writers to look at the outside world and yield to imperialistic duties. Yet he says:

[...] This poor rhyme
Is but an adumbration of my life,
My misery tricked out in a quaint disguise.
Oh, it did happen on a summer day,
When I was playing unawares with flowers,
That happiness shot past me like a planet,
And I was barren left! (p. 102),

which suggests a different metaphorical representation: the child might symbolise the happiness of love, the old man before his departure would then stand for Walter still enjoying his pastoral romance with the lady, while the man at his return and the dead child personify the defeated hero and the end of his happiness.

In Scene VI a new character is introduced: Walter's friend Edward, whose personality contrasts with the protagonist's ideas and attitudes. Walter's heart is described by him as 'an eager shaking star', and to his pursuit of literary fame, Edward opposes the image of the genuinely great poets who are those that 'Rest in the knowledge of their own deserts,/ Nor seek the confirmation of the world' (p. 109). Edward is not a dreamer, he lives in the present and not in reveries about far-off pastoral worlds, yet he does not identify with the utilitarianism and positivism of the

age either. Conversely, he is extremely critical of such values and condemns industrialisation for bringing about human alienation. The figure of Edward plays two important roles in the poem. It both provides Smith with a medium to introduce themes which foreshadow his future works, and also acts as Walter's antagonistic alter-ego, as if it were the visible, physical shape of his inner double, whose voice always tries to restrain his sentimental and spasmodic outpourings. An example is Edward's sceptical question in scene VII, 'What care the stars for us?' (p. 121), which follows Walter's metaphysical enquires on the nature and spirit of the universe.

Further characters are introduced in scene VIII, which describes the protagonist and his friend visiting a couple of acquaintances in Bedfordshire. It is on this occasion that Walter meets Violet, whom he loves after his first glimpse of her. The most beautiful moment of the scene, which is also one of the best passages of the whole poem, is when the various characters are all gathered inside a manor, and, in order to spend the time profitably, decide to recite poems and songs.³⁷ Walter's tale is about someone like himself: a Werther-like youth inclined to melancholy, solitary brooding, and searching companionship not among other men but in books, one who has his same ambition 'To set this Age to music' (p. 105) yet is killed by his own Promethean, unrealisable aspirations. Edward's dislike of the young man is another indication of his unsympathetic attitude towards Walter's morbid ideas. On the other hand, Arthur, their English friend, sings a song which reflects the English perception of Scottish manners and culture, characterised by hackneyed images such as the bagpipe, the purple heather, whisky, and deer-hunting. At the time, various English writers depicted the Highland scenery in conventional terms, as Clough does in *The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich* (1848). A satirical element can be devised in this stereotypical representation of the Highlands, which becomes more apparent in Smith's *A Summer in Skye* (1865).

³⁷ There is a Chaucerian element in this choice, which does not come as a surprise, since Smith admired Chaucer, and wrote an entire essay on him. See 'Geoffrey Chaucer', in *Dreamthorp*, pp. 200-233.

The dialogues between Walter and Violet include some of the more pleasurable sections of the poem. An example is the passage in which Walter explains to Violet why he loves the starlit sky over the city:

I'd grow an Atheist in these towns of trade,
 Were't not for stars. The smoke puts heaven out;
 I meet sin-bloated faces in the streets,
 [...] I hear wild oaths,
 [...]
 I see no trace of God, till in the night,
 [...]
 He doth reveal himself to me in heaven.
 My heart swells to Him as the sea to the moon;
 Therefore it is I love the midnight stars. (pp. 154-155)

Other extracts would equally show that 'A Life Drama' presents several depictions of city prospects, which add greatly to the value of the poem. In his review of the 1853 edition of Smith's poems Clough declared that they 'have something substantive and life-like, immediate and first hand, about them', and 'A Life Drama' was not excepted from this judgement.³⁸

Violet becomes Walter's confidante, the one to whom he feels free to tell the story of his life, of his experiences and his misadventures. The image of the child in the garden is evoked again in his tale, which suggests that whatever Walter describes and narrates has always some connection with his private existence, and that most of the characters he portrays are his different alter-egos. Violet pays back this closeness by offering him her love, so that the circle of his experiences closes here, with love prevailing once again over his literary ambitions; but this time the choice does not depend on his instincts but is the result of past tests, the conscious choice of human relationships instead of a life pushed to the edge of society and imprisoned in his

³⁸ Clough, 'Recent English Poetry', p. 4.

solipsism. From scene IX to scene X there is a gap of three years. Walter is once again in a gloomy mood, and his motivations are not completely clear. What we come to know is that he seems to feel a sense of guilt towards Violet from the moment he becomes her lover, as if he had broken the veil of innocence and caused the corruption of her pure soul. This preoccupation with sin and evil is obviously one of the central ideas of his Calvinistic upbringing. Walter's downhearted temper is reflected in a series of parallel images related by contrast. The present moment, the city, his mature age, the stream flowing under the town bridge on which he is standing are all set against the past, the country, his adolescence, and the river of his native region. His dejection turns all the things around him into symbols of evil, like the stream gushing under his feet, 'Drawing its filth as doth an evil soul/ Attract all evil things; putrid and black/ It mingles with the clear and stainless sea' (p. 170), or like the beautiful face of Violet herself.

Another three years elapse between scene X and scene XI. The town experience served him to understand where he really belongs and what he really aspires to accomplish. Hence his return to the orchard of his childhood, where he finds the inspiration to write the poem he has always desired to compose, his own 'Life drama'. He has re-acquired enthusiasm and self-confidence -- '[...] O World!/ I have thee in my power, [...]/ Thou shalt not 'scape me, World! I'll make thee weep' (pp. 179-180) -- but they are not long-lasting. From the conversation between Edward and Charles, another friend of his, it can be derived that Walter is again prey to distress and low spirits, despite the success of his poem. It is especially because of these rapid changes of mood that Walter can be considered a typical exemplification of the Spasmodic hero. Charles glimpsed the main causes of his depression during a discussion he had with him; Walter confessed to him that he felt as if he had lost two of the most important things of a man's life -- faith in God and in woman. Earlier on in the poem, he is described as a sort of Aesthete, a bohemian character consecrating his life to Dionysian amusements, while simultaneously distancing himself from Violet. Although he tried to recover this irreplaceable loss by looking for them in the place of his childhood, he could only come back 'with tears' (p. 188), realising the irretrievable nature of past experiences. Yet this is not the end of the poem.

The paradise seems to be finally regained when Violet reaches Walter in the orchard linked with sweet memories of childhood, and she brings with her the poem written by him. In remembering those early days, Walter confesses to Violet that he has always had a moody character:

[...] My happiness
Was flecked with vague and transitory griefs,
[...]
[...]; and through my soul
At intervals a regal pageant passed. (p. 191)

These lines contain one of the clearest definitions of the nature of the spasmodic. The very conclusion of the poem describes the definitive reunion between Walter and Violet, and his determination to devote both his life and his work to her, so that he can fulfil both of his desires. The general movement of the poem is from the individualistic stance of the protagonist to the acceptance of and openness towards the human world.

In 'A Life Drama', there are underlying echoes of other poets, in particular of Keats in the choice and sensuousness of certain images to describe natural scenery. Walter's perception of a specific landscape recalls also Ruskin's principle of the pathetic fallacy, since what is projected to the reader is always filtered through his consciousness rather than emerging as any kind of photographic picture, as I have previously underlined with reference to Walter's description of the city stream. In his later poems, he shows a greater capacity to represent natural prospects independently of his own subjectivity, and to endow them with an autonomous value. Some images and topics recur more frequently than others in the whole poem: the night, either with or without moonlight; the sea and the ships at sea; rain; love, often exemplified by the two figures of Anthony and Cleopatra; friendship; poesy. This repetitiveness, added to the diffuse use of blank verse, confer monotony to the composition as a whole, but now and then the poet manages to produce scenes of original genius which interrupt the tedious uniformity his critics dislike in the poem.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the poem is its Chinese-box structure. 'A Life Drama' is, after all, a poem about the story of its composition, so that, in a sense, Walter is the poetic mirror of Smith, but with his young spasmodic moods magnified to the extreme. But the main difference between the author and his character is that whereas the former experienced geographical and psychological displacement throughout his life, due to his problematic acceptance of Anglicisation, the latter is unquestionably Anglicised. 'A Life Drama' is obviously addressed to a British audience, and the author's choice of the English language and of a style reminiscent of Elizabethan, Romantic and Victorian English writers reflects this intention. Yet, in his subconscious, his Scottishness remains, and there is a whole tradition of Scottish letters behind it that Smith cannot get rid of so easily as he would wish. In trying to do this, he ends up creating what Richard Cronin defined as 'the production of a poet disconnected from the language of his poetry',³⁹ that is, of a poet who, in order to write a poetry which is not merely local, has to be blind and deaf to the actualities surrounding him, and to use, instead of his native, spontaneous idiom, the language and style of books.

Hence Smith's overuse and abuse of metaphors and linguistic embellishments; hence the accusation of plagiarism against him. The protagonist is an English young man from Kent, but, whenever he speaks about his life experiences, we can glimpse aspects belonging to someone else's life, that of the author himself. This means that the conflict between 'Englishness' and 'Scottishness' in Smith's subconscious is always there, perceivable even in a character like Walter, who wants to emulate the Romantic heroes of the English tradition. If many scenes in the poem belong to drawing-room literature, on the other hand, there are also moments in which the poetry is taken outside, but not to the 'clear spring or shady grove, [...] upon any Pindus or Parnassus, or by the side of any Castaly [...]; but in the blank and desolate streets, and upon the solitary bridges of the midnight city [...]'.⁴⁰

A similar sense of displacement characterises another poem included in the 1853 edition: the pessimistic poem 'An Evening at Home'. The title is misleading,

³⁹ Cronin, p. 138.

⁴⁰ Clough, 'Recent English Poetry', p. 4.

since the evening mentioned by the poet is that of the day on which Wellington's funeral was celebrated, 18 November 1852. Smith was not in Ayrshire then, but in Glasgow, and this becomes clearer as the poem proceeds, as it encompasses one of Smith's most significant descriptions of city landscape. The poet's sense of isolation and subsequent frustration is conveyed from the very beginning: he is in his 'lonely room',⁴¹ the rain is falling outside over the poor inhabitants of the city, on the same day when the English bards, metaphorically represented as larks, commemorate Wellington, the hero of the Peninsular War and the conqueror of Napoleon at the battle of Waterloo. An aura of pessimism and a suffocating atmosphere surround the poet, in opposition to the heroic air the English breathe in their country. The hostility of the weather becomes a metaphor for the non-poetic, dull present reality he can observe from his window, and he does not see any hope for the tomorrow, when, he says, '[...] We may all be drenched in sleet' (p. 205).

To the real world he perceives from his window, he opposes his own imaginary vision, which gives rise to a series of contrasting parallels. The Spring country setting of his fancy contrasts with the image of desolation and depression emerging from the industrial landscape outside his room; his own notion of happiness, linked with the joy, the genuine beauty which pervades nature, clashes with that shared by the city 'worldling' (p. 208), who has leagued with Mammon; these anti-heroic, materialistic inhabitants include no Wellingtons; the poetry of England has no correspondent expression in Scotland, hence the poet lives on the brink of society, aloof both from the English literary realm and from the Scottish contemporary world. Certainly, the image of England is idealised, and the poet seems to have forgotten that the industrial process produced its negative effects on English society as well, thus undermining his conclusion that: 'Most brilliant star upon the crest of time,/ Is England. England!' (p. 208).

The memory of the past, of an existence removed from the city clamour, does not help him to overcome his present gloominess, since when he thinks about it, he can only have this vision:

⁴¹ 'An Evening at Home', p. 205.

Before me hangs the vast untravelled gloom,
 Behind a wake of splendour fading fast
 Into the hungry gloom from whence it came. (p. 209)

What allows him instead to escape temporarily from the bleak picture of the city is his own creative imagination, which shapes the story of a woman, an ordinary person and not a Wellington, and of her husband, who, after a period of absence, returns home converted to Christianity. This short verse narrative is a reduced version of the story Smith expanded later in *Edwin of Deira*. This diversion does not last long though, and, in the end, the poet pictures himself lonely and downhearted again, while his memories are tormenting him with regret, instead of consoling him: 'The Past is with me, and I scarcely hear/ Outside the weeping of the homeless rain' (p. 218). In this beautiful conclusion, the rain forms one essence with the tears of the miserable, with whom the poet sympathises, since he shares with them the condition of the outcast.

'Lady Barbara'⁴² is a beautiful romance poem in Spenserian stanzas and with a ballad flavour about the love affair between Arthur and Lady Barbara, who, in order to escape the wooing of Earl Gawain, joins Arthur in his voyage. The sea scenery here depicted bears a resemblance to the ghastly landscape in Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, although there is no evidence of a direct relationship between the two poems. Lady Barbara is probably the poetic version of a real character, Smith's friend Barbara who drowned in the Glasgow and Paisley Canal in 1850. The love of a noble woman for a youth of inferior social extraction has its counterpart in 'Horton' (*City Poems*), where a gentleman falls in love with a peasant girl.

The 1853 edition of the *Poems* ends with a section entitled 'Sonnets'. It deals with two of the most important themes of Smith's works: literary Fame and its pros and cons -- '[...] 'tis our spirit's curse to strive and seek'⁴³ -- and the poet's condition as outcast within a society to which he feels alien, based on certain principles he cannot accept. This contrast is again represented metaphorically: the general

⁴² 'Lady Barbara', in *Poems by Alexander Smith*, pp. 221-228.

⁴³ 'Sonnets', in *Poems by Alexander Smith*, pp. 231-238 (p. 231).

merriment and animation of the swarming streets during the Christmas period is opposed to the silence and solitude of the poet inside his private room. In the end, there is a sign of change on his part, though; he starts looking at all those cheerful people with a certain interest and wonders what is lurking behind their individual appearance, behind their different faces. In this respect, there is a similarity between this conclusion and the outcome of Walter's moral formation, and it consists in giving up his own misanthropic behaviour and allowing himself to feel involved by human affairs and concerned with the existence of other human beings.

Alexander Smith's collaboration with the Spasmodics resulted in a collection of sonnets on the Crimean War (1854-1856), a joint initiative conceived by him and Dobell. Rather than being poems celebrating military ardour and heroism, they mostly represent occasional meditations on philosophic and moral issues, such as human sympathy and the need for mutual understanding in difficult moments ('The Wounded'), the necessity of human feelings versus the shallowness of power and success ('Self'), the cry of peace against violence ('Vox Populi'), love hindered by the war ('Home'), and other themes as well. Some of them display a harsh moral, tinged with cynicism and irony simultaneously; in 'War' the poet says: 'the far-off lily of a worthy peace/ Can be plucked only by Wars's bloody hand',⁴⁴ which communicates an ambiguous message. The pronouncement of peace and the graceful atmosphere in 'Miss Nightingale' contrasts with the bellicose fury and fervour of 'Sebastopol'; the humanity of the woman who superintended the first government-appointed women nurses to be sent to the British Army during the Crimean War is set in opposition to the demon-like behaviour of the soldiers in Sebastopol. Due to its being the product of two different writers, the collection presents contradictions difficult to cope with. Anti-militaristic and anti-imperialistic sonnets are mingled with other ones which seem to derive from the pen of an English poet exalting the power of his country, as in the following verses:

⁴⁴ 'War', in *Sonnets on the War. By Alexander Smith and by the Author of Balder and The Roman* (London: David Bogue, 1855), p. 36.

[...] Before us to the unseen close
 The future stretches without bound or mark,
 And England fearless sails across the dark,
 Leaving a trail of splendour as she goes.⁴⁵

These are not beautiful verses and certainly justify the acrimony with which some critics received the volume. The anonymous reviewer of the sonnets in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* concludes his article by saying sarcastically, 'We hope they may distinguish themselves in the war, so as to become in their turn the subjects of a sonnet, ode, epic or any kind of poem except an elegy'.⁴⁶

Luckily, Alexander Smith realised from this experience that he should distance himself from the Spasmodic school, which was on the verge of degenerating into shallow, sentimentalising literature, and follow his own individual route. This led him to the production of his most valuable and significant poems, in which the dialogue between the objective and the subjective achieves a perfect balance and harmony.

ii. Alexander Smith's *City Poems* (1857) and the urban metaphysical

In order to understand the importance of *City Poems*, it is helpful to consider Smith's experiences in 1854. This was the year when he moved to Edinburgh to hold his appointment as Secretary to the University of Edinburgh. From then onwards, he would always live in the surroundings of Edinburgh, and from 1857 in Wardie, a suburban area of that city. Even if changed compared to the past, Edinburgh had not been affected as much as Glasgow by the transformation of urban landscape produced by industrialisation, so that Smith's move away from the once 'dear green place' represents the possibility to look at its aspects from the perspective of his memories, from a distanced angle, untouched by its darkness and bitterness. This means that his

⁴⁵ 'Cheer', in *Sonnets on the War*, p. 39.

⁴⁶ 'Poetry of the War. Reviewed before Sebastopol', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 77 (1855), 531-535 (p. 535).

perception of the city's life in the new collection of poems has changed, that his attachment to it has grown, with the consequent result that his subjective response to the different facets of Glasgow is continuously balanced by their objective representation, and by his recognition that the city has a soul, a life of its own, independent of the filter of his consciousness. The poetic style of most of the poems differs significantly from the bombastic mode which characterises *A Life Drama*, despite a similar power of imagery, and Smith's unchanged ability to describe single, isolated pictures by means of the sudden vision or sketch. The difference between the two volumes was noticed at the time by Proctor Alexander in these terms: '[...] The youthful heat and unrest are allayed; the whole tone of the book is milder, calmer, wiser; only in an occasional tone of meditative melancholy is there the least reminiscence of the old fever of discontent'.⁴⁷

Wordsworth had already represented human isolation in the city in some of his poems, yet the Victorian perception of urban physical and moral features was not the same as that of the Romantics. Human life and society were changing very fast under the relentless progress of technology, the sense of anxiety was thus more overwhelming, and the resort to nature no longer represented an effective and durable consolation. Smith's poems are closer to the work of some of his contemporaries, such as Thomson and Macfarlan, but his style and poetic tone are personal, the former shifting from the prosaic to the lyric, the latter tinged with a melancholy which is not the pessimistic 'Melancholia' of Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night*, but rather a neo-romantic meditative mood which enhances instead of diminishing the potential fascination of urban imagery. *City Poems* reflect the outlook of Victorian society much more than 'A Life Drama', yet we do not have to look for a Dickensian realism in them, for the representation of 'real Every-day Life', of 'the real heart-break';⁴⁸ those who want to see these things in Smith's poems fail to appreciate them, as did Shirley in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1858.

⁴⁷ P. P. Alexander, 'Memoir', p. lxxv.

⁴⁸ Shirley, 'Northern Lights. City Poems and City Sermons', *Fraser's Magazine*, 57 (1858), 105-118 (p.117).

Smith's remarkable achievement in *City Poems* consists in something different: he managed to show that the city conceals its own beauty, that there is even a form of sublime behind its gruesome veneer, and hence that we can find ways of coping with its factual squalor and exterior ugliness. If he succeeded in doing so, it was not because he presented the city as it was, in the manner of realism or naturalism, but because he was able to perceive behind its facade something that others could not see, almost like the symbolist poet who possesses the uncommon faculty to decipher the spiritual signs beyond the phenomenal world. Smith's poems assert a re-evaluation of aspects of the city as material for poetic composition; he certainly achieves his purpose in 'Glasgow', but the other poems also present us with several passages adding to this accomplishment.

The first poem in the volume is entitled 'Horton'. At the outset, it presents us with a confusion of poetic *personae* which is typical of Victorian poetry, but after a few lines the 'I' speaking becomes particularly imposing. Who is this narrator? Only at the end of the poem do we have enough elements to guess his identity, after discovering his life habits and his ideas. From the very start, he appears to be a meditative character: his dream about a journey to hell prompts him to brood on the dialectic of day and night life, on the double existence of man. When he wakes up, he goes to work, to resume his routine life, although it is not his job that occupies his thoughts but '[...] lazy lengths of rivers in the sun,/ Larks soaring up the ever-soaring sky [...]'.⁴⁹ He is a city man thinking about the country: one of the Victorian stereotypical dualisms crops up again here. At work he finds his colleagues engaged in various conversations, which represent the antidote against their alienating, repetitive job. Each of them is assigned a name, and is so realistically sketched -- in terms and in a style which recall some of the parameters of French naturalism -- that it is likely Smith was thinking about his artisan friends when he composed 'Horton', the same friends he used to meet in the Addisonian Society. It is during one of these discussions that the name of Horton is mentioned. The reader gets to know that he was a poet-friend of the main speaker, a man leading a double existence, a Jekyll and

⁴⁹ 'Horton', in *City Poems*, pp. 1-50 (p.9).

Hyde consumed by his own ambitions and vices. In fact, his moral portrait is not that of a man of sound moral principles, yet his friends speak of him as of a hero, an aspect of the poem that some critics have not admired.

One gradually realises the similarity between Horton and Walter in *A Life Drama*, but here the hero/anti-hero is dead, which means that he is the *dramatis persona* of what Smith used to be, a spasmodic, passionate, and now rejected, young poet. Moreover, the central viewpoint is different: in 'A Life Drama', it was that of the egotistic protagonist, while in 'Horton', it is the multiple viewpoint of the various workers. The beauty of the poem rests on the presence of real details and incidents, like Horton's song, for instance, dedicated to Lady Barbara, the eponymous protagonist of a poem in the 1853 volume. The character of Horton, despite his assumed Byronism, is certainly intriguing. If Walter's aim was to set his age to music, Horton's was '[...] to turn/ This smoke of life to clear poetic flame;/ To put a something of celestial light/ Round the familiar face of every-day' (p. 20), an intention in which resounds the echo of Wordsworth's poetic theory. He could be immoral sometimes, a threatening figure to Victorian prudery, but, as Max, one of the workers observes, 'In every worthiness there is a flaw' (p. 41), an admission of human limitations and hidden criticism of the perfection of the traditional hero. The final scene of the poem describes the main speaker going back home. Along the way he stops by the river -- is it the Clyde? -- and from his position he can see the city lights and the fumes of the factories standing out in the gloomy atmosphere of the night. Smith's poetry is very often pictorial, permeated by colours which assume metaphorical connotations, and, as in expressionist painting, are related more to the poet's or the characters' moods than to the physical features of landscape. As well as pictorial, his poetry is also musical, characterised by the use of onomatopoeic words or the poet's evoking of real sounds. Indeed the last image of the poem is that of the poet inside his house listening to the sound coming from a spire.

The second poem in the volume, 'Glasgow', is that for which Smith is mainly remembered today, and there are certainly reasons which validate this general opinion. The first verses immediately introduce the 'I' speaking, a poet who is not concerned with country aspects, false idylls, and pastoral settings, but with the actualities of

urban life, a poet who knows 'the tragic hearts of towns'.⁵⁰ The sense of belonging to the city is very strong, and this attachment to his native place produces even the metamorphosis of its conventionally ugly sides, so that what his eyes see is a form of beauty which differs from that of a rural space. This beauty is 'sad and stern' (p. 55), and it bears a metaphysical quality, a spiritual essence of its own, which the poet sets in opposition to some isolated, insignificant images of the country side: the butterfly, the rose that now and then crops up in some corner of the town, appear to be petty, insignificant components of human life in front of the air of mysticism which permeates the city scene -- 'A sacredness of love and death/ Dwells in thy noise and smoky breath' (p. 60). Mary Jane W. Scott maintains that in 'Glasgow' 'Smith broke away from his early English Romantic models and proved himself a master of that supremely Scottish talent, the poetry of realistic natural description'.⁵¹

I certainly agree that the poet of *City Poems* has taken many steps away from that of 'A Life Drama', and that it is a different voice, more authentic and mature, that speaks to the reader of the later poems, yet I am not convinced that the term 'realism' can be satisfactorily applied to the verses of 'Glasgow', as well as to those of the other poems. The poet who says:

All raptures of this mortal breath,
Solemnities of life and death,
Dwell in thy noise alone:
Of me thou hast become a part -
Some kindred with my human heart
Lives in thy streets of stone.⁵²

is not simply projecting in front of our eyes a realistic, photographic picture of what he sees, but above all he is externalising his personal feelings, his responses in front of that particular scenario. Ruskin's pathetic fallacy and the expressionist theory are

⁵⁰ 'Glasgow', in *City Poems*, pp. 51-60 (p. 53).

⁵¹ M. J. W. Scott, p. 107.

⁵² 'Glasgow', p. 59.

here combined too, since it seems to me that, very often, what the poet depicts is not actually there, in front of his eyes, but is a picture resulting both from his memory of country scenery and from his sensory and moral perception of the urban setting. The following verses are a typical example:

Draw thy fierce streams of blending ore,
 Smite on a thousand anvils, roar
 Down to the harbour-bars;
 Smoulder in smoky sunsets, flare
 On rainy nights, with street and square
 Lie empty to the stars. (p. 56)

The representation is too grand to be real, but the purpose is achieved: the town is presented as a space full of potential fascination, of beauty and delight we can extract from its own essence. For this reason, I do not agree with those critics who deny the existence of an intrinsic grace in the city, and who come to the conclusion that the poet decides to stay in the city 'not because he has got the better of it, but because he has failed, and the city's terror and dream have got the better of him'.⁵³ The poet cannot banish from his mind the recollections of his life in the country, but he is now simultaneously able to accept the city and to perceive its inner glamour, the fascination of such things as the iron foundries, the quays, the cotton mills, and the train.

'Squire Maurice' proposes a favourite Scottish theme blended with the poet's individual inclination to metaphysical enquiries, yet without attempting to resolve them. Maurice is a divided character, a split personality who lives out the conflict between his instincts and his rationality: his passion for a village-girl contrasts with his awareness that such a relationship would provoke a social scandal, and he is so much tormented by the dilemma of marriage and desertion that he feels the urge to write to a friend of his, the main narrator of the story. Actually, as in 'Horton', it is only in a

⁵³ Robert Crawford, 'Alexander Smith, James Macfarlan and City Poetry', *Scottish Literary Journal*, 12. 2 (1985), 35-52 (p.49).

few stanzas that the title of the poem finds its justification. At the beginning, a Glasgow lawyer is introduced who is enjoying his days of repose in a country village, far from the routine and the clamour of the city. He is a soliloquiser, pondering all sorts of things during his wanderings.

The country-city conventional pair is here re-proposed but with an element of originality: at first, the village is described by the narrator as an Edenic place -- 'This is a place, you say, exempt from ill'⁵⁴ -- but, slowly, its secret flaws come to the surface, and he discovers that there is bribery, lust, and vice under the false facade. Crabbe is echoed here but with a parodic effect, since the traditional values associated with the agrarian world are reversed. In the village pub, the lawyer reads Maurice's letter, from which he realises the psychological torments and agonies his friend is going through. Maurice's own words represent an interesting psychological self-study, without any cathartic effect. The lawyer's advice to leave the girl is so bluntly realistic and anti-romantic that it almost disturbs us, but it is the solution Maurice will take, although with regret, as we can read in the following poem, 'The Night before the Wedding, or, Ten Years Later'. 'Squire Maurice' ends with a beautiful description of the city, which the narrator observes from a hill:

As silent as a picture lies the town,
Its graceful smokes are curling in the air;
The bay is one delicious sheet of rose,
And round the far point of the tinted cliffs
I see the long strings of the fishing skiffs
Come home to roost like lines of evening crows. (p. 94)

'A Boy's Poem' is the most autobiographical among Smith's poems, and it is probably also the most Scottish, since it records his memories of Glasgow and the Highlands, which he describes with a renewed affection. The first stanzas do not allow the reader to perceive the figure of the poet behind that of the protagonist. The

⁵⁴ 'Squire Maurice', in *City Poems*, pp. 61-94 (p. 67).

verses are addressed to a friend who is now in India, with whom he used to live a simple life, full of that wonder technology has destroyed, which gives the poet the opportunity to meditate about the progress of mankind and to question its worth. He presents himself as a man who has learnt how to cope with the pathos and darkness of life, and who now thinks about death with relief rather than anxiety -- 'And through the empty house a hand I know/ Is putting out the lights; 't will soon be dark'.⁵⁵ At a certain point, the poet begins to remember his childhood, when he was often aloof from his companions, plunged into his 'empty' (p. 116) solitude, in which his only companions are his thoughts. He then remembers the death of his father, the nightmare of the school years, the melancholy constantly invading his young soul, his solitary wandering in the open air, until something changed within him, and he learnt how to deal with other people both to establish friendships and to respond to their ill-doing.

One of the most graceful episodes is the account of his illness, his delirium, and his mother's 'kind white face' (p. 124) who appeased his suffering. Poverty obliged him to work in warehouses, where he also knew his first love. Urban and country scenarios do not clash in this poem, but even seem to be related, as in the scene in which the protagonist catches glimpses both of the city and of the rural district. On the one hand, he says:

We heard the swarming streets, the noisy mills;
Saw sooty foundries full of glare and gloom,
Great bellied chimneys tipped by tongues of flame,
Quiver in smoky heat. (p. 137)

On the other, he sees a different scenario:

[...] At length the stream
Broadened 'tween banks of daisies, and afar

⁵⁵ 'A Boy's Poem', p. 116.

The shadows flew upon the sunny hills;
 And down the river, 'gainst the pale blue sky,
 A town sat in its smoke. (p. 138)

The city is personified here, as if it had a soul and a heart of its own, hence not totally dehumanised. The second part of the poem opens with the voyage down the river Clyde. The reader follows the poet first in his excursion to the Highlands, to a landscape associated with perennial superstitions, and then to a loch in Argyllshire. By a graveyard he composes a love poem dedicated to his lover, about the conventional Romantic link between Eros and Thanatos, and finally he goes back, 'Amid the fiery forges and the smoke', to the warehouse where he works. This section of the poem closes with the sad discovery that his lover is promised to another, a repetition of Walter's first love affair, and with the image of his mother at prayer.

The poet's pessimism increases after his love disappointment, and the third part is entirely permeated by this gloominess, by dark tones, with the harsh realistic picture of his family condition. On the day of his birthday, he only feels grief, he only reads the miserable look of the poverty-stricken in his mother's eyes, while outside the city inhabitants celebrate the coming of the New Year. The city's life goes on around him and he is excluded from it; he can only wander between its bleak corners, behaving like a fugitive, but stopping now and then to brood about his existence and about the ever-changing essence of life in general. Like Walter, he has the habit of standing on a bridge from which he can observe the movements of the town, while thinking also about death and his mother. The poems actually finishes with the episode of his mother's delirium and death. The critics judged 'A Boy's Poem' very favourably. The reviewer of *City Poems* in *The Dublin University Magazine* pointed out its unity of tone and purpose, the richness of 'isolated passages, passionate, descriptive, or reflective, almost unmatched in modern poetry', and the poet's ability

'to extract from the brute mass of ordinary circumstances the more beautiful and touching aspects of poverty'.⁵⁶

The last poem of the volume is 'The Change', a very significant piece, since Smith admits here directly that his voice is no longer that of the Romantic-Spasmodic poet:

My lonely pride is weak as tears;
No more I seek to stand apart,
A mocker of the rolling years.⁵⁷

In 1861 *Edwin of Deira*, the epic about the first British king embracing the Christian faith, was published. The unfavourable opinions of the press were counterbalanced by favourable ones, but Smith could not handle the ceaseless accusations of plagiarism -- this time Tennyson's 'Idylls of the King' was the model he supposedly emulated. Consequently, he turned to prose writing, although he composed two other poetic pieces: 'Spring Chanson', included in *Last Leaves*, and the fragment which bears the title of 'Edinburgh'.

'A Spring Chanson', written in 1866, is an ambiguous poem that reflects the increasing gloominess and melancholia of the poet in his last years. The cheerful beginning, with the description of his blooming garden, is soon followed by an abrupt change in his present feelings and sensations. From the nature around him bursts a joy that he cannot share, since he feels 'as bare as winter in the thick leaf-coming May';⁵⁸ although there is no anxiety in his words, but rather a calm, appeased sadness, his pessimism emerges here more clearly than in any other poem. The indifference of nature and his being alien to its re-awakening is expressed in these verses:

Spring may walk o'er daisies spread,
With a skylark over head;

⁵⁶ 'Alexander Smith's City Poems', *Dublin University Magazine*, 49 (1857), 525-539 (p. 533).

⁵⁷ 'The Change', in *City Poems*, pp. 185-190 (p. 190).

⁵⁸ 'A Spring Chanson', in *Last Leaves*, pp. 300-305 (p. 303).

Her garments scented with the May;

[...]

But she is alien, she is foreign:

Her delight I have no store in. (p. 304)

There is a Romantic flavour in the poet's preference of the Autumn colours reminiscent of Leopardi's poems -- 'More I love September's yellow: [...] / More than Spring's bright un-control / Suit the Autumn of the soul' (p. 304) -- and it establishes a parallel between the natural seasons and the different stages of human life. The poem ends with the image of the merle singing, a metaphor for the poet and his song, which will outlive him and keep him alive in the memory of posterity:

Men live and die, the song remains; and when

I list the passion of thy vernal breath,

Methinks thou singest best to Love and Death -

To happy Lovers and to dying Men. (p. 305)

'Edinburgh' was probably meant to be the companion poem to 'Glasgow', the poetic tale of his mature years, as the former piece had offered an account of his youth. Here is how he pictures himself:

Another and nobler Me,

Dwells in regretful memory,

Bright-eyed, and golden-hair'd;

No more I breathe melodious song;

Yet to these later years belong

Moods, passions, unimpair'd:

Still lives the rapture of the eye,

Dim city, hanging in the sky!⁵⁹

⁵⁹ 'Edinburgh', in *Last Leaves*, pp. 306-314 (p. 308).

The noises and the 'roar' (p. 309) of Glasgow are now distant, the poet contemplates instead the quieter atmosphere of Edinburgh, which now suits better his calm soul. It is only a fragment, but possesses all the potentialities of a beautiful poem, making us regret that Smith could not exploit them fully.

Alexander Smith is still too often neglected by critics and compilers of anthologies. Despite the flaws of his writing, he must be allowed at least one major distinction: that he was among the first authors to see the poetic in modern life and modern civilisation, and therefore was a pioneer of urban poetry before Davidson and Geddes wrote their most outstanding poems on the subject. He also had the merit to reveal beauty in things generally dissociated from any concept of beauty, specifically, like Baudelaire in the beautiful poem 'Le Cygne' (*Les fleurs du mal*, 1857), the modern city. Hence he suggested that the urban world is not always an infernal 'city of dreadful night', to quote Thomson's masterpiece, and that man should, in Italo Calvino's words, 'look for and to be able to distinguish who and what, in the middle of hell, isn't hell, and make it last, and give it space [...]'.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Picador, 1979), pp. 126-127.

CHAPTER 4

LIVING IN THE TWILIGHT: THE DIALECTIC OF LIGHT AND
DARKNESS IN THE POETRY OF JAMES THOMSON ('B. V.')

i. Introductory

I wish to draw into clear light the facts that, in two moods of two several hours not a day asunder, a man's relations to the most serious problems of life may be, and often are, essentially opposite; that the one may burn with hope and faith, and the other lour black with doubt and despair; and that there is no possibility of conciliating (philosophically) this antagonism, since the two are mutually unintelligible.¹

What follows represents an attempt to propose to the reader of James Thomson an image of the poet and of the man, together with an interpretation of his poetry and his life, which take into consideration the full, broad range of his literary achievements and of his existential ideas, in order to eschew the risk of attaching to him the simplistic, reductive label of 'Laureate of pessimism'. Both Thomson's works and life, after careful analysis, convince us that, like the other poets of this study, he belongs to that category of writers who can hardly be assigned unquestionable epithets to define their work and personality. Like Hogg, Byron and the other 'eccentrics', Thomson is a writer who, instead of standing inside a particular cultural movement or tendency, moved rather precariously on the borderline between different, at times antithetical, positions. Interestingly, Thomson wrote an essay on

¹ James Thomson, 'Sympathy', in *Essays and Phantasies* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1881), pp. 228-249 (p. 242).

Hogg which shows his interest in the 'Scottish Eccentric',² and elected Byron as one of his early literary models.

In point of fact, Thomson represents a very fascinating case among 'displaced' Scottish writers. His 'eccentricity' depends on causes of different nature, related both to his inward spiritual sphere and to the outward social dimension. In both his inner, almost solipsistic, sphere, and in his relationship with the external world, Thomson displays a moral and philosophical outlook which constantly wavers, and which, therefore, is difficult to define positively. One of the most frequent interpretations of his writing is based on the assumption that Thomson's pessimistic vision of the outer world led to his total aloofness from it, and to his seeking refuge within his own interior world. To support such a reading of his works means turning him into the most Romantic of the post-Romantic writers, which is not the best way of looking at his personality and his works. James Thomson can be identified with 'Bysshe Vanolis', one of his pseudonyms derived from the anagrams of Shelley and Novalis, only to the extent to which James Hogg can be indifferently called the 'Ettrick Shepherd'. What I mean is that if, on the one hand, one cannot deny the presence of a Romantic or pseudo-Romantic component in Thomson's writing, which can be summed up in its individualistic, personal dimension, on the other hand, one must admit that it represents only one facet both of his complex self and of his *opera omnia*.

After reading especially his essays, one realises how untrue it is to describe him as utterly blind and dumb to external events. In fact, Thomson's satirical pieces in such volumes as *Essays and Phantasies* (1881) and *Satires and Profanities* (1884) prove the opposite. If we turn to the poetry bearing in mind the prose works, we also become able to read between the lines what we missed at the first reading, and to find in some verses a confirmation of what Thomson expressed in his prose. In short, there is a constant dialogic dimension in his works taken as a whole, a ubiquitous tension between opposites, a continuous, all-embracing dialectic which runs through

² See the posthumous 'James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd', in *Biographical and Critical Studies* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1896), pp. 398-436.

his whole production. The critic Charles Vachot describes one of Thomson's major polarities thus:

[...] jamais en lui le désespoir ne régna longtemps sans conteste: sa vie intérieure est faite de la lutte, ou de l'alternance, de ce désespoir avec un goût obstiné de la vie; son oeuvre est le dialogue toujours rebondissant de la douleur et de la joie.³

James Thomson was not the poet of the darkness of life only, as some critics maintain. Not only does a deep examination of his writing enable us to dispute this opinion, but the poet himself, through his own words, unveiled the truth to us: '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 in the latter'.⁴

The dialectic of darkness and light is so thorough in Thomson's poetry from his apprenticeship years to his last production that it becomes even difficult to attempt a classification of his poems according to a criterion simultaneously chronological and thematic. The present study adopts a chronological pattern for merely practical reasons, as it makes it possible to refer simultaneously to the poet's biography. Yet I do not intend to suggest that Thomson's poetical works follow a pattern of linear development. As a matter of fact, the unabridged picture of his poetry shows that no real evolution ever occurred, since there cannot be a progressive development for an individual affected by anxiety whenever he reaches a turning-point in his moral or ethical beliefs. It would be too simplistic to say that Thomson's thought evolved from Christian faith to atheistic unbelief, both because it would narrow his moral and philosophic concerns to a religious question, and because his turning away from orthodoxy was too problematic and psychologically disrupting to be considered a true evolutionary step. Thomson could never completely get rid of the religious and

³ '[...] in him the despair never dominated without conflicts: his inner life is characterised by the struggle, or the alternation, between this despair and an obstinate love of life; his work is the dialogue, continuously revived, of pain and joy.' Charles Vachot, *James Thomson* (Paris: Didier, 1964), p. 133.

⁴ Letter to George Eliot, 20 June 1874, quoted in Vachot, p. 193.

ethical teachings of his childhood. His personal, never-ending battle to divest himself of the burden of ideas inculcated into his young spirit looks forward to a moral truth which Joyce would express more than two decades after him, that is, the unremitting influence on a man's personality and behaviour of family education and origins .

The moral map one derives from the reading of Thomson's poems is a real maze of intersecting paths, to the extent that we even find that the supposed 'laureate of pessimism' wrote some of the most optimistic verses of his generation. Thomson himself, in one of his poems, describes the tension of opposite moods determining the direction of his life and poetry:

Striving to sing glad songs, I but attain
Wild discords sadder than Grief's saddest tone [...]
My mirth can laugh and talk, but cannot sing;
My grief finds harmonies in everything.⁵

These verses were written in 1860, when the poet had not dipped down to the dark abyss of pessimism, but he had already been faced by personal griefs which only underscored his inborn penchant to melancholy and gloominess. The above verses describe a spiritual dichotomy which accompanied Thomson throughout his life, even after he reached the most pessimistic conclusions. The abused and overused term 'Antisyzygy' turns out to be in fact particularly appropriate to define Thomson's inner struggle between an optimistic and a pessimistic view of the world, and it can be related both to his personal character, and to the peculiar frame of mind and *Weltanschauung* which characterised his age. Thomson was not alone in the battlefield against the various hostile forces of the time, such as political and religious dogmatism, Victorian philistinism or 'Bumbleism',⁶ to use his own terminology, and, moreover, he was not the only writer to feel that something had gone wrong in

⁵ 'Two Sonnets', *Vane's Story, Weddah and Om-el-Bonain, and Other Poems* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1881), pp. 165-166 (p. 166). All further quotations from Thomson's poems are referred to by page number.

⁶ 'Bumble, Bumbledom, Bumbleism', in *Essays and Phantasies*, pp. 104-123.

contemporary society, and also that, on the other hand, any attempt to change the present state of things carried with it a sense of guilt and moral inadequacy.

The introspective and visionary quality of many of Thomson's poems has too often misled critics towards the conclusion that he deemed it better to shut his eyes to the external phenomena, and retreat into his subconscious life. In fact, Thomson had his eyes wide open to the outer world, but lived with a self-torturing, Rousseau-like anxiety, the experience of the outcast who could not unremittingly abase himself in front of the Victorian façade of economic wealth and social progress -- unlike the crawling figure in his masterpiece, *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874). He certainly passed through moments when he needed to distance himself from external reality, in order to find an outlet for his brooding and melancholy cogitation, and indeed poems such as *The City of Dreadful Night*, especially in its meditative sections, 'Insomnia' and 'In the Room' attest this inner-directed disposition. Yet it was by looking outside himself, and entering the social territory, that he realised his own condition of alienation and his inability to conform to society's principles. Hence his unorthodox philosophical and ethical thoughts, which, nonetheless, were causes of distress and of what Joyce, echoing the medieval poet, would later call 'agenbite of inwit' (remorse of conscience),⁷ rather than a source of intellectual and moral relief. Some of Thomson's contemporaries experienced a similar inner disruption, which, in some cases, resulted in tragic ends, like the final release both John Davidson and Hugh Miller found in suicide. Evidently, they did not feel comfortable in their 'ironic stance',⁸ because their sceptical attitude towards contemporary creeds and philosophical systems rendered their position unsure, as unsteady as the ever-changing world which they perceived around them, and which, because of its ceaseless changeability, gave rise to their doubts and agnosticism. As David Daiches pointed

⁷ 'Ayenbite of Inwyt' is the title of a moral treatise which Dan Michel of Northgate translated from the French about 1340. In the Preface to the early English Text Society edition of the work (London, 1866), Richard Morris explains that the *Ayenbite of Inwyt* is a literal translation of a French treatise entitled *Le Somme des Vices et des Vertues* composed in 1279 by Frère Lorens [...]. See Weldon Thornton, *Allusions in Ulysses* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), pp. 21-22.

⁸ See Clyde de Loache Ryals, *A World of Possibilities*, p. 3.

out about the Victorians, 'when they were sceptics, they took no joy in their scepticism, as the men of the Enlightenment had [...]'.⁹

It is probably from this sense of unease and unhappiness that originated that peculiar state of the mind afflicting the spirit of many Victorian believers and unbelievers, as it had affected the Romantics. This is the Petrarchan *accidia* or *taedium vitae*, which in Romantic France was called *mal du siècle*, and *ennui* or *spleen* in modern times, and which Giacomo Leopardi in Italy defined as *noia* -- a concept very close to that of Thomson's melancholia. Matthew Arnold conceived this mood as the disease of modern societies. As far as Thomson's poetry is concerned melancholy sometimes becomes synonymous with a strong moral stance in front of the indifference of universal nature, with a sort of passive revolt whereby men respond to indifference with their own indifference, choose endurance instead of tragic resignation to fate, and learn to accept their lot despite its hindrances and limitations. This message is at the centre of Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night* and Leopardi's *La Ginestra* (1836).

In certain cases, the turmoil and hectic rhythm of the Victorian city produced in the most sensitive characters an effect completely opposed to urban dynamism: instead of entering into the city's pandemonium, they retired into a private sphere, affected by moral and often intellectual, creative paralysis. This Hamletic proneness to passive meditation rather than to active reactions impinged upon Thomson's behaviour too, although at times he was able to counteract this mood by travelling and never remaining anchored in one place for any length of time. In a letter printed in the *Secular Review* of 15 July 1882, Thomson wrote:

When travelling about I always find myself immensely better than when confined to one place. With money, I believe I should never have a home, but be always going to and fro on the earth, and

⁹ David Daiches, *Some Late Victorian Attitudes* (London: André Deutsch, 1969), p. 9.

walking up and down in it, like him of whom I am one of the children.¹⁰

Thomson never formed a family, although he loved children, and also thought about marriage when he was still in the army. The reason why he never really settled, and created his own household, can be found in the emotional disillusionment and upsetting griefs he had to endure both in his childhood and in his adolescence. In 1840 his younger sister died from measles contracted from him; in 1842 he suddenly found himself motherless; ten years later he lost his father, affected by mental insanity since 1840, and his love, incarnated in the figure of Matilda, the daughter of an armorer-sergeant at Ballincollig, Ireland.

Throughout his life, Thomson felt a sort of curse weighing upon him, and, after his sister's death, he could never free himself from a haunting sense of guilt and sinfulness.¹¹ If my identification of the 'him' in the letter quoted above is correct, he considers himself one of the children of Satan, which is obviously an overstatement, as was his self-representation as a new Ishmael, the perpetual misanthropic wanderer, since his biographers tell us that he always evinced sympathy and kindness towards his friends.¹² Thomson felt hostile to Victorian society, which made him ill at ease within it, and a radical, or, as Meeker says, 'a Bohemian in the very respectable Mid-

¹⁰ Letter to an anonymous addressee, *Secular Review*, 15 July 1882, p. 249.

¹¹ These and other biographical information are mainly derived from the following texts: Henry S. Salt, *The Life of James Thomson* ('B. V.') (London: Watts & Co., 1914); J. Edward Meeker, *The Life and Poetry of James Thomson* (B. V.) (New Haven: Yale University Press; London: Humphrey Milford; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1917); Imogene B. Walker, *James Thomson* (B. V.). *A Critical Study* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1950); *Poems and Some Letters of James Thomson*, ed. by Anne Ridler (London: Centaur Press, 1963) -- in particular the Introduction, pp. ix-xlv, and pp. 255-256, where we find Thomson's autobiographical account of his family in a letter to his sister-in-law; Charles Vachot, *James Thomson* (Paris: Didier, 1964); Kenneth Hugh Byron, *The Pessimism of James Thomson* (B. V.) *in Relation to His Time* (London: Mouton & Co.; Paris: The Hague, 1965); William David Schaefer, *James Thomson* (B. V.): *Beyond 'The City'* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965); William Sharpe, 'Learning to Read *The City*', *Victorian Poetry*, 22 (1984), 65-84; 'Introduction' to *The City of Dreadful Night*, ed. by Edwin Morgan (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993), pp. 7-24; Tom Leonard, *Places of the Mind: The Life and the Work of James Thomson* ('B. V.') (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993).

¹² In particular see Salt, p. 49, and Vachot, p. 415. In one of his notes Thomson wrote that 'great goodness -- that is, sympathy -- is as rare as the intense and comprehensive imagination' (Bodleian Library, MS.Don.e.43, fol. 3).

Victorian period'.¹³ Nonetheless, from the reading of his poems, one gathers that this radical, sceptical spirit was accompanied by an abiding sense of fear, the fear of losing completely his foothold in the reality of life and experience. This form of pre-existentialist 'Angst' was expressed by Thomson himself in a diary entry made for Sunday, November 4, 1869. Here he tells of burning all of his manuscripts except those which were already partly in print. Then he goes on to say:

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.¹⁴

Freedom was defended by Thomson throughout his life, but he also knew that when it became absolute so that man becomes totally released from social and moral codes, it involved the risk of feeling like a tightrope walker losing his balance.

Thomson possessed a brooding spirit, but was simultaneously aware of the danger of solipsistic meditation. His dualistic attitude towards life affected also his conception of art. Optimism and pessimism towards literature alternate in his mental outlook. Sometimes he describes it as the occupation of the weak, of those who cannot devote their energies to action as in poems such as 'Art' and 'Philosophy' (*Poems and Letters*, 1865), and the essay 'Per Contra: The Poet, High Art, Genius' (*Essays and Phantasies*, 1881).¹⁵ Other times he seems to endow art with a strong cathartic power, which eventually might have helped him to quash any suicidal mania. The poems 'The Poet and His Muse' and 'He Heard Her Sing' (*A Voice from the Nile, and Other Poems*, 1884) are two paradigmatical examples. A similar consideration applies to his conception of human activism counterbalanced by passive stoicism and indolence. The *carpe diem* philosophy emerging from some of his poems would seem to invest action in life with an essential role, but after reading the

¹³ Meeker, p. 5.

¹⁴ Quoted in K. H. Byron, pp. 146-147.

¹⁵ The volume or the collection where I read Thomson's works are indicated within brackets after the titles. Long titles have been shortened after the first reference.

essay 'Indolence' (*The Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery. Selected Prose*), readers are forced to reconsider their first impression.

Hence it is difficult to establish a classification or analytic criteria for Thomson's poetry. Quite clearly though, his life and literary career can be divided into three main phases, each of them starting at some essential turning point of his existence. At the same time, there are recurring themes linking the three different stages together, which confer a certain continuity, a sort of 'harmony in diversity' to his whole production. The first phase corresponds to his apprenticeship years and to the early development of his ideas on man and religion. It covers the period from his first school education in 1842 till 1860, when he wrote 'To Our Ladies of Death', a poem which marks the first important crux in his philosophic and moral views. The following phase is probably the most varied and therefore particularly productive as far as poetry is concerned. It includes the fourteen years from 1860 until 1874, a span during which the dualistic nature of Thomson's personality and work comes forth very clearly. Yet I prefer to deal with the last four years of this period separately, since they were completely devoted to the composition of the poem upon which Thomson's fame is mainly based: *The City of Dreadful Night*. The last stage of his literary career includes what he called 'the seven songless years', from 1874 to 1881, and the final two years of his life, when apparently he regained some of his poetic inspiration.

ii. Between faith and doubt (1834-1860)

From his birth at Port Glasgow on November 23, 1834, till his admission to the Royal Caledonian Asylum in London in 1842, James Thomson was brought up in a deeply and fervently religious household. The principles of Evangelicalism were drummed into his childhood mind without his being aware yet of his potential freedom to contest them. In fact, his religious faith remained unshaken until about 1851, thanks mainly to his mother, who succeeded in transferring to his soul her own pietistical feeling, so that his spiritual integrity did not fall apart when he lost his sister in 1840

and later his mother in 1842. The effects of both losses remained stifled in his subconscious until they surfaced during his boyhood and especially adulthood, when the spiritual assumptions masking them began to fade. Thomson attended the London Asylum from 1842 until 1850, when he entered the Royal Military Asylum at Chelsea. Since 1840, the year in which his father was smitten by a paralytic attack, Thomson's financial maintenance depended on his relatives, a situation which he must have felt as out of the ordinary. Anyway, both at school and in the army, where he worked until 1862, Thomson was his father's son, displaying the same cheerful and sociable temperament that his father had before becoming ill.

At the Royal Military Asylum,¹⁶ Thomson began his own self-education by reading the writers who appealed to him most: Byron was, chronologically, on the top of the list, followed by Shelley, Swift, Fielding, Smollett, Defoe, Novalis, and De Quincey. Only later on, in the 1860's, did he become interested in Shakespeare, Dante, Leopardi, Whitman and Heine, all of whom contributed to the formation of his philosophical and moral thoughts. This miscellaneous inventory of writers shows how diversified his literary tastes were, and can partly account for the motley quality of his own works, with echoes of Elizabethan, Romantic and Decadent writers. In 1851 he was sent to a post at Ballinacollig, Ireland to work as assistant to the garrison master. He did not mind teaching, although he would rather have become a clerk in a bank or mercantile office, which seems paradoxical for someone who later on would attack the automatism and prosaic aspects of Victorian society. In the end, he decided to follow the advice of his schoolmasters, and became one of them himself. There was then already a discrepancy between his ideals and real life, that clashing between the phenomenal and the noumenal which can be accounted as one of the causes leading to his pessimism.

In Ireland, two main events accelerated the course of his heterodoxy: firstly, the encounter with Bradlaugh, the apostle of radicalism and atheism who later became

¹⁶ In the Introduction to *Poems and Some Letters of James Thomson* Ridler writes that the Asylum was 'founded at Cross Street, Hatton garden, at first in close connexion with the Chapel where Irving found fame. But by 1828 the number of boys had risen from twelve to forty, and new buildings were created at Copenhagen Fields, Islington. This, therefore, was the place of Thomson's schooling' (pp.

the editor of *The National Reformer*, and secondly, his first experience of love, personified by Matilda Weller. The real nature of the relationship existing between Thomson and Matilda is still obscure, although Thomson wrote several poems where the image of the girl is directly or indirectly evoked. In what sense did this relationship contribute to the poet's estrangement from the *status quo* ideology? Matilda was in fact a supporter of that ideology, but her premature death affected the poet more strongly than the moral certainties she professed when she was alive. Her death in 1853, when Thomson was back at Chelsea, produced upon him an effect similar to that which the disappearance of the young Silvia had on Leopardi, the poet whom Thomson saw as his Italian brother.¹⁷ It was not the first time Thomson had lost someone he loved, but Matilda's death came at a moment of his life when he was particularly prone to brood upon the fugitive nature of human existence, and therefore it enhanced an inclination which was partly constitutional.

Consequently, Thomson's first poems are mostly centred on the concept of loss, separation, distance, though more in relation to sentiment and feeling than to religious and ethical concerns. At least until 1860, Thomson continued to cling to some of the fundamental dogmas of Christianity, such as the belief in an all-embracing, omnipotent Providence, and the notion of the immortality of the soul. In 1852, when he wrote his first poem, Matilda was still alive, but far from him, because by then he had already departed from Ireland. I refer to the love poem entitled 'Love's Dawn', which was conceived as the first of a series of poems called 'Four Points in a Life'. Two main aspects emerge in this juvenile poem: the symbolism associated with the girl; and the first signs of the poet's spiritual instability. Even when alive, Matilda was pictured by the poet as another Beatrice, whose divine purity contrasted with his human weaknesses. In the poem, Matilda is already more an

xi-xii). The Royal Caledonian Asylum was founded in 1815 for the children of Scottish soldiers or seamen who were dead or infirm (Vachot, p. 19).

¹⁷ Silvia was the daughter of one of the Leopardis' servants. Her untimely death is lamented by Leopardi in the beautiful poem 'A Silvia' (1828). Thomson wrote a sonnet to friends that he shared with Matilda which bears a strong resemblance with Leopardi's 'great idyll' dedicated to Silvia, in particular in his lament for the untimely death of the young woman. This sonnet is printed in *Novalis and the Poets of Pessimism: with an English Translation by James Thomson ("B. V.") of Hymns to Night*, ed. by Simon Reynolds (Norwich: Michael Russell, 1995), pp. 54-55.

Angel than a real woman, an idealised figure similar to Sophie von Kühn, a girl who died at the age of fifteen, loved by the German poet Novalis, another of his kindred poets, discovered by Thomson through the writings of Carlyle. In her symbolical significance, she recalls also all the Kilmeny-like figures of Scottish poetry. As Kilmeny's departing from the earth can be seen as a symbol of the disappearance of the old Scottish community with its popular beliefs, so Matilda might be invested with a similar symbolism, though loaded with a negative overtone which is absent in Hogg's figure. She personifies the religious and ethical beliefs which Thomson retained in his heart until the early 1850's, when they began to become blurred. Matilda and Thomson's religious dilemmas are indeed continually interrelated in his poems, and her death meant to him not only her physical removal, but also the beginning of his gradual spiritual movement away from the beliefs she incarnated. As early as 1852, we find the poet already writing that his love for Matilda is the light within his 'cavernous darkness',¹⁸ and his sense of guilt and sinfulness finds in her love a means of redemption.

The sense of the past as opposed to the present is a common theme in Victorian literature, loaded with Romantic and Decadent overtones. In another 1852 poem, called 'A Proem' (*A Voice from the Nile*), Thomson sets the world of memories in opposition to the dullness of the present, and describes art as the means to bring the past back to life by giving shape to reminiscences and turning them into the language of poetry. Many years later - for instance, in the already mentioned poem entitled 'Art' - he will reverse completely the relationship between art and life, allotting to the latter superiority over the former. The opposition between present and past is also at the centre of a poem Thomson wrote in 1854, which forms Part III of 'Four Points in a Life' (*Poems and Some Letters*). It is the poem called 'Parting', in which the poet introduces another dimension beside the past and the present, that is, the future life of the immortal souls of the two lovers who will be reunited in 'calm, deep waters'.¹⁹ The symbolic image of the sea is obviously part of Thomson's Romantic heritage, and it is very close to the representation of the sea in Shelley's 'A

¹⁸ 'Love's Dawn', in *Poems and Some Letters of James Thomson*, p.1

Vision of the Sea'. 'Parting' is remarkable also for another reason. The tone is different from that of previous poems; it has partly lost its purely personal quality, because the poet assumes an ironic distance from the subject. Yet traces of Thomson's individual experiences can be easily detected behind the figure of the protagonist.

From 1854 until 1862, Thomson worked as a schoolmaster in Her Majesty's Army, a period in which he wrote several poems, the thematic and stylistic variety of which is a mirror of his changing moods. The question of religious faith often crops up, and therefore these poems are generally characterised by a serious tone. Yet the bright side of Thomson's personality was given expression too, and the results were poems such as 'The Jolly Veterans' (*Vane's Story, Weddah and Om-el-Bonain, and Other Poems*), 'A Happy Poet' (*A Voice from the Nile*), and 'The Lord of the Castle of Indolence' (*Poems and Some Letters*). Among the first class of poems, recording Thomson's gradual estrangement from the religion of his childhood, there are five pieces which may be grouped under the general title 'Loss of Faith': the 'The Approach to St. Paul's' (*Poems and Some Letters*), 'Suggested by Matthew Arnold's "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse"' (*A Voice from the Nile*), the 1858 poem 'A Recusant' (*Poems and Some Letters*), 'Robert Burns' (*A Voice from the Nile*) and finally 'A Real Vision of Sin' (*Poems and Some Letters*).

In 'The Approach to St. Paul's' the poet does not express openly his religious doubts yet, and, instead of looking into himself and exploring his own spiritual life, he plays the role of a watcher, of one who almost spies the behaviour of the city crowd from a distance. He is an onlooker and simultaneously a wanderer in the city; his movement towards St. Paul's Cathedral is set in opposition to the confused, aimless stir of the urban throng. Symbolically, this contrast signifies the spiritual gap existing between the observer and the observed: while he can still notice the beauty of the Cupola standing out in the sky, and the illuminated cross on top of it, the people around him seem to ignore them, because they are too much 'absorbed in dreams of

¹⁹ 'Parting', in *Poems and Some Letters of James Thomson*, p. 2-3 (p. 3).

Mammon-gain'.²⁰ The cathedral, emblem of Christian religion, stands in the city as an isolated pyramid in the desert; an image which iconographically anticipates the dismaying sublimity and grandeur of both the Sphinx and the statue of Melancholia in *The City of Dreadful Night*. The poet standing aloof from the urban multitude is not only a post-Romantic expression of individualism but also suggests that each single individual in the city is a solitary, isolated atom, and that living in the city is like living in a desert.

Thomson's invective against the materialistic impiety and Mammon-worship of his contemporaries resounds also in 'Suggested by Matthew Arnold's "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse"', which, in fact, apart from the metre (stanzas of six octosyllabic verses) is a totally independent poem from the supposed model. The critic Hokie Neale Fairchild considers this poem a failure, a 'pathetic nonsense',²¹ which is perhaps too harsh a comment, but justified in a sense. This is the first poem in which Thomson's spiritual dilemmas find an open outlet; it marks the essential moment of his increasing religious scepticism when he realised that orthodox religion did not respond anymore to his personal ideals, and that it was therefore necessary to look for a surrogate to replace it. Anyway the years from 1855 to 1860 were only a prefiguration of the following decade, which coincided with the 'years of the quest', of the poet's attempts to find an alternative 'form' of creed to supplant orthodox Christianity.

In 'Suggested by Matthew Arnold's "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse"' the 'Form' finds its objective correlative in the Grande Chartreuse, which stands for the religion of his ancestors opposed to the spiritual void of the present generation. Yet the poet is not simply defending that Form against the materialism of his time, since his view is quite shifting and faltering, thus showing that in 1855 Thomson was in a transitory phase, an unstable state of anxiety between a past which was dying and a future which was still obscure. Hence his spiritual oscillations from Part I to Part III of the poem. In Part I, the poet denounces his age for its being 'bereft of faith;/ And

²⁰ 'The Approach to St. Paul's', in *Poems and Some Letters of James Thomson*, pp. 4-5 (p. 4).

²¹ Hokie Neale Fairchild, 'Thomson', in *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, 6 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), IV: 1830-1880, pp. 458-459.

living in Eternal Death',²² and he describes human life as a dark path, devoid of the light of religion. Thomson denies also the power of 'our own light' (p. 215), of human reason, thus dissociating himself from the rationalist trend to which Bradlaugh adhered. He appeals directly to God, and asks him to teach humanity how to regain their faith, but a sincere faith unlike all modern creeds, which are equally marred by 'Black disbelief, substantial doubt' (p. 218). In Part II a new idea is introduced: God cannot be dead, His spirit must still be alive, while it is only His old form which is dead. Essentially, Thomson expresses here an idea of religion which is simultaneously esoteric (God's spirit speaks only to those who have ears to hear him), and anti-dogmatic. He refers to the essence of all religions, which has lost its old garments and is looking for new ones. In Part III his anxiety crops up again because of the precarious human condition he perceives around and within himself: he admits that 'We cannot by our own strength go' (p. 222), that men do believe in something which transcends their existence, but that they do not know how to identify it. The only way mankind can face this void is to put on a 'passive fortitude' (p. 224), endure their unstable condition, and hope that a new spiritual Form will speak to them in the future. The human condition being one of constant waiting without knowing what the outcome will be, men cannot help developing anxiety -- an idea predating Beckett. Yet towards the end the poet suggests some hope: 'A dawn-light creeps throughout the gloom,/ Sullenly sinks the storm of wrath' (p. 226).

In 1858 the solution Thomson had proposed to himself to overcome the anxiety of scepticism did not satisfy him anymore. The poem entitled 'A Recusant' is about an individual who is no longer supported by any belief, not even by a personal, individualised creed, and who, at the same time, cannot face his spiritual void with indifference but feels a deep sense of guilt. The poem was originally called 'Heresy',²³ which obviously referred to the apostate, unorthodox behaviour of the protagonist. He can only look at the Church standing in front of him, without partaking of the ritual ceremonies inside it because of his religious doubts. His

²² 'Suggested by Matthew Arnold's 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse'', *A Voice from the Nile and Other Poems* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1884), pp. 214-227 (pp. 216-217).

²³ See *Poems and Some Letters*, p. 262n.

alienation from the gathered community and their share of beliefs is clearly painful to him. At some point the poem seems to echo Montaigne's philosophy: the poet suggests that men must accept rather than look for the solution to their doubts, because the human condition is one of perpetual quest. Yet it is clear that the poet is once again uncertain, his feelings fluctuating between doubt and fear.

'Robert Burns' is both a literary homage to a poet Thomson admired, and another expression of his anti-dogmatism and scepticism. What he especially praises in Burns is his sympathetic, egalitarian treatment of human beings, which strongly contravenes both the Calvinistic theory of the elect, and the Christian Manichean division between the saved and the damned. In fact, Thomson overstates Burns's denunciation of fanaticism when he describes him as a pagan referring to 'The blood of his heathen manhood'.²⁴ The figure of the disbeliever presented in this poem is different from that of 'A Recusant'; he is someone who has learnt how to cope with his sceptical mind, who is nostalgic maybe but never despairing. He therefore can be interpreted as an idealised, unrealistic representation of the poet himself, who was always and everywhere accompanied by the shadow of despair and the obsession of guilt.

The last poem about loss of faith which deserves some attention is 'A Real Vision of Sin'. The title is very significant: Thomson offers here a realistic, quasi-Dickensian picture of two derelicts of society who cannot find a better solution to their existential problems than committing suicide. They are living embodiments of sin, their physical appearance is the exteriorisation of their spiritual stains, and it may be that Thomson intended them as the visual representation of his own guilt complex. The two protagonists are both unbelievers, but their reaction to the possibility of suicide is different -- at least at the beginning: while the woman does not reveal any sign of hesitation, the man expresses a sort of Hamletic preoccupation about what awaits them after death, which is an *ante-litteram* existentialist anguish in front of the unknown. For a moment he thinks it would be preferable to endure the present lot instead of leaping into a mysterious, dark, and maybe more horrible condition, but it is

²⁴ 'Robert Burns', in *A Voice from the Nile and Other Poems*, pp. 250-251 (p. 251).

just a fleeting idea, because, in the end, they both yield to the temptation of putting an end to their present grievous state. The suicide theme is one of the leit-motifs of Thomson's poetry; particularly, it recurs in the beautiful poem 'In the Room' of 1867, and later in *The City of Dreadful Night*. In other poems, it is indirectly alluded to as one of the possible means to reach a Nirvana-like spiritual rest. In real life though, the poet never embraced this possibility, although the way he let himself be consumed by dipsomania might have hidden suicidal intentions.

In the same period, Thomson composed several poems characterised by a similar gloomy tone, but more specifically focusing on the theme of absence and consequent mourning. Like 'Love's Dawn' and 'Parting', they are connected with the death of Matilda Weller. The first of them chronologically is 'Tasso to Leonora' (*A Voice from the Nile*), composed in 1856. This is a wonderfully constructed dramatic monologue in the voice of Tasso, the late Renaissance poet who, according to a legend, lived for some time in a sort of insanity hospital in Ferrara. Several writers were fascinated by the story; Byron, for instance, wrote a 'Lament for Tasso' in 1818. Nonetheless, the figure of Tasso provided Thomson with just another poetic *persona*, and he borrowed Browning's technique to objectify his own personal ideas. He imagines Tasso inside a dungeon which symbolises the lack of communication between himself, the actor uttering his monologue, and the other puppet-men of the world theatre acting outside his cell. The theatrical aspects of the poem are indeed very effective. Not only does the whole monologue look like a tragic harangue of a play, but the soliloquist himself makes use of the metaphor of the stage to describe the human world. Leonora, himself, all men are but puppets moved by an inscrutable force in the theatre of the universe, 'Vexed with the insensate stir/ Of this doleful Mime distraught,/ By such pigmy puppets wrought'.²⁵ Yet Tasso cannot coldly resign himself to the thought that 'All is but a mocking Mime' (p. 200), but he foresees a time when both himself and Leonora will put off their masks, and their masculine and feminine beings will be reunited to form the perfect androgynous 'whole'.

²⁵ 'Tasso to Leonora', in *A Voice from the Nile*, pp. 186-201 (p. 197).

Thomson's philosophic outlook had obviously undergone another change in 1856. The 'whole' he speaks of echoes the Shelleyan 'One', a similar idea expressed by Novalis, and even elements of some Oriental religions.²⁶ Clearly, the poet was then expanding his moral and philosophical horizons beyond the ideological borders of Christianity. The representation of men as phenomenal units, therefore ephemeral, against the nouminous essence they can reach only after taking off their masks evokes the Platonic world of 'Ideas' and their earthly counterfeits. Moreover, in the image of the puppet-men Thomson is an existentialist *ante-litteram*. They are an anticipation of T. S. Eliot's 'hollow men' and of the characters of much modern literature, such as the 'spectres' of Ibsen's plays or the protagonists of Beckett's and Pirandello's tragicomedies. Despite this general gloomy vision of the world, in 'Tasso to Leonora' Thomson has not definitively abandoned his belief in an after-life and in the immortality of the soul, although these concepts appear to be associated with Platonic idealism rather than with Christian religion.

The two poems 'Marriage' (*Poems and Some Letters*) and 'At Death's Door' (*Poems and Some Letters*) complete the series *Four Points in a Life*. Both of them return to the central theme of 'Parting': the reunion of the two lovers in eternal peace after death. The second poem, in fact, conveys such a serene image of death, in such a composed tone, that one risks jumping to the wrong conclusion that the poet had then finally overcome his spiritual disturbances. This illusion though vanishes immediately when one turns to other poems written in the same period. The already mentioned 'A Recusant' is of the same year. The range of poems composed in 1857 appears extremely heterogeneous within Thomson's *opera omnia*. His dual nature becomes particularly visible when we set a poem like *The Doom of a City*, an expression of his night side, beside cheerful poems such as 'The Jolly Veterans' and 'A Happy Poet', while in 'A Festival of Life' the two components seem to coexist.

Four other poems written in the late fifties, and belonging to the group about absence and mourning are worth mentioning: 'Bertram to the Most Noble and Beautiful Lady Geraldine' (*Vane's Story*), 'The Fadeless Bower' (*Vane's Story*), 'The

²⁶ See Vachot, pp. 440-444.

Deliverer' (*A Voice from the Nile*), and 'Mater Tenebrarum' (*Vane's Story*). Thomson was in Dublin when he composed them, far from his London friends, especially the Grays. There is evidence that he was particularly fond of the young Helen Gray, which gave rise to various critical speculations about the romance with Matilda. It may be that the story of Thomson's platonic relationship with Matilda has been inflated by some of his biographers, misled by his idealistic representation of love in his writing. It is likely that Thomson had Helen and not Matilda in mind when he was in Ireland during those years. A further proof is provided by the poem 'Meeting Again' (*Vane's Story*), written in 1860 when the poet went to London to pay a visit, his last one, to the Grays.

'Bertram to the Most Noble and Beautiful Lady Geraldine' is a poem about the impossibility of a specific love relationship, which was a theme of 'Tasso to Leonora' as well. The poet meets his lover during a ball. He would like to express his feelings to her but she discourages him because of her scornful attitude towards him. As Bertram cannot make his dream of love concrete, so the poet was unable to consummate his love for Matilda, who, for this reason, remains primarily a symbol of platonic love, similar to the idealised representation in Shelley's *Epipsychidion*. The figure of just such an angelic woman appears also in 'The Fadeless Bower' and 'The Deliverer'.

The bower described in the former poem is the place where the poet confessed his passion to his lover for the first time. Now she is dead but the bower is still there, a visual symbol of their love, a magic place where his feelings are so intensified that the image of the girl becomes confused with that of the most beautiful rose of the bower. When the poet realises he is just daydreaming, the vision fades and the bower loses its entrancing power. One hope still remains, that someday he will meet her again in another world. Similarly, the eponymous 'deliverer' of the latter poem is the angelic woman who appears to the protagonist. He is a prisoner like Tasso, but, instead of overcoming the claustrophobic closure of the prison walls by means of his imagination, he dreams about his freedom and this is brought about by the Angel. This Beatrice-like figure speaks to him about the meaning of love in human life. She defines it as the means to accomplish the full life cycle by the fusion of masculinity and

femininity to create the family unit. This idea recalls the Platonic myth of Hermaphrodite, but it also hides a more personal aspect: the poet's craving of a family life which he never enjoyed fully. Some of the images in the poem have a surrealistic halo which looks forward to the atmosphere of later poems such as 'Insomnia' and *The City of Dreadful Night*, but the sense of despair and spiritual void expressed in these pieces is totally lacking in 'The Deliverer', where the protagonist's prayer to God suggests that Thomson's Christian beliefs had not been completely overturned.

The 1859 poem entitled 'Mater Tenebrarum', similar to the previous poems on absence and mourning in its evocation of the 'dead child', differs from them in that it records for the first time the poet's doubt about the immortality of the soul, which until 1859 was a strong remnant of orthodox Christianity mingled with Platonic and Buddhist components. In the poem, he represents his failed attempt to establish a contact with his dead lover; her utter silence to his prayer persuades him that she is dead both physically and spiritually. The picture of the world without the girl doubles the description we find in *The Doom of the City*, written two years earlier. His pessimism is expressed in the following verses, which, through their slow rhythm and their length, represent the formal, verbal mirror of the endless, sleepless night the poet is experiencing:

No hope in this worn-out world, no hope beyond the tomb;
No living and living God, but blind and stony Doom.
Anguish and grief and sin, terror, disease and despair.²⁷

Most of Thomson's poems are characterised by a formal rhythm which reflects the poet's mood and train of thought. Very often he makes use of the rhythmic triads exemplified in the verses above; the triplets oblige us to proceed slowly in our reading, and to respect the metrical pauses that they imply. This kind of formal pattern will be one of the supporting elements in the formal architecture of *The City of Dreadful Night*.

'Mater Tenebrarum' marks a further step towards Thomson's total dismissal of Christian orthodoxy, and, despite its final ambiguous verses, where he seems to assert again the immortality of his lover's soul, it can be considered a result of his pessimistic view of institutional creeds. From 1857 till 1860 Thomson's invective is especially directed at the institutions of his time, the government and the Church, and his vituperation against them is at times so loud and so harsh that paradoxically he ends up assuming the tone of a reproachful preacher. As his poems show, Thomson could easily cope with such inconsistencies aroused by his paradoxes, maybe because he saw the whole universe as an immense theatre of absurdities and incongruities. The epitome of his anomalous representations is the cathedral scene in *The City of Dreadful Night*, where the preacher is an agnostic addressing his Nietzschean tirade to the astounded congregation.

Thomson's denunciation of the social and moral diseases stemming from Victorian institutions emerges in particular in the 1857 poem *The Doom of a City* (*Poems and Some Letters*). The length and the verbal richness of the poem are at times drawbacks to the full appreciation of its contents, which are remarkable especially as a prefiguration of the essential themes of *The City of Dreadful Night*. It preshadows the later poem in its double representation, visionary on the one hand, realistic on the other, and also in the descriptive and visual quality of the poet's imagination. Yet the general tone is different: the speaking voice in *The Doom of a City* belongs to someone who still beholds a spiritual integrity supported by his belief in a transcendental order and in a superior Providence; conversely, the poet of the subsequent poem has lost the sense of security and succour that religious faith can provide. In other words, the figure of the poet lurking behind the earlier poem is reminiscent of the Romantic image of the prophet-poet, of the poet as God's emissary, whose task is to leave a didactic message to ordinary men. On the other hand, the author speaking through the verses of *The City of Dreadful Night* has lost his divine, superhuman halo to become simply one of the 'desolate, Fate-smitten' wandering individuals he addresses in the 'Proem'.

²⁷ 'Mater Tenebrarum', in *Vane's Story, Weddah and Om-el-Bonain, and Other Poems*, pp. 174-176

The Doom of a City is composed of four parts, each divided into different sections, forming a framework which points towards that of the 1874 poem. In a note Thomson informs us about the source of the poem: 'The City of the Statues is from the tale of Zobeide in the History of the Three Ladies of Bagdad and the Three Calenders'.²⁸ The tale of Zobeide is included in the *Arabian Nights*, which appealed to Thomson's imagination in his boyhood. There is indeed in the poem a verbal and descriptive sensuousness which will become an essential part of the aesthetic cult of the 80's and 90's, and which is connected with the nineteenth-century mythical, romanticised representation of the Orient. In the same note, Thomson defines the poem as a 'Fantasia',²⁹ and certainly the poem presents many features of a fantastic, supernatural verse tale from beginning to end.

The opening part is called 'The Voyage', and it immediately presents us with the protagonist, the classical wandering hero (who will become the modern wandering anti-hero in *The City of Dreadful Night*) who, unable to sleep in his prison-house, sets off on his journey through the labyrinthine topography of the city. Undoubtedly, he is one of Thomson's poetic alter-egos, and his alienated condition within the urban complex, his status of foreigner among the city mass, are the literary projection of Thomson's own feelings of his plight in London. He even thinks about suicide as a way of escaping the urban prison for ever, but his stoical endurance finally prevails, and he decides instead to embark on a voyage. His desire and urge to 'dare the desert sea'³⁰ and his hubris relate him to the Ulyssean and Promethean characters of Romantic poetry, in particular Shelley's and Byron's defiant heroes, while his ability to suppress the thought of suicide evokes Schopenhauer's notion of the Will to live. The sea itself is another common *topos* of both classical and romantic literature, and in *The Doom of a City* it stands for the Unknown, that which the human mind endlessly yearns for, the mystery of life, fascinating and frightening at the same time. Anyway, the poet prefers to face the Unknown of the sea rather than be anchored in the known city, which he describes as a 'stifling tomb' (p. 13) from which he must

(p. 176).

²⁸ See *Poems and Some Letters*, p. 260n.

²⁹ Ibid.

escape. The claustrophobic, dim atmosphere of the urban setting, and especially its association with the graveyard are very close to Leopardi's depiction of his own native town, another 'city of dreadful night'.

A small boat carries the poet along a river towards the open sea. At this point, the supernatural enters the poem, and what we can vividly see is a sea tempest with echoes both of Coleridge and of the Apocalypse. The darkness of the night is now and then brightened by sparkling lights (the whole picture is a metaphor of human life), until the poet perceives ghostly beings around him. The entire description is quite obscure, looking like a mere exercise of the poet's imagination, and only a few verses later can the reader understand what it is going on. The meaning of the representation becomes clearer in the episode of the sea monster. Before then, the poet succeeded in arousing the reader's curiosity and suspense by conveying his inner perturbation without identifying its source. His enigmatic and intricate sentences contributed to this effect, as when he said: 'I knew, but would not know,/ I knew too well, but knowledge was despair' (p. 18). The scene of the Leviathan monster helps the reader to decipher these words and recognise the object of the 'knowledge' referred to. The dreadful sea titan is an allegory: it is the externalisation of the poet's interior 'monsters', of his aberrations such as his sinfulness and his guilt; thus it significantly looks forward to MacDiarmid's octopus and sea-serpent in *A Drunk Man* and other poems. The outer projection of his evil has a cathartic effect: when the monster disappears, he feels like a prisoner escaped from his cell, the new sense of freedom is expressed by the poet by means of a simile reminiscent of Dante's typical *comparatio*. The first part of the poem ends with an idyllic picture which reflects the calm restored both outside and inside the poet's consciousness.

The following part, entitled 'The City', is that which relates the poem most clearly to *The City of Dreadful Night*. The voyager arrives at a city lying on a bay, apparently inhabited, given the multitude of palaces and buildings forming it, yet no signs of human life spring from the houses. Everything lies in utter, death-like silence.

³⁰ *The Doom of a City*, in *Poems and Some Letters*, pp. 12-54 (p. 13).

The vision of the bare squares and desert streets calls to mind some of De Chirico's paintings; the narrator is the only living being walking along and through the entangled paths of the city. While wandering about, he also ponders about the meaning and worth of life, wondering whether there is any sense at all in our individual pilgrimage through existence. His own voyage is after all a Dante-like allegory of human life, of all men's pilgrimages, so that he looks like a modern Everyman, or a reborn Dante embarking on a journey of self- and universal discovery. But before attaining the goal of his quest, the poet-hero must undergo a series of tests. He has already passed the first one: the tempest and the confrontation with the sea monster; having regained his self-confidence, he can go on to the next trial.

In the city it is not the visual image of his own moral weaknesses that he has to face but that of the tragic condition of mankind at large. He is walking around when he suddenly sees a funeral cortège; the mourned person is a young girl, another reminiscence of Matilda. He approaches nearer the melancholy people in order to see them better; the scene he can now clearly envision is shocking. He realises that the participants in the funeral are not living beings but statues carved in stone, for ever petrified in their gloomy expressions and sombre gestures. Hence the city suddenly turns into a Mausoleum in front of his eyes, 'a dark dead dearth/ Of soulless silence yawned in dreadful mystery' (p. 23). The petrification of the city inhabitants is in a sense even more appalling than the condition of the dwellers of the posterior 'city of dreadful night': in *The Doom of a City* the city is affected by total, unalterable fossilisation, whereas in the later city there are at least some indications of human life, that is, the urban sounds and movement.

The poet does not clarify whether the city inhabitants were turned to stone by some inscrutable force or whether they have never been real men at all, but surely they bear some symbolical meaning. Personally, I see them as the fantastic representation of modern men living in a city, and once again this representation is based on an apparent paradox: urban life is generally seen as the opposite of stillness and silence, but obviously it is not the phenomenal, the external aspects of the city that the poet intended to picture. On the contrary, he wanted to render visible the inner life of the city denizens of his time, whom he saw as spiritually paralysed, unable to cope with

the religious and moral dilemmas produced by the new scientific discoveries and theories, such as Darwinism and the new higher criticism of the Bible. Moreover, their spiritual stagnation is parallel to their worship of Mammon and material success. The statues therefore offer another gloomy picture of modern man, particularly of the modern city inhabitant, many years before Joyce wrote *Dubliners*, where a similar spiritual paralysis is substantiated by the realism of the characters. Contrary to the figures in Keats's *Ode to a Grecian Urn*, there is no sublime quality in the immobility and immutability of the statues' postures. The poet would rather hear them utter demonic words than see them dumb, so he writes:

Better, far better that the air be rife
With weird deliriums of demonic life,
Than void with utter idiotic death. (p. 28)

After the shocking vision of petrified humanity, the wandering hero has to face two more trials: first, he sees his own skeleton beside him, an image of death haunting him; secondly, he meets the personification of Misery, which he describes as man's bride, accompanying him everywhere. He realises indeed that his own miserable condition, his gloom, and melancholy overwhelm him whenever he drives his life away from human intercourse to look for an isolated, quiet island far from the city turmoil. The second part therefore closes with the poet's admittance of the importance of human sympathy and solidarity.

The third part, 'The Judgements', is less convincing, due to the inflated artificiality of the whole representation and of the tone and style used to express it. This is the part concerning the doom, the judgement which a supernatural voice from the sky delivers to the stony figures. Most of them are damned, the few who survive turn into marble statues and ascend purified to heaven. This Manichean division between saved and damned spirits shows that in 1857 Thomson was close to his 1855 position: he still believed in a supreme Providence, while he condemned the falsity and aridity of the institutional, dogmatic Church.

In the fourth, conclusive part, called 'The Return', the poet expresses this position clearly. After leaving the 'great City' (p. 50), he returns to the real city, a London which is described as a modern Sodom, deserving a similar punishment. The images of the petrified city and that of London overlap: the real city appears to him as ossified as the visionary one, its Church is a 'Fossil of Faith' (p. 53), its inhabitants resemble the skeleton which the poet perceived beside him, equally deprived of a heart and a soul. The message he brings back from his voyage is 'Repent, reform, or perish', which means that Thomson had not lost yet his confidence in man's ability to improve his condition, that he still believed in a form of personal meliorism, to be achieved not through material gain, but by submitting oneself to the stings of purgatory in order to be freed from sin and guilt. The oratorical tone characterising the last two parts cannot certainly be considered one of the more successful aspects of the poem; at times it becomes so bombastic that one wonders whether the author is hiding an ironic intent. The poet's task as messenger is assumed, feigned rather than natural, as if Thomson were imitating, either mockingly or seriously, one of the preachers whom he must surely have heard speak from the pulpit, especially in his boyhood.

Apart from these flaws, the poem can be generally regarded as a success, superior in style and imagery to the other narrative poem of the same period: 'A Festival of Life' (*A Voice from the Nile*). This is an ironical title. The long poem is an allegory in free ode-like stanzas about death rather than life, and its imagery and style are very close to those of Gothic or pseudo-Gothic poems such as Poe's 'The Mask of Red Death'. It is characterised by the same grotesque components, connected with the ambiguous representation and significance of death it conveys.

The life-death dichotomy is the essential underlying theme of the poem, which explains also the apparent inconsistency of the title. As a matter of fact, in many of his poems, Thomson represents the borderline between life and death as a shadowland, a diaphanous pellicle which can be broken through very easily. This may also justify why he adopted the pseudonym 'Crepusculus' for some time, and why so many of his poems are characterised by a twilight atmosphere. A recurrent theme in his works is also the relationship between sleep and death, or between dreams and

what awaits us after death, and the poet's feelings associated with this theme shift from anxiety to a yearning for peace and rest. Death-like sleep would, for instance, come as a release from his ever-present anguish to the protagonist of 'Insomnia'. On other occasions, Thomson substitutes one of the terms of the relationship with its opposite: now life, not death, is associated with dreams. A web of interrelations is thus woven by the poet between different entities, and the significant syllogism deriving from them all is that life and death find in the dimension of sleep and dreams a point of conjunction. In *The City of Dreadful Night*, Thomson characterises life as a 'dream whose shapes return',³¹ and in other poems, including *The Doom of a City*, he depicts it as 'death in life', arid and desolate like a desert.

Dreams and dream-like states are part of Thomson's surrealism, which is constantly mingled with his realism. The events described in 'A Festival of Life' offer a perfect exemplification of this complex blend. They are indeed the contents of a dream; as they appear so they suddenly vanish, with the same rapidity things come and go in real life. Heraclitus's '*pantha rei*' (everything flows) is indeed immediately evoked in the epigraph, taken from Shelley's 'Adonais'. In the beginning, the 'I' of the poem is on a shore, facing a rough, but, in Romantic terms, sublime sea in the middle of the night. Abruptly the scene changes, and we leap with the protagonist into his visionary world. The transition from wake to sleep is not mentioned, but certainly what can be seen through his eyes is far removed from the present, physical world. A fantastic palace, radiating colourful lights, and pouring different sounds out of its halls into the stormy air, arises in front of him. As if gifted with supernatural powers, the poet can overlook the events which are taking place inside the palace.

He perceives a fancy dress party in which the Masques are enjoying a sort of pagan orgy, enraptured in hectic dancing and singing. The frenzied bacchanal is interrupted by the arrival of two strangers, two weird masked individuals who keep themselves aloof from the rest, 'silent and dark and solemn',³² and who stare at the crazy party with 'dark intolerable eyes' (p. 177). One of them is a beautiful Queen, while her companion looks like a dreadful monster, a demonic Medusa with a grinning

³¹ *The City of Dreadful Night*, ed. by Edwin Morgan (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993), I. 15.

face. The former is enchanting, seductive like a dark Madonna, the latter is repulsive and abominable. From their arrival, many people begin to disappear until the colourful, saturnalian party turns into a mourning ceremony, and all the Masques become spectral figures who follow the two strangers. The palace falls into pieces until it vanishes completely; as the vision fades, the poet wakes up, still in front of the sea, which he now contemplates with pantheistic admiration. The masquerade is an allegorical representation of human life: men are all masked people in the sense that they live a life built on false assumptions and sham values, until they face the reality of death, which is always ambiguous like a Sphinx, its mystery both enticing and dreadful.

To a similar melancholic, gloomy vein belong other poems written between 1857 and 1859. 'Withered Leaves' (*Vane's Story*) is about the transitory quality of human life: the roses of yesterday have become the withered leaves of today, even if some form of life still emanates from them, the life recorded in the memories associated with them. In 'Lines on His Twenty-Third Birthday' (*Poems and Some Letters*), the poet looks back to the past year, and what he perceives is a gloomy spectacle: he sees himself as a stranger among his fellows, isolated from the 'Sea of life' surrounding him.³² The vision of the future is not more consoling, but he promises to himself he will not yield but endure the pangs of existence. 'A Requiem' (*Vane's Story*) opposes to this image of stoical endurance that of a poet yearning for the eternal peace of death. The same pessimism towards life characterises the poem called 'The Cypress and the Roses' (*Vane's Story*), where the black cypress stands for adverse destiny and the roses are the emblem of man's struggle to build something positive in life. The roses can never grow because of the ominous presence of the cypress's shade; symbolically, man's efforts to 'grow' his own garden, to live a constructive life is worthless. This poem evinces Thomson's increasing disbelief in the theory of meliorism he adhered to until 1857.

As I have previously mentioned, Thomson's life was not merely an insomniac dreadful night, but retained for him also moments of light and cheerfulness which he

³² 'A Festival of Life', *A Voice from the Nile and Other Poems*, pp. 168-185 (p. 175).

was sometimes able to record in his poetry. In 1857 Thomson was still working as army schoolmaster, a job which at times frustrated him, but also provided him with moments of merriment, which he recorded in such poems as 'A Chant' (*A Voice from the Nile*), 'The Jolly Veterans' (*Vane's Story*) and 'A Capstan Chorus' (*Vane's Story*). It is hard to say if Thomson took an active part in the social life of the soldiers, but the joyful tone of these poems is genuine.

'A Happy Poet' (*A Voice from the Nile*) and 'The Lord of the Castle of Indolence' (*Poems and Some Letters*), written in 1857 and 1859 respectively, open the series of Thomson's mainly optimistic poems, envisaging the themes of later poems such as 'The Naked Goddess', the 'Cockney poems', 'At Belvoir', 'The Sleeper' and 'He Heard Her Sing'. The eponymous 'happy poet' is Thomson himself in one of his most joyful moods. He is still the Romantic, individualist poet who tends to stand off from other men, but, instead of resenting his solipsism, he deliberately chooses it in order to observe humanity more objectively, but still sympathetically. He is also the poet of nature, able, like the Romantic poet, to see a correspondence between his inner life and the outer world, and, like the symbolist poet, to read the spiritual ciphers inscribed in the physical world. Thomson's philosophic ideas in 'A Happy Poet' include pantheism, the Kantian concept of subjective reality (not very far, after all, from the contemporary theory of 'pathetic fallacy' formulated by Ruskin), and the Buddhist notion of the life cycle comprehending both man and nature. His optimism here affects even the image of death. To the question 'what is Death?', he answers,

The tranquil slumber dear and strange and boon
That feed at whiles our waking being breath;
The solemn midnight of this glorious moon,
With countless distant stars, and each a sun,
Revealed harmonious with our daily one.³⁴

³³ 'Lines on His Twenty-Third Birthday', in *Poems and Some Letters*, pp. 54-58 (p. 56).

This description strongly contrasts with the image of death as black abyss and eternal oblivion which emerges in later poems.

The 1859 poem called 'The Lord of the Castle of Indolence' is characterised by a similar tone, but the subject matter is different. It concerns one aspect of the poet's radical and unorthodox attitude towards Victorian ethics and morality. By depicting the figure of a king who spends his life in indolence and laziness, he intends to attack the Victorian cult of labour, the frenzy and 'much ado about nothing' of modern life. The title pays homage to the other James Thomson, the eighteenth-century poet who wrote 'The Castle of Indolence', from which Thomson derived the Spenserian stanza form. Yet, contrary to the author of *The Seasons*, who described the contrast between English and Scottish societies without taking sides with either of them, Thomson clearly favours the creation of a society based on inertia rather than on excessive labour. His namesake returns in a later poem entitled 'On the Terrace at Richmond' (*Poems and Some Letters*), in which he mentions again the Lord of the Castle of Indolence. The 1859 poem is interesting also because it anticipates the content of a later essay written in 1867 called 'Indolence: A Moral Essay', in which he assumes an anti-Carlyle position about the value of work in human life. His antagonism to this doctrine is expressed by means of a sarcastic tone, as when he writes: 'His continual cry of Work! Work! Work! is simply the Imperative mood of a doctrine which couched in the quiet Indicative reads "Mankind is a damned rascal"'.³⁴ According to Thomson, the Victorian obsession with labour was only the means for the coward individuals to avoid reflecting upon their life, and it betrayed man's reluctance to 'settle for a time in tranquillity, having a notion that if they pause, the world must come to a full stop [...]' (p. 161).

As early as 1859, Thomson had turned down the possibility of giving a sense to his life through material and utilitarian means, he had rejected any easy, ephemeral consolations, including that of material success, and from 1860 until 1870 he looked for other ways of dissolving his tormenting doubts.

³⁴ 'A Happy Poet', *A Voice from the Nile and Other Poems*, pp. 202-213 (p. 213).

iii. The search for an alternative faith (1860-1870)

In 1860 Thomson was still working in the army and therefore had to change his residence according to the places to which he was posted. Yet from 1862 his life was mostly based in London, although his sense of alienation and strangeness in the city never allowed him fully to belong to it. Thomson was a wanderer both physically and spiritually throughout his life, haunted by an anxious feeling of exclusion and estrangement. Until 1860, even if some of his poems reveal his first hesitations and apprehensions towards religious and political orthodoxy, Thomson found in Christianity a moral and psychological support. Increasingly though, he became aware of the controversies and discrepancies which maimed the institutional creed at its core, and by 1861 he found himself unable to cope with the dogmatic, ritualistic and theological aspects of Christianity.

The ten years preceding the composition of *The City of Dreadful Night* were the years of Thomson's quest for a new form of belief which could replace the old one. His first attempt crops up in a poem which inaugurates the series of his great poems of despair: 'To Our Ladies of Death' (*Poems and Some Letters*), written in 1860, and prefiguring later pieces such as 'In the Room', *The City of Dreadful Night*, 'The Poet and His Muse', and 'Insomnia'. The poem marks a turning point in his poetic production. It asserts more conspicuously what he already hinted at in 'Suggested by Matthew Arnold's "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse"' and in *A Doom of the City*: mankind is generally corrupted and sinful because the traditional pillars of society, Church and Government, are marred by confusion and are unable to act as guides; hence the poet's turning away from them, and his conception of a 'personal religion'. His new creed was a pantheistic faith based on the idea that after death all men would finally merge into the universal spirit of Mother Nature and be born again under different forms, either human or non-human. In fact, Thomson's pantheism is very peculiar: it does not merely correspond to the belief in the existence of a divine essence in nature, but to a faith which blends ideas deriving from Oriental

³⁵ 'Indolence: A Moral Essay', in *Essays and Phantasies*, pp. 142-165 (pp. 143-144).

religions with the philosophical notion of the immortality of universal matter. We may perceive in it also echoes of Romantic organicism, but Thomson was never a sentimental pantheist, because he always saw nature as twofold, dualistic, bright and dark, good and bad.

The vision of all men partaking of a universal life cycle, and undergoing a sort of metempsychosis whereby their spirit and matter are interchangeable, suggests also another novelty in Thomson's poetry. Though 'personal', his new faith presupposed a universalistic rather than an individualistic dimension: for the first time, the poet could bridge the distance between himself and the others by considering himself as well as them elements of and contributors to the cosmic life process. Therefore his pessimism in this poem is not yet absolute; it may be defined as 'historical', as Leopardi's pessimism, for example, is usually called before it becomes 'cosmic', that is, embracing everything, institutions, men and nature. Thomson's ideas and feelings are expressed in particular in the following lines:

That when I thus have drunk my inmost fill
Of perfect peace, I may arise renewed;
In soul and body, intellect and will,
Equal to cope with Life whate'er its mood;
To sway its storm and energise its calm; [...]

But if this cannot be, no less I cry,
Come, lead me with thy terrorless control
Down to our Mother's bosom, there to die
By abdication of my separate soul:
So shall this single, self-impelling piece
Of mechanism from lone labour cease,
Resolving into union with the Whole.³⁶

³⁶ 'To Our Ladies of Death', in *Poems and Some Letters*, pp. 68-73 (p. 72)

The 'Whole' mentioned here is different from the 'whole' of earlier poems: it is not the spiritual unity of the two lovers but the universal life of nature, encompassing all forms of being and becoming. In the verses just quoted, the poet is addressing the Lady of Oblivion, the one among the Ladies of Death to whom he feels most close.

In 'A Festival of Life', Thomson represented death as dual; in 'To Our Ladies of Death', the image of death becomes a trinity: the Lady of Beatitudes, the Lady of Annihilation and the Lady of Oblivion. The poem opens with the image of the poet who, having lost all hopes and strength to endure life, wishes to die. Thus he addresses the Lady of Oblivion, after explaining the reasons why he cannot appeal to the other two Ladies. The Lady of Beatitudes receives the pure, faithful men, and his sins and guilt hinder him from invoking her. On the other hand, the Lady of Annihilation, depicted as a 'mighty statue of demoniac mien', and a 'Statue of Despair' (p. 70), represents the opposite extreme, absolute evil and damnation, but the poet does not recognise himself in any of the satanic beings the Lady attracts to her like a sorceress.

Thomson still keeps here a manichean division between evil and good, but his own diverging from the two extremes is certainly indicative. He rejects the absolutism of metaphysical light and darkness to accept instead the condition of twilight with its variety of brightness and shade. The Lady of Oblivion welcomes the individuals who have lived in a perpetual crepuscular state, who have been neither the apostles of goodness nor the apologists of evil, but the victims of existential *ennui* and despair. The literary models underlying the poem are De Quincey, especially his 'Suspiria de Profundis', and Dante, while Browning supplied the stanza form of his 'Guardian Angel': four decasyllables rhyming ABABA followed by a couplet and a final decasyllable rhyming with the second verse. This is also the metre adopted most frequently in *The City of Dreadful Night*. Apart from these literary connections, the poem is very original in its overall structure, almost classical in its tripartite form, and in its figurative language. An example is given by the effectiveness of the alliteration in the following line: 'Weary of struggling in all-sterile strife' (p. 68).

Between 1862 and 1866 various elements concurred to embitter Thomson's pessimism and to accelerate the process which would finally lead him to utter unbelief and gloominess. In 1862, owing to a trifling incident, Thomson was discharged from the army, which meant he had to look for other sources of financial support.³⁷ He therefore moved to London, which was not yet for him the 'city of dreadful night', although the city rhythms, its humdrum life, and social contradictions certainly did not act as antidotes against his inborn melancholy and his already rooted pessimism. In London he entered Bradlaugh's household, and consequently established his first connections with the exponents of contemporary radical and atheist ideology. It is undeniable that it was thanks to Bradlaugh that Thomson managed to get some of his poems published in secularist journals and papers which censored neither themes nor style, and were therefore willing to accept his works. The collaboration between the thinker and the poet continued until 1866, when Thomson left his house and went to live on his own, in the single room he depicts in the poem 'In the Room'. Thomson wrote only three political poems in his life, and the fact that two of them were composed during the years of his collaboration with Bradlaugh testifies to the influence which the militant thinker exerted on him. 'A Polish Insurgent' (*Poems and Some Letters*) and 'Garibaldi Revisiting England' (*Vane's Story*) are discordant with the rest of Thomson's poetry, although the former does contain a personal element, since the poet, among other jobs, worked as secretary of the Polish Committee of London.

Another important development characterising these years was Thomson's interest in Giacomo Leopardi, the Italian poet in whose writing he found a corroboration of his own ideas. He started to read Leopardi sometime between 1862 and 1866. Immediately the Italian became one of his major literary models, and he continued to be so, at least until the time Thomson embarked on the composition of his famous masterpiece, when Dante gradually took over as the poet's literary model.

³⁷ See T. Leonard, pp. 97-98. Thomson was present with other teachers when one of them took a swim for a bet in a local pond where swimming was forbidden. He refused to report the names of the witnesses, and therefore was put on a charge of 'disrespectful conduct'. More serious reasons for his discharge from the army might have been his connections with the radical Charles Bradlaugh, the

Thomson considered Leopardi a kindred soul, probably not only because the Italian writer expressed the same ideas about human life and nature, but also because he must have recognised that their lives were linked by appalling similarities. Both of them had a love-hate relationship with their family setting and with the traditions and principles upon which it was based; both of them lived through unhappy love experiences, and moreover both of them suffered from psycho-physical problems, even if Leopardi's weak constitution afflicted him from his birth, whereas Thomson's dipsomania became a serious problem only after 1862. Yet the most interesting affinity between them is their personal relationship with the place where they lived most of their life. Leopardi's Recanati was only a small provincial town compared with Thomson's London, but they are represented in a strikingly similar way in their works. Recanati was Leopardi's 'city of dreadful night' or of 'horrible night', as he described it in his *Epistolario*, which Thomson partly translated, and included in his biographical study of the Italian poet which was never published in his life time but posthumously in the volume edited by Dobell: *Essays, Dialogues and Thoughts of Giacomo Leopardi. Translated by James Thomson (B. V.)* (1905).

The poems 'Night' (*Vane's Story*) and 'The Fire That Filled My Heart of Old' (*Vane's Story*), written in 1864, evince the kinship which Thomson felt with Leopardi. The former is in line with Thomson's poems of a melancholic vein; it does not record events but the feelings and moods of a solitary man -- another of Thomson's wandering alter-egos -- in the middle of the death-like, still night. The pivotal theme of the second poem is the *taedium vitae* which both poets experienced abhorring it more than negative feelings, even more than hatred. Thomson describes his life in these words:

No love, no hate, no hope, no fear,

No anguish and no mirth;

Thus life extends from year to year,

fact that he knew things about the army which young soldiers were not supposed to know, and his drinking habits which had already caused him to be charged several times.

A flat of sullen dearth.³⁸

The most significant poem written in 1864 is 'Vane's Story', an autobiographical verse account about the poet's loss of faith. Vane is undoubtedly Thomson's poetic *persona* even though an artistic process is at work whereby life is transmuted into literature. In other words, Vane reveals some similarities with the 'Spasmodic' hero of Alexander Smith's *A Life Drama*, whereas James Thomson, despite his changing moods, was never affected by morbid sentimentalism. In fact, Vane is a more complicated figure than he apparently seems. 'Vane's Story' centres on a few essential aspects which can be summed up in the following points: the *mélange* of realism and fantasy; the agnosticism of the protagonist; his rejection of Victorian moral codes; the value of human solidarity and the superiority of love between men over love towards God; the Leopardian *noia*; and the mixed tone, half-serious, half-humorous, of Vane's tale.

The whole poem is a verse narrative with some features of prose. At the very beginning the poet makes use of a device usually characteristic of fiction: an anonymous narrator says that the story he is going to tell concerns the life of his friend Vane, who died soon after confessing it to the present narrator. The text is therefore Vane's manuscript published by this anonymous editor. The realistic and supernatural components of the poem are intermingled. Vane's own account of his gradual loss of faith and of the meeting with the angelic figure who revived his weary soul is largely factual, but the intervention of this idealised woman, and the image of the Fountain symbolising Vane's life belong to the realm of the uncanny -- similar to the symbolic fountain in Smith's *A Life Drama*. Vane is losing his Christian faith and gradually becoming an agnostic, while the Angel tries to rekindle his spiritual life by touching his most vulnerable side, his deep rooted sense of guilt. The figure of the girl is thus ambiguous: she is the personification of love, but she embodies also all those certainties, those moral and religious codes from which Vane is more and more loosening himself, such as orthodox Christianity and the ethical value of work.

³⁸ 'Night', in *Vane's Story*, pp. 158-159 (p. 158).

Vane's universal vision has turned from theocentric to anthropocentric, and he values human sympathy more than God worship, as he states in these lines:

'Now my gross, earthly, human heart
With man and not with God takes part;
With men, however vile, and not
With Seraphim I cast my lot'³⁹

These words are also the expression of Vane's *carpe diem* philosophy, of his acceptance of the present life despite the *ennui* and the alienation which characterise it. Yet this idea is contradicted when Vane confesses to the woman his wish to die and be born again in a different world where they can be rejoined. Vane's wavering attitude towards human existence is the poetic projection of Thomson's own conflicting ideas in those years. In 1864 he was neither a declared atheist nor a Christian believer anymore, he rejected religious dogmatism but could not conceive a world deprived of any spiritual essence.

In 'Vane's Story' optimism and pessimism counterbalance each other, and the gloominess of later poems is here avoided by means of a peculiar sense of humour with which Vane/Thomson look at the paradoxes and mysteries of existence. This was the kind of humour that Pirandello turned into a literary theory in twentieth-century Italian drama and fiction associated with existentialist philosophy. It represents a unique moment in Thomson's poetry.

'Vane's Story' is still in many respects a Romantic poem: the poet speaks about himself by means of the protagonist's voice; the point of view is subjective and the author's concerns are very personal. One year after the composition of his autobiographical poem, Thomson's interests shifted from his private world to the outer reality, and the results were poems which record almost photographic pictures of the social or the natural environment. There were of course some exceptions.

³⁹ 'Vane's Story', in *Vane's Story*, pp. 1-56 (p. 18).

Poems such as 'William Blake' (*A Voice from the Nile*), and 'Once in a Saintly Passion' (*Poems and Some Letters*), both written in 1865, are two new meditative pieces respectively on the isolation and God-like image of the poet, and on Thomson's obsession with guilt. The poem 'Art' (*Poems and Some Letters*), on the other hand, even if it concerns Thomson's personal views on artistic creation, stands in between the introspective and the realistic pieces. It deals with the poet's meditation on the relationship between art and life, which was also one of the main issues of the time, but it is connected with the 1865 poems about real and social life because it is also the poet's statement of the superiority of life over art. This idea is clearly expressed in these verses: 'Singing is sweet; but be sure of this,/ Lips only sing when they cannot kiss', and 'Statues and pictures and verse may be grand,/ But they are not the Life for which they stand'.⁴⁰

The prose counterpart of this poem is the essay 'Per Contra: The Poet, High Art, Genius' (*Essays and Phantasies*) also written in 1865. It is an indirect satire against the aesthetic cult which would flourish later on in the century, negating the idea of art as expression of the artist's divine inspiration, and therefore showing Thomson's anti-romantic position. Art has always been primarily a trade, a means of supporting one's life, says Thomson, and those who practise it are usually solitary individuals, living in an ivory tower of their own, and showing little empathy towards other men. He goes on to say that art is certainly a means of expression, but one which implies a complicated, elaborate exercise, 'while the best expression of any being is spontaneous, immediate, instinctive, simple, unlaborious'. Essentially what he is saying is that '[...] life remains and ever is as superior to art as a man to the picture of a man'.⁴¹

Life and the representation of life were Thomson's main interests in 1865; he set about observing the outward world, and recorded the objects of his scrutiny both in the poetry and the prose of that period. In the essays written in 1865 and 1866, all appearing in *The National Reformer*, Thomson attacked the sacred cows of Victorian

⁴⁰ 'Art', in *Poems and Some Letters*, pp. 126-127 (p. 127).

⁴¹ 'Per Contra: The Poet, High Art, Genius, in *Essays and Phantasies*, pp. 124-141 (pp. 135, 131).

society without hiding his own personal resentment towards them.⁴² On the other hand, the poems present us with a more idyllic picture, and a sense of beauty even when the poet describes an ugly and sad social reality. This is the case in the two poems respectively entitled 'Low Life. As Overheard in the Train' (*A Voice from the Nile*) and 'Polycrates on Waterloo Bridge' (*Vane's Story*). They reveal the author's attention to social circumstances, especially to the condition of the poor or the working-class, and can therefore be defined as populist poems, recalling the mode of French Naturalism.

'Low Life. As Overheard in the Train' describes a conversation between a dressmaker and a clerk, which the poet overhears during a train journey. From the dialogue it can be deduced that their life is 'low', characterised by the repetitive, mechanical rhythm, and the inhuman routine imposed by their work. The female figure calls to mind the working-class women of Balzac's and Maupassant's novels, embittered by their own living condition. When the clerk proposes to her to join their individual talents through marriage, the first question she asks is: 'And how much a year will you settle on me?'.⁴³ Earlier she had told him about the death of one of her companions during the night, with a coldness which suggests that such tragic events happen ordinarily in her working place. The overall picture is very delicate, almost impressionistic, created by a few effective touches.

Equally effective are the imagery and characterisation in 'Polycrates on Waterloo Bridge'. This time the social status of the protagonist is obscure, but from his thoughts it is clear that his life is not easy. His stance is that of every man in a moment of loneliness, overwhelmed by pessimism and sad reflections. He is standing on a bridge, smoking his pipe, when, staring at the flowing water, he feels a sort of urge to make a 'solemn offering'⁴⁴ to the Gods, and the pipe is the only precious thing he can give them. He looks at his pipe sinking down, and almost envies it,

⁴² See for example the essays 'Bumble, Bumbledom, Bumbleism' in *Essays and Phantasies*, and 'The Story of a famous Old Jewish Firm', 'Christmas Eve in the Upper Circles', 'Jesus: as God; as a Man', and 'Mr Kingsley's Convertites' in *Satires and Profanities* (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1884).

⁴³ 'Low Life. As Overheard in the Train', in *A Voice from the Nile and Other Poems*, pp. 243-246 (p. 246).

because the gloomy waters represent the tomb-like peace he wishes for himself too. Leaning over the water, he hears a supernatural voice addressing him in these words: '*Not that pipe, but —*' (p. 155). It is the voice of his subconscious, which he identifies with the voice of the gods, urging him to follow the pipe, and put an end to the tragedy of his life. That the Gods should push him to commit suicide is certainly paradoxical, and the poem perhaps contains some satirical intent. Yet Polycrates does not embrace their suggestion without hesitation; on the contrary, he replies to the voice: '[...]Sssl how mean/ All the gods have ever been!' (p. 155). The end of the poem is thus open, as if the poet intended to suggest that man's question about whether or not life is worth living cannot be answered.

1865 was generally a happy year for Thomson. He was living in London with the Bradlaughs, and had made many new friends among the cultural and literary circles of the time. The cheerful moments he spent with them are recorded in poems such as 'Sunday Up the River. An Idyll' and 'Sunday at Hampstead' (*Poems and Some Letters*). Both of them are Impressionist poems depicting the country setting and its pastimes. In the former, the poet describes his feelings while he is waiting for his lover. His interior peace and calm are reflected in the surrounding landscape, and, simultaneously, the beauty and colourfulness of Spring pervade his spirit. The second poem is more eventful: a group of friends organise a Sunday picnic at Hampstead in order to get away for a while from the bustle and routine life of London, 'Away from the smoke and the smirch'.⁴⁵ Section III of the poem presents the conventional city/country dichotomy, and includes a description of the urban toil which is close to the representation of the automatism of the city in some poems of John Davidson and James Young Geddes. One of the characters says that, although the city is far, he can still hear its industrial noise:

[...] my ears still throbbing seem, my Love,
With the rush and the clang of wheels;

⁴⁴ 'Polycrates on Waterloo Bridge', in *Vane's Story*, pp. 153-155 (p. 154).

Of a vast machinery roaring
 For ever in skyless gloom;
 Where the poor slaves peace imploring,
 Found peace alone in the tomb. (p 80)

Apart from attacking the Victorian myth of progress and industrialisation, Thomson denounces the hypocrisy and falsity of the supposedly pious people through the voice of one of the characters:

'We went to Church one Sunday,
 But felt we had no right there;
 For it's only a place for the grand folk
 Who come in a carriage and pair.' (p. 81)

There is a Chaucerian echo in the friends gathered at Hampstead who decide to occupy their time by telling stories about past events and people. The interest of their tales lies in the fact that they establish a link between the past and the present, a historical continuity which is also one of the main concepts of Victorian culture. They are spokesmen of the Victorian historic perspective, which sets the mechanism of the eighteenth century against an organic image of the history of the world: the present does not develop from the disruption of the past (idea of revolution), but absorbs and derives from it its essence (idea of evolution).

In 1866 Thomson wrote other poems which are real 'festivals of life': 'Life's Hebe', 'Philosophy', and 'The Naked Goddess' (*Poems and Some Letters*). It is significant that the poet who in 1866 wrote 'Each is free to choose his lot',⁴⁶ in the same year decided to leave the comforts and vivacity of the Bradlaugh's household and move to a single room where he lived completely alone. 'Philosophy' is a proclamation of the *carpe diem* philosophy, summed up in the line 'Life liveth but in

⁴⁵ 'Sunday at Hampstead', in *Poems and Some Letters*, pp. 78-86 (p. 78).

⁴⁶ 'Life's Hebe', in *Poems and Some Letters*, pp. 131-132 (p. 132).

Life',⁴⁷ which means that, since there is nothing after life but abysmal death, man must live his present lot as fully as possible, despite its restrictions and painful circumstances. Nonetheless, contrary to 'Life's Hebe', the poet's tone and mood are here pessimistic; his message is that men must live their present life fully not because it is beautiful, but because it is the only thing they can do, given that there will be no other life after death. In this sense the poem is an expression of Thomson's agnosticism and dark pessimism.

On the other hand, in 1866, Thomson could still perceive some goodness and beauty in nature. The central image in 'The Naked Goddess' is that of a sort of mythological figure of Nature opposed to the artificiality and falsity of society, which tries to persuade the Goddess to enter the human world and get civilised. The representation of nature is pagan-like, and linked with Thomson's pantheism, untouched by the contemporary Darwinian theory of the survival of the fittest, which introduced an element of violence into the Romantic and post-Romantic vision of nature. In fact Blake had expressed the dualism of nature by means of the two opposing figures of the lamb and the tiger, and indeed Blake's allegories are echoed in Thomson's poem in the images of the lion and the eagle. There is no hint though at the evil of nature; on the contrary, the Goddess stands for what is pure and genuine against what is counterfeited and assumed; she empathises with children but is scornful towards the priest and the philosopher. She rejects their offer, and instead disappears from the forest. The end of the poem is fantastic: after the departure of the Goddess, the city inhabitants prove doomed, and the whole landscape turns from bright and colourful to dark and gloomy. One idyllic picture still remains: the two children befriended by Nature get married and leave the city to go to an island in the Atlantic where they find again the Goddess and a new golden age.

A similar mythical and fairy tale atmosphere typifies two narrative poems written respectively in 1867 and 1868: 'Two Lovers' and 'Weddah and Om-El-Bonain', both included in *Vane's Story, Weddah and Om-El-Bonain, and Other Poems*. The most important aspect they share is the central story, in both cases

⁴⁷ 'Philosophy', in *Poems and Some Letters*, pp. 134-135 (p. 135).

derived from Stendhal's 'De l'Amour'. Essentially, it is the story of the impossibility of a love relationship, due to the different religions professed by the two lovers. Two main themes are the clash between Western and Eastern civilisations, and the relentlessness of Fate, which wants the two lovers to remain separate even after death. In 'Two Lovers', since man is unable to divert the inevitable action of destiny, the poet launches another message urging men to live fully their earthly existence:

Live out your whole free life while yet on earth;
 Seize the quick Present, prize your one sure boon;
 Though brief, each day a golden sun has birth;
 Though dim, the night is gemmed with stars and moon.⁴⁸

In 1867 Thomson composed another of his great poems of despair, which is arguably also one of his best poems. He had already moved to his single room in Pimlico when he wrote 'In the Room', and certainly there is a strong link between the room 'acting' in the poem and his dwelling place. The room is the real protagonist of this surrealistic piece: the pieces of furniture become animate like the objects in some contemporary surrealistic or existentialist works, such as Nathalie Sarraute's short stories or Jean Paul Sartre's fiction. This absurd, reversed reality includes a grotesque element which the poet points out immediately at the beginning of the poem, by prefacing it with a very impressive epigraph taken from Rabelais: 'Cette insigne fable et tragique comédie'.⁴⁹ This is obviously a definition of human life, and it is perfectly substantiated in the poem, where the animation of the furniture superficially recalls a Walt Disney fantastic situation, whereas a tragic element lurks behind it.

The opening stanzas are very effective and striking: the general atmosphere is created by the poet appealing to the senses, emphasising especially the visual and auditory aspects of the room. Outside the world has just entered the twilight stage; inside everything is covered by a 'dusky gloom' (p. 146). The place would be utterly

⁴⁸ 'Two Lovers', in *Vane's Story*, pp. 113-119 (p. 118).

⁴⁹ 'This eminent fable and tragic comedy'. 'In the Room', in *Poems and Some Letters*, pp. 146-150 (p. 146).

silent if it were not for those 'subtle thrills' (p. 146), those little noises produced by the furniture: the mirror, the curtains, the cupboard, the glass, the table, and the fire-grate speak about the tenant of the room either with hostility or with indifference, and they lament his weird behaviour, his neglectful attitude towards them. The mirror misses the previous occupant, a girl who made 'him' feel useful; the table criticises the man's habit of writing all the time, and the fire-grate says that he burnt all his manuscripts except one letter. Only the bed seems to be more sympathetic towards the tenant; it knows the whole truth, and through his speech the reader is informed about the present condition of the man. He lies dead on his bed; a phial beside it is the evidence of the tragic act he committed against his life. At the end of the poem, he becomes an 'it', an inanimate being, which enhances the paradoxical reality inside the room: the objects live while he looks like a piece of dead furniture. The bed is also a spokesman for the dualism of human existence, its tragi-comic essence, its dialectic of light and darkness when he tells about the different life stories he witnessed: now comedies about love, now tragedies about death. The poet adds his own comment about human life in the following lines:

The drear path crawls on drearier still
 To wounded feet and hopeless breast?
 Well, he can lie down when we will,
 And straight all ends in endless rest. (p. 150)

Thomson pointed out on several occasions that man has the freedom to choose either to pursue or to interrupt his life, and it may seem strange that he always opted for the first possibility. The anonymous writer of the essay 'Why James Thomson did not kill himself' in *The Spectator*, after expounding the characteristics of Thomson's pessimism, makes a very relevant statement which throws some light also on the interpretation of 'In the Room'. He wrote that Thomson

[...] admitted fully and repeatedly that the logical outcome of all his philosophy was suicide, [...], but maintained that for him personally

there was a deterring reason. He was a poet; [...] he could not bear to cease to sing. [...] He would not, he said, make an end, because he felt the impulse to sing; and all his song was protest, useless and feeble unless addressed, consciously or unconsciously, to Something that could hear.⁵⁰

There may have been various reasons why Thomson did not reach the ultimate tragic decision taken by John Davidson. To commit suicide would have meant yielding to Fate, and, in a sense, attributing too much importance to life itself. Moreover, it may be that Thomson felt Schopenhauer's 'Will to live', an urge to endure his existence, or that, in front of the mysterious abyss of death, he took the Hamlet-like decision to continue to face his present miserable state. Or, as the anonymous author of *The Secularist* suggested, the most important reason which deterred Thomson from killing himself may have been that he was a writer, and that writing could give a sense and a goal to his existence.

Who is the man 'In the Room' who, after burning all his papers, decided to end his life? He might well be seen as a generic individual, but the episode of the manuscripts destroyed in the fire is a telling hint. In 1869, that is, two years after composing the poem, Thomson wrote the following diary entry:

Burned all my old papers, manuscripts and letters, save the book MSS. which have been already in great part printed. It took me five hours to burn them, guarding against chimney on fire, and keeping them thoroughly burning. [...] The memories treasured in the letters can never, at least in great part, be revived in my life again, nor in the lives of the friends yet living who wrote them. 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.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Anon, 'Why James Thomson did not kill himself', *Spectator*, 23 March 1889, pp. 394-395.

The coincidence of the fictional and the real episode is too obvious to be neglected. Perhaps the poet had been meditating for a long time about burning his manuscripts and letters representing a past he wanted to cancel, but the decision came only in 1869. Thus the man in the poem may be seen as a poetic persona of Thomson himself, anticipating an action he would commit later. On the other hand, there is no recorded evidence that Thomson attempted to destroy his life after his manuscripts, but it may be that the idea of suicide crossed his mind. Yet, unlike the miserable man in the poem, Thomson possibly managed to expunge that idea from his thoughts through the cathartic act of writing.

'In the Room' is the last remarkable poem before *The City of Dreadful Night*. For two years Thomson wrote prose contributions to secularist papers, until in 1870 he began the toilsome, stressful four-years work which would result in his masterpiece.

iv. The loss of light and the dreadful night (1870-1874)

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

[...] most, thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlots curse
Blasts the newborn Infants tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.⁵¹

-- And first the look and aspect of the place,
The broad highway appearance, as it strikes
On strangers, of all ages; the quick dance

⁵¹ Quoted in Meeker, pp. 75-76.

Of colours, lights, and forms; the Babel din;
The endless stream of men, and moving things [...]

Here there and everywhere a weary throng,
The comers and the goers face to face,
Face after face; the string of dazzling wares,
Shop after shop, with symbols, blazoned names,
And all the tradesman's honours overhead [...]⁵³

Cityscape and urban imagery have been depicted, both literally and metaphorically by writers throughout history, even when the term 'city' designated a reality completely different from that of our days. A long tradition exists concerning the representation of the city as a wasteland, or as a place of corruption and spiritual aridity: from the Biblical Jerusalem and Ezekiel's prophecies, via Dante's *Inferno*, the Romantic and the Victorian urban pictures, to Eliot's *The Wasteland*, and other contemporary works, such as Calvino's novels. It is a long, diverse literary line; James Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night* is part of it, and, because of its complex form and tortuous content, it represents an original and special case within it.

In Blake's 'London' and Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, the city represents that which man should stay away from, as W. Sharpe pointed out, 'an earthly version of the New Jerusalem which has fallen, producing lust and alienation',⁵⁴ and there is only one way of escaping the urban degeneration: to seek refuge in nature. Some Victorians, in particular Tennyson and Arnold, similarly described the city as Hell on earth,⁵⁵ but Thomson's 'city of dreadful night' differs from their pictures in that it is 'Shut out alike from Heaven and Earth and Hell',⁵⁶ and a 'nightmare from which one

⁵² William Blake, 'London', in *William Blake's Writings*, I, p. 191.

⁵³ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude. A Parallel Text*, ed. by J. C. Maxwell (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 1805-6: VII. 154, 171.

⁵⁴ Sharpe, 'Learning to Read *The City*', p. 82.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Arnold's 'Kensington Gardens' and Tennyson's *In Memoriam* or *The Idylls of the King*. Other examples can be found in Dickens's novels and Carlyle's *Latter-Day Pamphlets*.

⁵⁶ James Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night*, VI. 57. This and further quotations are taken from Edwin Morgan's edition of *The City of Dreadful Night* and indicated by section and line numbers.

cannot wake',⁵⁷ thus an amplification of the 'dreadful' life in the Victorian city. Yet it is also something else, an example of what Tom Leonard called 'places of the mind', that is, the projection on the poetic level of the author's own mental landscape. I will return to this essential dualism of the poem later.

Two works foreshadow *The City of Dreadful Night*: the poem *The Doom of a City* of 1857 and the 1867 prose phantasy 'A Lady of Sorrow' (*Essays and Phantasies*), especially its third section entitled 'The Shadow'. I have already extensively analysed *The Doom of a City*.⁵⁸ On the one hand, there is an affinity between the earlier poem's vision of the petrified city overlooked by the Sage and the 'city of dreadful night' watched by the Statue of Melencolia; on the other hand, they are the expression of two different stages of Thomson's philosophical and religious ideas. Whereas in 1857 his gloomy vision of the universe was tempered by the belief in human meliorism, this is denied in the later poem. When he composed the prose phantasy ten years afterwards, despite his increasing scepticism and pessimism in front of the incongruities of what he had previously seen as a divinely designed world, he still had something to cling to: his faith in the immortality of universal matter of which man becomes a part after death. In fact, a few concepts link 'A Lady of Sorrow' with *The City of Dreadful Night*. First, the notion that extremes often meet in the universe, epitomised by the mixing up of life and death, and the coinage of such phrases as 'death in life' which frequently recur in Thomson's writing. In the 'Introductory Note' to 'A Lady of Sorrow', the author writes:

There is truth of winter and black night, there is truth of summer and dazzling noonday. On the one side of the great medal are stamped the glory and triumph of life; on the other side are stamped the glory and triumph of death; but which is the obverse and which the reverse none of us surely knows.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Sharpe, p. 83.

⁵⁸ See section II of the present chapter.

⁵⁹ 'A Lady of Sorrow', in *Essays and Phantasies*, pp. 1-50 (p. 2).

Secondly, both works encompass a vision of human life as an endless nightmare; hence the confusion between life and dreams -- in 'A Lady of Sorrow' the world is defined as a 'waking Nightmare' (p. 16). Thirdly, there are obvious parallels between the description of the city and its inhabitants in the prose phantasy, and the experiences and encounters of the narrator in the 'city of dreadful night'. In 'A Lady of Sorrow' the city is a 'Vast Metropolis which was become as a vast Necropolis' (p. 17), characterised by streets illumined by lamps, squares, churches, and all the conventional elements of the urban paraphernalia, but since their function is reversed, the whole discourse concerning them becomes one of absurdity and skewed reality. Its dwellers are characterised by 'haggard faces', 'wrinkled brows', 'thin compressed lips', 'drooping frames', 'glassy hopeless eyes', and the author projects himself into this image of dreadful reality, thus establishing what he calls a 'great Freemasonry of Sorrow' (p. 17). The picture of the city denizens calls to mind some of Edward Munch's spectral figures, half men and half phantoms, just like the inhabitants of the 'city of dreadful night'. Finally, the prose piece also contains a prefiguration of the two colossal images of the Sphinx and the Statue of Melencolia of the later poem. In 'a Lady of Sorrow' the mythical, enigmatic Sphinx embodies 'Fate [...] in the desert of Life' (pp 16-17), whereas an equivalent figure of Melencolia is the anonymous 'colossal image of black marble, the Image and the concentration of the whole blackness of Night' (p. 21), the black Goddess worshipped by the city denizens.

These antecedent compositions testify that in 1870, when Thomson embarked on the writing of his most renowned poem, he was already concerned with certain ideas and images, but they needed now to conform to his changed view of man and nature. The original conception and genesis of the poem are indeed very interesting, since they throw light on Thomson's creative process and theory, his position wavering between Shelley's and Wordsworth's notion of poetry as a spontaneous expression of feelings and a personal awareness of the labour and fatigue involved in any creative act. In an essay entitled 'A Strange Book' Thomson wrote:

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 as unpremeditated, as real a lightning-flash of inspiration as ever suddenly illumined mystery or seer.⁶⁰

It may be that the original plan of *The City of Dreadful Night* took shape in his mind straightforwardly, but the actual creative process did not occur with the same speed and spontaneity but underwent constant re-thinking and revisioning practice on the part of the author.⁶¹ It is some critics' opinion that there are two different intermingled poems in *The City of Dreadful Night*, which correspond to the two distinct stages of composition (1870 and 1873 until the first publication in 1874), and my close reading of the poem is indebted to their interpretation.

The City of Dreadful Night was written in two different phases separated by a three-years gap during which Thomson had to abstain from literary activity because he was working as a hack journalist in order to make a living. From April to December 1872 he worked for 'The Champion Gold and Silver Mines Company' in Colorado, an experience he described in the satirical essay 'Religion in the Rocky Mountains', which appeared in *The National Reformer* in 1873. From July to September 1873 he was a reporter of the Carlist War in Spain for the *New York World*, and it was during the this residence in Spain that Thomson underwent a serious sunstroke which left on him indelible signs. He had started *The City* in 1870, or, more precisely, he had created the embryo of the poem: a trilogy of short allegorical narratives about a wanderer looking for a way of penetrating the mysteries of life. From this early stage he then went on to realise that the three pieces could be joined to form one unique poem to which was first assigned the title *The City of Night*.⁶²

In 1870, between January and October, he composed eleven sections in a chronological order which was not maintained in the final version of the poem. What

⁶⁰ Quoted in I. B. Walker, p. 90.

⁶¹ As far as the dating and structure of the poem are concerned, I am indebted to the analysis in the following texts -- some of them have already been mentioned: W. D. Schaefer, *James Thomson (B. V.): Beyond 'The City'*, W. Sharpe, 'Learning to Read *The City*', and W. D. Thesing, *The London Muse. Victorian Responses to the City* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1982) -- in particular here the 'Introduction' (pp. xv-xviii) and 'Romantic Versions of the City' (pp. 133-146).

⁶² See Schaefer, p. 73.

appears now as Section II was the first part he composed, followed by the sections which in the ultimate arrangement were located under the numbers XVIII, XX, I, V, XI, VII, IV, X, VI, and III. After the three-year pause, Thomson resumed the composition exactly from the point he had interrupted it: Section VIII, the first written in 1873, is indeed linked with the last two parts of the 1870 poem, since they similarly hint at an essential leit-motif which recurs particularly in the 1873 sections, that is, the idea that despite their despair and miserable condition, the inhabitants of the 'city of dreadful night' are, consciously or unconsciously, united by a sense of fellowship, since all experience the same existential tragedy.⁶³ Hence their common ability to train their senses to distinguish peculiar sounds and images in the gloomy atmosphere of the city (Section III); hence their quest for a little ray of hope they can eventually share in order to get out of their Limbo condition (Section VI); hence their dramatic dialogues and confrontations about the meaning of life (Section VIII). Indeed, as critics such as Schaefer, Sharpe and Thesing have justly pointed out, Section VIII marks an important shift in the composition of the poem.

The following sections (XIX, IX, the Proem, XII, XIV, XVII, XV, XVI, XIII, XXI), compared with the previous ones, display a stronger concern on the part of the author for a human condition which does not refer exclusively to himself but embraces a community sharing the same physical and psychological state. The diverse crowd assembling in the cathedral in Section XII exemplifies very clearly the gradual widening of the poet's mental scope from his individualistic response to the microcosmic dimension of the city towards the consideration of a more generalised human condition, which, although it is not universal but restricted to a specific 'sad Fraternity'⁶⁴ -- the 'Freemasonry of Sorrow' in 'A Lady of Sorrow'⁶⁵ -- still allows him to go beyond a purely solipsistic state of mind. Schaefer arrived at a more radical conclusion when he pointed out that

⁶³ Already in 1865 Thomson had expressed his conception of human empathy in the essay 'Sympathy', in *Essays and Phantasies*, pp. 228-249.

⁶⁴ *The City of Dreadful Night*, 'Proem', 36.

⁶⁵ 'A Lady of Sorrow', p. 315.

[...] the 1873 city is no longer symbolic of a state of mind, a realm of personal grief, of individual suffering which cannot communicate; the poem now deals with a universal situation that concerns all mankind [...]⁶⁶

He sees the 1873 poem as 'a sort of pessimist's manifesto', but he seems to contradict his previous statement when he mentions the 'secret fraternity'⁶⁷ formed by the city inhabitants. In fact, in the Proem, Thomson makes it quite clear that he is not appealing to a universal audience but to a specific one, so that the 'city of dreadful night' becomes the microcosmic representation of a specific and not of a universal macrocosm, which is certainly an oxymoron but one confirmed both by the poem and the poet. Undoubtedly there is a microcosm/ macrocosm relationship at the core of the poem: the city as emblem of the world of man and nature. Yet Thomson's poems and essays show that he always backed away from conceiving universal philosophical systems, and creating theoretical, abstract axioms about all of man and life and *The City* does not represent an exception.⁶⁸ In it Thomson does not lay claim to describe the situation of all mankind but is simply presenting his own condition and showing that he does not live it in utter loneliness and isolation, since there are some men who are equally 'desolate, Fate smitten/ Whose faith and hope are dead, and who would die' (Proem. 27). In point of fact, Thomson himself admitted that not many people would grasp the significance of the poem, since 'it is so alien from common thought and feeling [...] that scarcely any readers would care for it'.⁶⁹

Thomson never assumes any *parti pris* in the poem, but instead poses continuous questions to the reader, and, at times, seems almost to contradict himself, thus foreshadowing MacDiarmid's zigzagging attitude in his poetry and life. *The City* is a poem where extremes meet, characterised by ambiguity and polarities. Hence the possibility of different interpretations. After a first reading the poem seems to convey an image of utter gloominess and despair, but further readings help to perceive in it

⁶⁶ Quoted in Thesing, p. 143.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ See 'On the Worth of Metaphysical Systems', in *Essays and Phantasies*, pp. 296-302.

other aspects and hints preparing the reader for the ultimate message, which is still nihilistic but hiding a peculiar kind of philosophical consolation. The poem is 'antisyzygical' not only conceptually but also formally and structurally. Two main types of sections interweave, characterised by a different time tense and a different metrical scheme. On the one hand, the Proem and the eleven odd-numbered sections are written in the present tense, all in the same stanza form which Thomson used in 'To Our Ladies of Death' rhyming ABABCCB. They are essentially descriptive, philosophical sections which both reflect the poet's own ideas and effectively involve the reader by means of the present temporal form. On the other hand, the ten even-numbered sections are characterised by different metres and by the use of the past tense, since they mainly concern what the narrator saw and experienced during his wandering through the city. They provide the narrative or dramatic stage in which the phantom-like, puppet-like characters of the poem play their roles, until the epitomising dramatisation of Section XX, in which the two prototypical figures of the Sphinx and the Angel confront each other.

In a post-modern fashion, Thomson makes use of a range of different styles, and borrows some features from other artistic domains, so that parallel to the reading, pictures and images of the figurative arts can be visualised: statues such as the Sphinx and the Angel, Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I*, and also other artistic representations, not directly referred to but lurking behind the text, such as the paintings of Doré, Bosch, De Chirico, and Munch. This artistic syncretism is reflected in the stylistic variety of the poem. The alternating pattern of reflective and narrative sections also dictates the poet's stylistic choices, and the result is a medley of poetic tones and modes which entertain despite the complex issues they express. Hence the reader can listen to pseudo-gothic heroic and anti-heroic tales, to philosophical or factual dialogues between the characters, to a radical, unconventional sermon, and is simultaneously invited by the narrator to visit his (the reader's and the narrator's) mental landscape and his 'heart of darkness'.

⁶⁹ Letter to Dobell, quoted in *Poems and Some Letters of James Thomson*, p. xxx.

Having said that, one cannot help perceiving some flaws in the poem because of its meandering form. Despite Thomson's powerful imagery and ability to give a visual shape to his own thoughts, some parts of the poem appear less appealing and involving -- sometimes they may even seem redundant. I refer in particular to the 'mansion scene' in Section X, in which the love/death theme is a repetition of the Matilda motif encountered in many of his poems as well as in Section IV of *The City*. Yet one may argue that repetition is part of the incantatory effect which the author intends to produce. Due to its complexity and, at times, impenetrability, the poem has given rise to several dismissive judgements to which I object, especially when they tend to emphasise and overstate the impact which dipsomania or the supposed use of hallucinogens had on the poet. Roden Noel finds in the poem '[...] the note rather of a powerful idiosyncrasy afflicted to the verge of madness than the note of an impersonal world sorrow',⁷⁰ while Lance St. John Butler relegates it to 'a drug-addict's view of London by night',⁷¹ and Peter Quennell reinforces this opinion when he observes that the poem is '[...] a sort of nightmare London [...] seen through the eyes of a drunken army-schoolmaster as he wandered back to the Pimlico slum in which he lodged'.⁷² These judgements appear reductive for a poem which constantly confronts the reader with new meanings and new possibilities of interpretation, as if it were a work *in fieri*, an endless process, rather than a definitive product of Thomson's poetic imagination. My present purpose is to select and focus on some of the meanings and interpretations embedded in the poem.

The two epigraphs prefaced to the poem are a paradigmatic example of Thomson's syncretic style. The first is taken from Dante's *Inferno* (III. 1), one of the latent models of the whole poem, and certainly a very strong influence on Thomson's writing. It refers to the entrance door to hell, hence a very well chosen line for the

⁷⁰ Noel Roden, 'James Thomson', in *The Poets and the Poetry of the Century*, ed. by Alfred Henry Miles (London: Hutchison and Co., 1899), pp. 627-638 (p. 637).

⁷¹ Lance St. John Butler, *Victorian Doubt. Literary and Cultural Discourses* (New York, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore: Harvester Wheat Sheaf, 1990), p. 47.

⁷² Peter Quennell, 'A Victorian Pessimist. Review of *The City of Dreadful Night and Other Poems*. With a Preface by Henry S. Salt', *New Statesman and Nation*, 4 (1932), 235-236 (p. 236).

opening of a poem about a city half-real, half-surrealistic and unearthly.⁷³ Thomson's interest in Dante crops up in a letter he wrote to W. M. Rossetti in 1872, in which he says that the two books he took with him to America were the Globe Shakespeare, Pickering's Dante and Cary's translation of the *Divine Comedy*.⁷⁴ The Florentine exile gradually became a stronger influence on him than Leopardi, from whose work Thomson derived the second epigraph. This is a passage from Leopardi's tale 'Dialogue between Ruysche and his Mummies' (*Moral Tales*). The pivotal theme of the extract is that death does not represent a dreadful but a consoling thought, whereas the so called 'antico dolor' (old pain) refers to the existential anxiety and sorrows which only death can finally subdue. Thomson expresses a similar concept in the Proem where the pain of life becomes the 'dolorous mysteries'⁷⁵ of the 'sad Fraternity' he is addressing.

Ridler has provided the manuscript evidence that the Proem was actually written only in June 1873, but that Thomson decided to use it as a prologue in the final version.⁷⁶ The narrator of *The Doom of a City* similarly leaves his message to mankind, but it is related only at the very end of the poem, while the fact that Thomson prefaced it to *The City of Dreadful Night* suggests he wanted to make clear immediately the reason why he embarked on the distressful enterprise of evoking 'the spectres of black night/ To blot the sunshine of exultant years' (Proem. 3). The very effective 'Because' at the beginning of the second stanza introduces the four-stanzas explanation of the primal conception of the poem. Briefly the motivation can be narrowed down to three main points: first, his Leopardi-like intention to allow Truth to be 'stripped naked of all vesture that beguiles' (Proem. 10), of all the falsities and ephemeral illusions of the time; secondly, his desire to give a sense of his powerless position in the universe by means of his own writing; and thirdly, his attempt to show empathy towards those individuals who can understand him because they feel and act as he does.

⁷³ The epigraph reads: 'per me si va nella città dolente', which Morgan translates: 'Through me is the way into the city of pain' (see note i, p. 73).

⁷⁴ Printed in *Poems and Some Letters*, p. 244.

⁷⁵ *The City*, Proem, l.37.

⁷⁶ *Poems and Some Letters*, p. 270n.

By saying that through the writing of the poem he may provide his audience with some form of consolation, Thomson endows artistic creation with a high value. Once again he could find confirmation of this idea in Leopardi. In one of his thoughts collected in the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi says:

Hanno questo di proprio le opere di genio, che quando anche reppresentino al vivo la nullità delle cose, quando anche dimostrino evidentemente e facciano sentire l'inevitabile infelicità della vita, quando anche esprimano le più terribili disperazioni, tuttavia ad un'anima grande che si trovi anche in uno stato di estremo abbattimento, disinganno, nullità, noia e scoraggiamento della vita [...] servono sempre di consolazione, raccendono l'entusiasmo [...]⁷⁷

This poetic effect works exclusively on those readers who, like the poet, perceive the world as a dream of the mind, as a series of recurrent illusions ending up in death, and who are perpetual wanderers in quest of a solution to the mystery of life which they will never find. Sharpe speaks about a 'collective consciousness'⁷⁸ to refer to the awareness shared by the author and his audience that, although they must endure the pain of life in solitude, at least they know that other individuals have to 'dree' the same 'weird' (V. 25). Hence the poet's task is that which Thomson describes in the essay 'Saying of Sigvat':

Though no words of mine will ever convert any one from being himself into being another Me, words may bring cheer and comfort and self-knowledge to others who are more or less like myself, and

⁷⁷ Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di Pensieri* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1937), p. 188. The translation of this passage would read more or less thus: 'The peculiarity of the works of genius is that, even when they vividly represent the nothingness of things, even when they clearly show and make us feel the unavoidable unhappiness of life, even when they express the most terrible despair, nevertheless, to a great mind, be it even in a state of extreme gloominess, disillusionment, nothingness, spleen and disappointment of life [...] they always provide comfort, and rekindle enthusiasm [...]'.

⁷⁸ Sharpe, p. 67.

who may have thought themselves peculiar and outcast; it may be to them a friendly voice revealing that they have a brother in the world.⁷⁹

Section I of the poem is centred on two main interrelated aspects: the author's conception of life as a 'dream whose shapes return' (l. 15), and the physical picture of the city and its inhabitants. The opening sentence of the section reads: 'The City is of Night; perchance of Death,/ But certainly of Night' (l. 1). From the start it is clear that Thomson's city is not identified with the abode of the damned and spiritually dead, and thus it differs from Dante's *Inferno*. On the other hand, the poet asserts the certainty of Night, the absence of a real, effective light in the city, despite the artificial beams of the street-lamps. What the reader is made to see is a vision of the city plunged into utter darkness, and a sort of externalised projection of the content of an endless, recurrent nightmare. The narrator/author is the insomniac protagonist of the journey through the city labyrinth which he intends to describe. The link between *The City of Dreadful Night* and the later poem 'Insomnia' is indeed very interesting. The 'city of dreadful night' is a 'City [...] of Night, but not of Sleep' (l. 71), and in a couple of letters, respectively to George Eliot and his sister-in-law Julia, Thomson described the poem as 'the outcome of much sleepless hypochondria', 'written under evil inspiration of insomnia'.⁸⁰ In fact, there is a constant play between reality and dream in the poem. The city is not a mere fruit of the author's imagination and his nightmarish vision; on the contrary a more shocking idea seems to lurk behind it: that the reality of life is to be questioned and that we, like the ghostly city inhabitants, may all be living a nightmare from which only death can wake us. Thus Thomson adds a frightening, pre-existentialist aura to the Kantian dichotomy of reality and appearance.

The city architecture and scenery form a very powerful picture where extremes and contradictory realities meet: the general atmosphere is benumbed but now and then odd sounds can be heard; the city is wrapped by and plunged into a deep darkness but the street-lamps are lit up; it looks like a desert, although there are

⁷⁹ 'Saying of Sigvat', in *Essays and Phantasies*, pp. 213-219 (p. 214).

people walking through its bare streets. As Foakes has rightly observed, 'the remote and the familiar, the imaginary and the actual are united';⁸¹ even if the physical, structural components of the city possess a real and ordinary shape, they seem to be deprived of their usual significance, and reduced to fragments of a void universe where nothingness has engulfed any human component. No human signal emerges from the houses, and the wandering through the urban landscape is a purposeless quest, only remotely reminiscent of the didactic visionary experiences of the Romantic hero, but in fact anti-Romantic in its being devoid of an ultimate goal. There are even ruins in the city, but they have lost any Romantic connotation and are instead the visual symbols of spiritual aridity and fragmentation, of an irrefutable sense of loss and nemesis.

The absence of human signs makes the narrator wonder whether the inhabitants are sleeping 'or dead, or fled from nameless pestilence' (I. 49). They are imprisoned inside their mansions, which are 'dark and still as Tombs' (I. 45), so that the city looks like a necropolis, or, as the anonymous critic of *The Academy* pointed out, as 'an edifice of black marble'.⁸² The few people the narrator perceives have 'the worn faces that look deaf and blind/ Like tragic masks of stone' (I. 52). The symbolic overtone of the stone figures of *The Doom of a City* is echoed here: they are anonymous beings, sleepless and victims of existential 'ennui', which makes them proceed with their heads drooped or stop in a pondering posture, thus anticipating the attitude of their Patroness Melencolia described in the last section of the poem. They resemble the dwellers of Dante's 'Limbo' in their being equally outcast from both Hell and Heaven, but, in opposition to them, they lack a personal identity and live in the steady, stinging awareness that there are no certainties in human existence apart from death, which represents the ultimate release from their pain, as Thomson explains in a footnote closing Section I: 'Though the Garden of thy Life be wholly waste [...] over its walls hang ever the rich dark clusters of the Vine of Death [...]' (p. 31).

⁸⁰ Letter to George Eliot, quoted by E. Morgan, 'Introduction' to *The City of Dreadful Night*, p. 14.

⁸¹ R. A. Foakes, 'The Vanity of Rhetoric. Matthew Arnold's Poetry in James Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night*', in *The Romantic Assertion. A Study in the Language of Nineteenth Century Poetry* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1958), pp. 149-179 (p. 173).

⁸² Anon, 'Academy Portraits. James Thomson', *The Academy*, 3 December 1898, p. 384.

The main aspect of Section II is the basic trilogic pattern characterising both its form and content. The narrator meets a wanderer, and begins to follow him because he seems to be going somewhere; apparently he represents an exception from the anti-heroic and aimless meandering of the other inhabitants, but at the end of the section it becomes clear that his pilgrimage is exactly as theirs: a monotonous, circular movement without any ultimate goal. It starts and ends up in the same graveyard, the place where Faith died. Stanzas 2, 3 and 4 describe the narrator's feeling that the three Christian values had, for him, died: dead Faith in the graveyard, dead Love in a villa, and dead Hope in a 'squalid house' (II. 22); each time he makes use of similarly structured sentences to describe his non-heroic adventures. Until stanza 4 it is not clear whether he is a soliloquist or whether he is addressing the narrator, and even when he answers a specific question posed by the narrator, the identity of this 'shadowlike and frail' (II. 2) being remains undeciphered. None the less this wanderer may be seen as an alter-ego of the narrator, and, ultimately, of the poet himself, so that the character's soliloquy becomes an interior monologue within the narrator's consciousness.

Section II ends with the frequently quoted mathematical symbol whereby Thomson divides human life (the average man's age of 70 years) by the 'persistent three' (333) represented by Faith, Love and Hope, and the result of which is a recurring 0.210 (therefore another perpetual three if one sums its numerals).⁸³ Thomson's biographers always mention that he was enthusiastic about maths at school, yet there is also a metaphysical meaning behind his numerology. What Thomson achieves in *The City of Dreadful Night* is to make use of a symbolic number usually associated with the Holy Trinity in order to convey an unconventional meaning: there is nothing sacred behind this recurrent three but rather the poet's intention to express through concise means the sense of monotony and eternal repetitiveness which characterises human existence and, beyond it, the whole universe. Nonetheless, this principle of recurrence does not imply unchanging fixity but must be fused with the idea of flux, of constant process inherent in cosmic life.

Thomson does not deny this dynamic principle but shows that it is in a sense a sham kind of movement, since it is based on the repetition of precise patterns rather than on a progressive, ever-different evolution. Within this mechanical vision of the universe man is nothing but a cog, spiritually arid and shallow just like a watch from which we have erased 'The signs and figures of the circling hours,/ [...] the hands, [...] the dial face', which continues to work although it is 'Bereft of purpose, void of use' (II. 33, 34, 36).

Section IV is one of those sections characterised by what I. Campbell defined as 'incantatory repetition'.⁸⁴ Eleven stanzas out of twelve begin with the following lines: 'As I came through the desert thus it was,/ As I came through the desert [...]' (IV. 7, 16, 25, 34, 43, 52, 61, 70, 79, 88, 97). Among them six stanzas end with the sentence 'No hope could have no fear' preceded by the clause 'I strode on austere' (IV. 14, 23, 32, 41, 50, 59), so that altogether they form twelve identical sentences where the numeric symbolism is maintained by the use of a multiple of three. The speaking voice of this section is that of another wanderer who is now describing his experiences when he crossed the desert. Once again both the character and the place are nameless; whereas the former may be identified with another *persona* of the author, the referent of 'desert' is quite obscure. Clearly the wandering figure had to endure a series of tests in the desert, thus enacting a kind of parodic version of Christ facing the temptations in the wilderness. His attitude is stoic, and he seems to possess that moral indifference and perseverance which is epitomised by Melencolia at the end of the poem. He is not scared by the monsters, the weird creatures he encounters -- a projection of his own subconscious fears -- nor does he fear the apocalyptic turmoil of the elements. Yet his stoic fortitude is not long-lasting; it turns first into fear and then into rage when he meets the female figure holding a 'red lamp in her hand' (IV. 64). This woman is the poetic representation of Matilda; she personifies love, yet a love bringing about fear and anguish, since she is also the cause of the narrator's psychological split: part of his self accompanies the woman whereas another part

⁸³ Thomson explains this mathematical result in a footnote at the end of Section II, on page 33 in Morgan's edition.

watches the pair from a distance; the couple stands for the potential happy life he could have had if Matilda had not died, while the lonely, isolated self is the image of the poet at present, not only deprived of love but enraged against destiny, because it played another of its tricks by first raising his hope through the meeting of Matilda, and later killing it through her death. The red lamp carried by the woman is her own bleeding heart, an emblem of dead love, totally dissociated from the Romantic *Liebestod* motif. Even if one of the two selves walks away with the girl, he is only a 'corpse-like' (IV. 100) being, a sort of evanescent form, without a spiritual integrity. Their gradual disappearing in the sea represents the irrecoverable loss of love, at least for the 'vile' (IV. 101) part of the narrator, which, in fact, is his more realistic self, deprived of any illusions and hopes.

Section IV includes the inversion of some commonplace images of both Romantic and Victorian literature. The woman holding the lamp is not only reminiscent of the character of Bertrand de Born in Canto XXVIII of the *Inferno*, who is carrying a lamp-like object which turns out to be his head, but also of some figures of Pre-Raphaelite painting, such as Jesus Christ in W. Holman Hunt's *The Light of the World* or the female figure in Simenon Solomon's *Amor Sacramentum*. Nevertheless, whereas in these pictures the light emanating from the lamp conventionally connotes the metaphysical light of human existence, the red lamp in *The City of Dreadful Night* conversely symbolises death and violence inherent in universal life. The woman and his dead double form a pair joined not in eternal love but in eternal death; love, Thomson seems to say, is just another among the chimeras of life.

The illusory quality of life is again tackled in Section V, where the poet asserts his philosophy of stoic endurance by saying that man's doom is to 'dree his weird' (V. 25). This is also the destiny of the inhabitants of the 'city of dreadful night', who, being hopeless, are not even given access to Hell, which they would rather elect as their abode instead of what they call their 'insufferable inane' (IV. 24). Section VI, one of the most dramatic parts of the poem, deals with their unchangeable destiny. It

⁸⁴ Ian Campbell, 'And I Burn Too: Thomson's *City of Dreadful Night*', *Victorian Poetry*, 16 (1978),

is structured on the dialogue between two characters who, paradoxically, have been denied admittance into Hell because they have already lost all their hopes, and therefore cannot respect the primary maxim and prerogative which says: 'Leave hope behind all ye who enter here' (VI. 21) -- another obvious quotation from Dante's *Inferno*. Yet the most important concept expressed in Section VI is the notion of human sympathy, of the solidarity between individuals sharing the same condition, and, in this specific case, between two miserable beings who undertake a quest in order to find a little hope to 'leave behind' at the door of Hell. The situation is absurd, reminiscent of Beckett's grotesque and tragi-comic scenes, yet it also contains a human message: however long the search might be, what essentially matters is that men can face it together and share any eventual result.

The next significant dramatic episode occurs in Section VIII, where the dialogic element is very strong. The narrator overhears the conversation between two characters who, like Polycrates in 'Polycrates on Waterloo Bridge', are standing by the riverside and talking to each other while watching the water flow. The whole scene is effectively structured and remarkable in its use of two different individuals in order to describe an ideological dualism -- the opposition between two attitudes towards existence and destiny. Nonetheless, it is one of the hypothetical interpretations applicable to the flyting, rather than the flyting itself, that is particularly relevant in the context of the poem. The two voices represent oppositional viewpoints confronting each other, while the third person of the scene, the external narrator, stands aloof from them and listens to their talk as a pure spectator subject to a sort of *Verfremdungseffekt*. On the one hand, he listens to the words of a pessimist who has lost confidence both in himself and in human nature after experiencing a series of frustrations which deprived him of any firm will to battle against existential adversities. He is an emotional character, once probably deriving advantage from his sensitivity but now feeling it as a weakness, merely as the main source of his 'taedium vitae', or, in Leopardian terms, *noia*. On the other hand, the narrator hears the cold exposition of an unshakeable atheistic doctrine expressed by means of a detached and

rational tone. The essential precepts embraced by this radical thinker are a denial of any divine force in the universe, a mechanical view of the world seen as a mill endlessly rotating and alternately releasing goodness and evil, and finally a belief in the indifference of the whirling universe towards man's lot, since, as he explains: 'It [the universe] grinds him some slow years of bitter breath,/ Then grinds him back into eternal death' (VIII. 46).

What the two characters especially stage is the traditional contrast between Romantic idealism, yet deluded and frustrated, and rationalism united to mechanicalism, but their views are linked by the pessimism with which they look at the human condition and the gloom they perceive all around the world. Whereas the strict dialogic pattern works effectively on the literary level, it becomes awkward when related to real life, including Thomson's own existence. In other words, the two fictional figures embody the ethical and philosophic ideas to which Thomson adhered during his life, but the difference between the characters and their author is that the latter could never unquestionably cling to one or other ideological position -- rather he continuously oscillated between them throughout his life. Thomson was Romantic and anti-Romantic simultaneously; for some time he believed he could find a solution to the mystery of life in the sceptic, rationalistic ideology of his friend Bradlaugh, but this belief proved transitory, and in any event he could never completely give up his repressed proto-Romantic idealism. About his wavering attitude Vachot writes:

Lui-même a insisté sur le caractère subjectif des solutions que l'homme invente aux problèmes majeurs et d'autre part sur le fait que les extrêmes se touchent: sa personne et son génie constituent la plus parfaite illustration de ces deux vérités. Homme des extrêmes, nul plus que lui n'est prompt à passer de l'un à l'autre.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Vachot, p. 413. ('Thomson himself has insisted on the subjective characteristic of the solutions which man invents for major problems, and, on the other hand, on the fact that the extremes meet:

Section VIII offers important clues to understand Thomson's psychological oscillations, thus showing the strong link existing between him and Hugh MacDiarmid.

From Section IX till Section XII there is a continuation or a repetition of some descriptive elements encountered in previous sections: the sound and visual features of the city (Section IX); the death of love leading to the death of faith and to spiritual darkness (the mansion scene in Section X); the brotherhood of 'the saddest and the weariest men on earth' (XI. 27). Section XII corresponds to another crucial point of the poem. It introduces the episode of the city community gathering inside the cathedral, where the reversal of conventional, orthodox codes reaches its climax. The narrator witnesses a procession of people entering the cathedral; they convey a sense of community which causes him to ask: 'Our isolated units could be brought/ To act together for some common end?' (XII. 1). In previous poems, the poet described himself as looking askance at the gathering of people inside a church, and always remaining at a distance from them. This time the situation is different: he is not anymore the isolated individual of 'A Recusant' but feels himself as belonging to that community, and therefore does not hesitate in front of the cathedral portal but enters the church after giving his own 'countersign' (XII. 54). This term refers to the formula which everyone has to recite before the 'shrouded figure' (XII. 8) standing in the porch, a sort of warden supervising the admission into the church. He calls to mind some of the hideous wardens of Dante's *Inferno*, but he is harmless, and his task is only to make sure that each member of the congregation repeats the same password, 'I wake from daydreams to this real night' (XII. 16, 20, 24, 28, 32, 36, 40, 44, 48, 52). As far as the narrator is concerned, he does not mention his 'countersign' directly, but, presumably, it is the same. By uttering this hypnotic sentence, the inhabitants of the city recognise that life is just a sequence of mirages and deceptive forms which mask truth, and that truth is the negation itself of those phantasms.

In short, all the people gathered in the cathedral express that desire 'to show the bitter old and wrinkled truth' which the poet manifested in the opening prologue

his personality and his genius are the most perfect illustration of these two realities. Man of extremes, nothing more than him is willing to shift from the one to the other').

of the poem (Proem. 9), and, under the leadership of the preacher/anti-preacher, enact a ritual which completely reverses the pedagogic purposes of orthodox religious propaganda. In this respect, Thomson's ideas appear in step with Marx's conception of religion as the opium of the people, because it exerts control over them by asserting the truthfulness of what in fact is only a series of delusions. The denizens' awareness that life as depicted by orthodox preachers, is only a figment of the imagination, and that the only truth is that of the 'dreadful night' of the city, or of the darkness of the physical and spiritual world, is an attack against such Christian precepts as repentance and penance in order to deserve eternal salvation, and also a denial of the theory of human meliorism, whereby man is able to improve his existence through reason. In fact, the austere tone and the gloomy speech of the preacher bring to mind the frightening, castigatory sermons of some Calvinist ministers, but, of course, there is an ironic intent behind the whole episode. Thomson makes use of a preacher to animadvert on the kind of preaching he witnessed in his childhood, and to expose his antidogmatic, eccentric ideas by resorting to the rhetoric of the official Churchmen. As early as 1865, Thomson asserted his disbelief in any form of proselytism and propaganda in an essay called 'Open Secret Societies', in which he wrote: 'All proselytism is useless and absurd, men are unchangeable.'⁸⁶ Three years later, in another essay, he ironically stated: 'In fine, to thoroughly reform the present and the future, we must thoroughly reform the past',⁸⁷ which is a deliberately absurd declaration.

The parenthetical meditation of Section XIII distracts for a while our attention from the cathedral episode, which is resumed in Section XIV. Before disclosing his pessimistic and nihilistic philosophy by means of the preacher's voice, Thomson displays his conception of time in Section XIII. Two contrasting ideas about time are here intermingled, and they reflect a common dualism of Victorian literature. Metaphorically, Thomson depicts time as a 'monstrous snake,/ Wounded and slow and very venomous' (XIII. 16) which whirls around the earth and mankind in

⁸⁶ 'Open Secret Societies', in *Essays and Phantasies*, pp. 190-212 (p. 211).

⁸⁷ 'Proposals for the Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery', in *Essays and Phantasies*, pp. 51-103 (p. 94).

perpetual cyclic movement. It is undoubtedly an image of evil, close to the snake symbolism of Icelandic mythology, rather than to the mysterious, metaphysical significance of the serpent for MacDiarmid and other Scottish writers such as Gibbon and Gunn. Time fleets so speedily that man cannot grasp the experiences and events it carries along; but, on the other hand, there is the idea that a single instant can be felt to be eternity. Apparently, this may be seen as an anticipation of the Bergsonian and modernist notion of time whereby the chronology of past, present and future collapses and is replaced by the epiphanic moment or the eternal present. In fact, it has not the same value, nor does it look back to Wordsworth's notion of the 'spots of time', because the impression of temporal arrest and paralysis can only be negative to Thomson, alluding to those insomniac nights 'that are as aeons of slow pain' (XIII. 30). What he suggests is that man should not complain about the rapidity of time but rather yearn for it in order to escape 'everlasting conscious inanition' and reach as quickly as possible 'Dateless oblivion and divine repose' (XIII. 40, 42).

This is how Section XIII ends. In Section XIV the scene is moved from the outside into the inside of the cathedral, where the preacher speaks with a resounding voice and stares at the astounded congregation with his 'steadfast and intolerable' eyes (XIV. 19). He is the spokesman of Thomson's own ideas, which from 1874 until his death remained mostly unchanged. His words project in front of the community a very gloomy, dark panorama of the world, and its inhabitants, defined as 'spectral wanderers of unholy Night' (XIV. 27). So the whole world is described as a 'city of dreadful night', and all mankind is generally identified with the ghost-like ramblers of the city. Moreover the preacher suggests that the universe is not ruled by a divine spirit but by 'Necessity Supreme' (XIV. 75), which does not make any distinction between man and other creatures, because all will eventually turn into pure matter and enter one of the life cycles until their ultimate disappearance.

In front of such a dark and tragic truth, the preacher suggests, each individual has a dilemma to solve: either to endure stoically 'this little life' (XIV. 49), or to bring it to an end by means of a deliberate self-destructive act, legitimised by man's prerogative of free-will. The preacher -- and Thomson -- does not seem to encourage his audience towards one or other solution but lets them ponder on their freedom to

choose, and brood on the words 'End it when you will' (XIV. 90) in silent consternation.

On the other hand, the poet assumes a more definite and determined position when he deals again with the same existential dilemma in Section XIX. The vision of the 'River of the Suicides' (XIX. 4), which is an echo of the episode of the suicides in the *Inferno* (Canto XIII), kindles his proneness to meditation, and induces him to ask what stops some men from committing suicide like those individuals who, 'tired of ever-vain endurance', cannot patiently wait for the final realisation of 'the sweet assurance/ Of perfect peace eventual in the grave' (XIX. 19, 20), and therefore accelerate the process of nature by means of a violent act against it. His question 'Why actors and spectators do we stay?' (XIX. 23) is part both of his self-inquiring monologue and of an interrogation about human life addressed to his readership. Men are only puppets in the theatre of the world, as Tasso similarly states in the earlier poem 'Tasso to Leonora', yet three main reasons prevent them from destroying their life, and the poet expounds them in the following lines:

To fill our so-short rôles out right or wrong;
 To see what shifts are yet in the dull play
 For our illusion; to refrain from grieving
 Dear foolish friends by our untimely leaving. (XIX. 24)

First, man feels life as a duty to be accomplished, a moral imperative which is certainly part of the Victorian mental outlook; secondly, man is curious to see what masks and roles he will put on next; thirdly, he does not want other people to suffer because of his action. The last reason shows that Thomson felt very close to his fellows, and was not at all misanthropic even during the most difficult years of his life. He was not weak either as is proved by his explicit advocacy of the philosophy of stoic endurance, because if '[...] it is but for one night after all:/ What matters one brief night of dreary pain?' (XIX. 29). Thus he suggests that men should find within themselves the moral fortitude to suffer their short-lived period on the earth, since human life is only a short 'dreadful night' compared with the eternal oblivion subsequent to it.

This idea echoes what the poet says in Section XIII, though by contrast. There the poet describes the nights as 'aeons of slow pain' (XIII. 30), now he refers to life as a 'brief night of dreary pain' (XIX. 30): astonishingly both phrases occur in line 30 of their respective section. In fact, this internal contradiction can be explained by observing that whereas in Section XIII Thomson is speaking about the physical dimension of time and the real sequence of hours forming it, in Section XIX he is using time terminology as figurative language, and, moreover, expands the temporal scope by setting human life (the 'brief night') against the sphere of eternal oblivion beyond it. There is no such magnification of perspective in Section XIII, which rather presents a more factual, almost empirical description of the process of time in human existence. Suicide cannot therefore be the solution to our existential anguish: this is the conclusion we reach after reading Sections XIV and XIX. The preacher offers the audience a paradoxical form of consolation to which one of the congregated members responds with an outcry:

Speak not of comfort where no comfort is,
 Speak not at all: can words make foul things fair?
 Our life's cheat, our death a black abyss:
 Hush and be mute envisaging despair. (XVI. 39)

This comfort corresponds to the anti-Christian thought that 'we knew nothing of [life] ere our birth,/ And shall know nothing when consigned to earth' (XVI. 52). The mystery of life, that is, will never be unveiled, and hence man should simply give up the self-tormenting effort to understand something which is far beyond his reach.

'The empyrean is a void abyss' (XVII. 28) is the closing sentence of Section XVII, in which Thomson, many years before MacDiarmid, attacks the morbid Romantic inclination to ascribe human feelings or spiritual values to the inanimate. In other words, this section is an exposition of Ruskin's theory of the pathetic fallacy, and it also echoes Leopardi's rebellious voice which accuses Nature of cheating man through false illusions. Men who 'regard with passionate awe and yearning/ The mighty marching and the golden burning/ And think the heavens responds to what

they feel' (XVII. 5) are deluded, delirious creatures, as are also those who look backwards to their past, to the 'Eden innocence' (XVIII. 60) of their childhood in order to grasp some comfort for the present. In *The City of Dreadful Night* Thomson expresses his dissociation from the Blakean concept of the lost Innocence which can be recovered by man, and denies the possibility of finding consolation and a new enthusiasm for life in the past. His anti-Romantic attitude emerges particularly in section XVIII, which chronologically was the second part he composed.

The narrator is now wandering in the northern part of the city when he arrives at a spot where three lanes divide. His decision to take the left-hand lane is ominous, as the Latin form 'sinister' suggests. What he meets along the way is a half-horrifying, half-pathetic figure enacting a grotesque attempt to find 'the long-lost broken golden thread' (XVIII. 50) uniting his present with his past. Campbell points out the similarity between this old, miserable being with 'A haggard filthy face with bloodshot eyes' (XVIII. 25), and the character of Brunetto Latini in Canto XV of the *Inferno*, who turns his burnt figure to Dante in order to talk to him.⁸⁸ In fact, Thomson's personage lacks the aura of austerity which surrounds the figure of Brunetto; he crawls like an animal, and looks like a mockery of nature. His creeping is not a movement leading to freedom, but a distressful, non-evolving roaming inside the prison of his mind, and a parodic version of the Romantic quest. To his ephemeral, childish hopes the poet replies:

For this is law, if law there be in Fate:
What never has been, yet may have its when;
The thing which has been, never is again. (XVIII. 76)

Section XVIII can be interpreted in psychoanalytic terms. At some point, the crawling figure, while talking to the narrator, explains how the horrific present is a betrayal of any kind of original, individual innocence:

⁸⁸ Campbell, 'And I Burn Too', p. 127.

And I become a nursling soft and pure,
 An infant cradled on its mother's knee,
 Without a past, love-cherished and secure;
 Which if it saw this loathsome present Me,
 Would plunge its face into the pillowing breast,
 And scream abhorrence hard to lull to rest. (XVIII. 61)

Deprived of the security of family at an early age, Thomson may well have seen in the crawling figure another of his *poetic personae*. One of Thomson's contributions to *Cope's Tobacco Plant* entitled 'Memories' may offer an important clue on this point. Unfortunately the date of this passage is unknown but its relevance is undeniable:

[...] whatever be the present (which is infinitesimal) and whatever be the future (which to us is indefinite), the past, the sure past, whose records are written eternal and immutable in the book of destiny, [...] whose very tears are shining stars: it is dear and holy with the dearest holiness of the dead'.⁸⁹

From this quotation it appears obvious that at a stage in his life Thomson believed that the past was a sort of eternal repository of records from which man can derive comfort and pleasure at any time. In other words, he used to have the same hopes and aspirations as the grotesque wanderer of Section XVIII, but at the time of the composition of *The City of Dreadful Night* he rejected all illusions in order to show the naked truth, which is why he represents this supposed poetic mirror of his past self as a crawling creature, unable to stand and half deprived of humanity. He wants his morbid Romantic self to appear as a loser, and he opposes to it the stronger, steadfast figure of Melencolia, whose Romantic name and posture contrast with her classical-like tenacity and unyielding attitude.

⁸⁹ 'Memories', in *Selections from Original Contributions by James Thomson to Cope's Tobacco Plant* (Liverpool: At the Office of 'Cope's Tobacco Plant', 1889), p. 16.

Unmoved, firm behaviour set in opposition to a spasmodic and unhealthy type of Romantic predisposition is also personified by the figure of the Sphinx in Section XX. This image is not exclusively an emblem of the Necessity governing the universe, impassive and indifferent to man, but also and especially an anticipation, or prefiguration of the Melencolia described in the last section.⁹⁰ According to this interpretation, the Sphinx becomes a positive symbolic figure, and consequently the antagonistic angel represents a negative reality, something with which the poet disagrees and thus shows as weak and doomed. Section XX contains a very striking iconographic representation of the poet's moral and philosophic outlook in the last years of his life. A powerful picture is here vividly projected in front of our eyes; its protagonists are a colossal 'couchant sphinx' and, opposite to her, an armed angel 'standing in the moonlight clear' (XX. 9, 10). The background scenery is formed by a 'cloistered space' within which the cathedral stands in a 'calm sea of air' (XX. 3,6), all surmounted by a moonlit sky which bestows a metaphysical halo upon everything. Staring at this overwhelming scene, the narrator falls into a state of half-consciousness and drowsiness, but for three moments when something occurs which awakens him from his half-lethargic state. The recurrent three crops up again, and each time represents a didactic moment in which the narrator/observer acquires new intelligence, and, as in an epiphany, increases his awareness about the mystery of existence and the human condition. During his pilgrimage through the supernatural realms, Dante undergoes a similar experience: when he has to shift to a new circumstance or introduce new characters and themes, he often portrays himself as asleep or worn out but suddenly stirred by some particular incident.

What the narrator perceives is an allegorical vision of mankind and its frail, fleeting illusions: he is here the spectator of a three-acts tragedy with an underlying moral to grasp. In the first act the angel's wings break down, so that he becomes simply a warrior. He has lost his faith but can still rely upon his own power, supposedly his rationality and wit. In the meantime, the Sphinx has not changed her countenance. In the second act his sword collapses too. Now he is reduced to a

⁹⁰ This opinion is corroborated by Sharpe in 'Learning to Read *The City*', p. 73.

humble, 'unarmed man with raised hands impotent' (XX. 34) before the sphinx. His humanity is still integral but weakened and deprived of its spiritual and mental strength. The third act is about the total downfall of this powerless figure in front of the imperturbable Sphinx, who is now called 'monster' (XX. 41) because of her abnormal, extreme impassivity, although the term often seems to be used simply as a synonym of 'colossus' and 'titan' to refer to the physical dimension of the sphinx without containing any negative connotation. This is corroborated by the closing verses of the section, in which the narrator, with his eyes still fixed on the 'sworded angel's wrecks' and 'the sphinx supreme' (XX. 46), says: 'I pondered long that cold majestic face/ Whose vision seemed of infinite void space' (XX. 47). The Sphinx is a very emblematic example of the open, ambiguous symbolism of the poem: it represents the pitiless, harsh Necessity ruling the world, in front of which all human aspirations and ideals, such as religious faith and rationalism, dissolve, but it is also an image of impassive endurance and stoic fortitude, epitomised by Melencolia at the end of the poem.

The vision of 'infinite void space' contemplated by the Sphinx and, through her eyes, also by the narrator, recalls Leopardi's vision of the infinite in his sonnet interestingly entitled 'L'Infinito' ('The Infinite'), equally powerful and loaded with a mysterious, almost mystic value. David Daiches observes:

[...] the concluding lines of the most famous of all his poems, *L'infinito*, distil that particular kind of broodiness that I have associated with the Victorian elegiac mode:

[...] Così tra questa
 Immensità s'annega il pensier mio.
 E il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mar.⁹¹

⁹¹ Daiches, *Some Late Victorian Attitudes*, p. 46. Alastair Fowler has translated the lines from Leopardi's sonnet as follows: '[...] So my thought founders, lost in this/ Immensity; and it seems to me a gentle thing/ To suffer shipwreck in this pacific ocean'. See *Leopardi: A Scottish Quair*, ed. by R.D.S. Jack (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1987), p. 21.

Although Leopardi's vision is Romantic whereas the 'void space' on which the Sphinx's face lingers is rather an *ante-litteram* allusion to the existentialist universal vacuum, both comprise a sort of mystic enigma and transmit a sense of absolute stillness. Even if what is reflected in the eyes of the Sphinx is a void infinity, or an infinite void, which excludes any religious significance, it still suggests that there is something beyond the reach of mankind, a mystery which Thomson never denied but, at the same time, never attempted to explain. The vacuum is what man perceives when, urged by his hubris, he strives to discern the content of the mystery.

After denying the usefulness of such classical and Romantic ideals as the return to the golden age of childhood and past innocence by portraying the pitiful crawling figure, Thomson similarly shows the position of the rationalist as weak and ephemeral by representing the breakdown of the armed angel. Beyond all these illusions only one stance remains possible, and he exemplifies it in the figure of Melencolia. Before explaining its significance, Thomson offers us a physical description of the colossal 'winged Woman' (XXI. 6) looking over the 'city of dreadful night'. In fact, there is another antecedent to this picture apart from the already mentioned figure in 'Our Lady of Sorrow', that is, an early, undated draft of Section XXI, entitled 'The "Melencolia" of Albrecht Dürer'.⁹² The final version is a more accurate and detailed literary portrait of Dürer's engraving, but the early draft presents a very significant element which Thomson banished from the later description. The earlier Melencolia is compared with a Sphinx who gazes 'in eternal trance'

Athwart the desert's gloomy mysteries,
Thus images a soul beyond the scope
Of all fond frailties of fear and hope. (p. 66)

Thus the previous poem expressly states the link between the two Titanesses. Both seem to look at the infinite space beyond human borders, but Melencolia also

⁹² Printed in *Poems and Some Letters*, pp. 66-67.

attempted something else: she tried to perceive and interpret the mystery contained in that space, but all her efforts were in vain, hence her 'sternly desolate' (p. 67) posture, and her useless tools lying around her. The same visual allusion to the ineffectiveness of scientific methods to disclose the mystery of life is conveyed in the Melencolia picture of *The City of Dreadful Night*.

As I have already mentioned, both the petrified Sage in *The Doom of a City* and the colossal statue overlooking London in 'A Lady of Sorrow' represent two early versions of Melencolia in *The City of Dreadful Night*. Nevertheless Thomson's ideas in the 1870s were different from those he expressed both in the 1850s and in the 1860s. The figure of the stony Sage is a symbol of the urban inhabitants' spiritual stagnation and sterility, due to their giving priority to materialistic ambitions over moral and ethical codes; hence he represents the negative effects of the contemporary tendency to consider the empirical and material aspects before the spiritual ones. In the 1850s, Thomson was evidently bewildered by the new scientific theories of the time and the revolutionary consequences they had in the moral and religious sphere. The Titaness in the prose phantasy 'A Lady of Sorrow' is another expression of the overwhelming power of materialism and science over religion and morality, yet she stands also for a gigantic prototype of contemporary man fallen into despair and anxiety because of the ambiguity and inherent danger of the new scientific discoveries.

In 1874, when he started the poem, Thomson's attitude towards scientific determinism and the consequent falling away of human spirituality had already undergone a substantial change. Even if he never revealed any personal agreement with the disconcerting results of scientific advance, he gradually acquired an awareness of their inevitability and learnt to accept them with the same air of indifference and moral endurance which characterise the image of Melencolia. The critic Peter C. Noel-Bentley, after describing the 'city of dreadful night' as a reversed Jerusalem in which the basic symbols of divinity have lost their significance, very interestingly remarks:

In such a world Melencolia symbolizes the only existence that is possible. She sits, a parody of the divine female figure (Beatrice or

Mary), high over the City on a plateau (itself a parody of the Biblical mountain) surrounded by symbols of isolation, her instruments.⁹³

The tools of scientific knowledge and inquiry are there in front of her; the question is whether or not she uses them. Noel-Bentley and other critics seem to suggest that Melencolia simply gazes at her instruments because she has realised that they are utterly useless for her purposes. This interpretation is in fact clearly refuted by the text itself of the poem, especially by the following verses:

Baffled and beaten back she works on still,
 Weary and sick of soul she works the more,
 Sustained by her indomitable will. (XXI. 50)

In other words, in spite of her awareness that empirical speculation will not lead her to discover and penetrate the 'dreadful mysteries of Time' (XXI. 46), Melencolia keeps on working because it is her inexorable moral duty to do so, in order that 'her sorrow shall be turned to labour' (XXI. 54) until death. She stands for the stoic endurance and the firm acceptance of human limitations which Thomson embraced in the last years of his life, when he left behind his hostile attitude towards the Victorian obsession with labour and the incessant course of material progress.

Yet his final message is dreadful, since it admits the spiritual void and darkness of the whole universe, and denies the possibility of a panacea to redeem the present state. Contrary to the *Inferno*, *The City of Dreadful Night* does not offer the reader the possibility of applying to it an 'anagogic' interpretation, whereby its shocking, anguishing scenes represent a means of undergoing a self-catharsis, and promote a renewal of life. Thomson does not hesitate to express his nihilism and atheism with extreme honesty:

⁹³ Peter C. Noel-Bentley, "Fronting the Dreadful Mysteries of Time": Dürer's *Melencolia* in

The sense every struggle brings defeat
 Because Fate holds no prize to crown success;
 That all the oracles are dumb or cheat
 Because they have no secret to express;
 That none can pierce the vast blank veil uncertain
 Because there is no light beyond the curtain;
 That all is vanity and nothingness. (XXI. 64)

Nevertheless the conclusion presents the same ambiguity and dualism which pervade the whole poem, and the vision of Melencolia produces on the reader the mixed effects felt by the inhabitants of the city who look at her with a specific aim in mind:

The strong to drink new strength of iron endurance,
 The weak new terrors; all, renewed assurance
 And confirmation of the old despair. (XXI. 82)

Melencolia is an image of moral strength, rising high and superb between the earth and the sky, a visual expression of the only behaviour man can assume in the modern world of waste and materialism in order to survive and escape the destiny of the armed angel facing the sphinx. Thomson intends to suggest to his addressee a way of resisting or coping with the abasing aspects and the disturbing problems of the modern city, or as Sharpe points out, '[...] a solution to the familiar catalogue of urban complaints and fears, a way of dealing and living with the urban despair to which it at first appears to succumb'.⁹⁴ This means consists neither in a Romantic, idealistic turning back towards the past to look for the lost age of innocence nor in suicide. Instead Thomson proposes to emulate Melencolia, and embrace, in Sharpe's words, her 'self-awareness, fellowship, and sober contemplation' (p. 84) as ethical principles. Men should strive to find in themselves the moral and mental strength to come to terms with the 'dreadful night' they live in, supported by the consolation that

Thomson's *City of Dreadful Night*, *Victorian Poetry*, 12 (1974), 193-203 (p. 198).

they are not alone in facing it, since there is a whole brotherhood of men experiencing the same sense of anxiety and despair.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Sharpe, p. 66.

⁹⁵ In this respect the figure and significance of Melencolia are very close to Leopardi's image of the broom in 'La Ginestra' ('The Broom', 1836).

v. A deep gloom with sparks of light (1874-1882)

In the last eight years of Thomson's life darkness and pessimism gradually overwhelmed any sporadic moments of light and optimism. Various physical and material reasons contributed to blacken further his vision of human life and nature. First, there were financial reasons: from 1874 until 1881 Thomson encountered many difficulties in finding a publisher for his poems, and therefore he was obliged to accept, though with regret and frustration, the hackwork which he was occasionally offered. Secondly, his physical condition was deteriorating; he suffered from a severe form of insomnia and very often turned to alcohol to procure for himself momentary states of mental oblivion. His London friends, such as Holyoake, Foote, the Wrights and Marston, were not able to save him from his dipsomania. After 1874 Thomson spent most of his life in London, except for his sporadic visits to Leicester, where he got acquainted with the Barrs. The city continued to represent for him both a tangible and visible hell on earth, and a mental dimension, a sort of visualisation of his tormented consciousness.

It has been generally accepted that during the years from 1874 to 1881 Thomson did not compose any poetry but produced only prose contributions to some secularist papers. In fact, there are manuscripts in the Bodleian Library which prove not only that he did not completely set aside his verse writing, but also that he began some of the poems which he completed after 1881. The process of starting, abandoning and then resuming his compositions shows how vexed and pressured he was at the time. Whereas the 1877 poem 'The Pilgrimage to Saint Nicotine of the Holy Herb'⁹⁶ is an example of the hackwork Thomson had to write if he wanted to find a publisher easily, the poem of the following year entitled 'I Had a Love' deserves some attention.

For some obscure reason, Thomson did not want Dobell to publish the poem in the 1880 volume *The City of Dreadful Night and Other Poems*, so that the only available version is that included by Ridler in *Poems and Some Letters of James*

Thomson, where it has the title 'Lines, 1878'. Critics have largely ignored this piece which, in fact, is a relevant testimony to the interior conflicts which the poet was undergoing in the last years of his life. It may be that Thomson did not want to publish the poem because he saw it as too personal and emotional. It is also likely that Thomson felt that the poem looked back to the pseudo-romantic poems of his youth, thus contrasting with his more realistic view in the 1860s.

'I Had a Love', on the other hand, could almost be a verse entry from Thomson's diary, containing a secret confession he intended to keep unpublished. Contrary to the expectations raised by the title, it is not merely a love poem. Matilda is evoked once again, as is the despair which the poet felt at her death, and which led to the loss of his love, faith and hope, as in *The City of Dreadful Night*. Nevertheless, the central idea concerns the reason why the poet did not commit suicide even after realising that the world was a wasteland, a 'many-insect-peopled drop of dew',⁹⁷ and after losing all hope and all faith not only in social institutions but in God as well. His atheism and nihilism emerge from such lines as 'Why were we ever brought to life at all?' and 'From Nothingness to Nothingness - all lost!' (p. 208).

The idealism of earlier years deserted him completely after 1870; he did not believe anymore in the future reunion of the two lovers' immortal souls, and in this poem he says that even if there were the chance to be rejoined with her on the earth, he would reject it, since he sees the world as too gloomy and corrupted to wish for the return of the girl from the eternal rest of the 'Dead Sea' (p. 208) where she is lying. Why does he not pursue then the idea of entering that eternal silence and stillness himself? The answer is contained in the following verses:

Songs in the Desert! Songs of husky breath,
And undivine Despair;
Songs that are dirges, but for Life not Death,
Songs that infect the air

⁹⁶ Printed in *Selections from Original Contributions by James Thomson to Cope's Tobacco Plant*, pp. 54-59.

⁹⁷ 'Lines, 1878', in *Poems and Some Letters*, pp. 205-208 (p. 207).

Have sweetened bitterly my food and wine,
The heart corroded and the Dead Sea brine. (p. 206)

Later on he adds: 'So potent is the Word, the Lord of Life,/ And so tenacious Art' (p. 206). It is the 'bitter sweetness' of art and creativity that keeps him alive. His songs are 'dirges' that 'infect' the air, but none the less they celebrate life, however bleak, not death.

Apart from 'I Had a Love', the period from 1874 until 1881 was not very productive as far as Thomson's poetry is concerned. On the other hand, many essays appeared in the secularist papers of the time, such as *The National Reformer* -- to which Thomson contributed until 1875 -- *Cope's Tobacco Plant*, and *The Secularist*. Most of these essays corroborate the ideas which Thomson expressed in previous poems and articles, but they are sometimes even harsher and more sarcastic towards contemporary social and moral codes. 'Great Christ is Dead', 'The Devil in the Church of England', 'The Primate on the Church and the World', 'A Bible Lesson on Monarchy' -- written between 1875 and 1876, and included in *Satires and Profanities* -- and 'On the Worth of Metaphysical Systems' of 1876 (*Essays and Phantasies*), are only a few revealing titles from a long list of satirical essays in which Thomson's anticlericalism, antidogmatism, and atheism clearly emerge despite his impersonal, objective illustrations of contemporary religious and political systems.

Until 1880 his poetic inspiration seemed to have gone, but some positive incidents brought again some light into the general darkness which clouded his spirit. After many efforts, his friend Dobell managed to find a publisher for his poems, which resulted in the appearance of the volume *The City of Dreadful Night and Other Poems* in 1880. The same publishers, Reeves and Turner, took on also the next volume of poems, which appeared the following year under the title *Vane's Story, Weddah and Om-el-Bonain, and Other Poems*, and of the collection of prose pieces called *Essays and Phantasies*. Moreover, at the time Thomson had also occasion to rediscover his social life, when in 1881 he was invited to Leicester for the opening of the New Hall of the Leicester Secular Society. It was in this circumstance that he became acquainted with the Barrs, with whom he spent the final happier period of his

life. These events injected a new creative energy and enthusiasm into Thomson's spirit, so that from 1881 he resumed the composition of poetry, and the outcome was a heterogeneous range of poems reflecting his changing moods. Thomson's poetic output in the last two years of his life can be divided into three main groups: first, miscellaneous poems; secondly, love poems; thirdly, poems of despair and pessimism.

The first set of poems is characterised by the presence of an ideological component of some kind, concerning either his philosophical or his political and ethical views. In 'Address on the Opening of the New Hall of the Leicester Secular Society' (1881), the ideas expressed by the poet are obviously connected with the principles on which the Society are based: free thought, human sympathy, social duty, the search for truth (associated with German Higher Criticism of the Bible), *carpe diem* philosophy, and faith in humanity rather than divinity.⁹⁸ These ideas seem to contradict the gloomy, pessimistic conclusions at which Thomson had gradually arrived since his first sceptical attitude in the 1850s. And indeed the poem gives the impression that, except for the belief in human freedom and the need to look for truth beyond the false pretensions of orthodox religion, most of the other convictions are not sincerely felt by the author. This does not necessarily mean that on that particular occasion Thomson put on the mask of Tartuffe in order to obtain some form of public prestige, but since those friends who asked him to give the inaugural speech helped him throughout his career, he certainly felt indebted to them, and a way to thank them was to give a speech in support of their ideas. Moreover, the creed of the Society did not completely clash with his own moral beliefs, because it included a set of notions which he might even have cherished, though aware that they were only illusions, albeit useful. Essentially, the difference between himself and his audience was much like that between Leopardi and his addressee: all of them conceived human life as based on moral values and aspirations, but while their audiences deemed them truth, the two poets saw them as illusions -- the so called Leopardian 'fole', or objects of our imagination, perhaps foolish, yet useful for enduring existence.

Leopardi is echoed in another poem of the same year which summarises Thomson's last philosophical ideas and his non-religious vision of the universe. I refer to the poem entitled 'A Voice from the Nile' (*A Voice from the Nile*). Its most remarkable feature is the close correspondence between form and content. The unusual adoption of free verse -- Thomson used it only in one other poem, 'Despotism Tempered by Dynamite' (*A Voice from the Nile*) -- determines the flowing rhythm of the poem, and is perfectly suited to the protagonist and narrator, that is, the river Nile, which is used as a personified symbol of nature, endlessly flowing on while it is speaking. The central themes of the poem are typically Leopardian: nature is utterly indifferent to man; there is no connection whatsoever between the divine and the human; therefore man has just one existential task which is simply to endure his life. In a sense, Thomson returns back to his pantheistic ideas, but this time man is represented as an isolated being in the universe, excluded from the beauty and joy of nature shared by the other living beings. In his speech, the river points out the contrast between man and other creatures: men are 'sad-eyed',⁹⁹ whereas the other beings are cheerful; men have always been socially divided, while the other realms of nature are based on the principle of egalitarianism. This is obviously an idealistic picture of the natural world, perhaps a deliberate overstatement to make the miserable condition of humankind stand out more strongly against the panorama of a cheerful Nature. The river explains why such a difference exists: whereas animals do not create illusions which then inevitably fail and are replaced only by an overwhelming void, man

Is alien most in this, to cherish dreams
And brood on visions of eternity
And build religions in his brooding brain
And in the dark depths awe-full of his soul. (p. 7)

⁹⁸ James Thomson, *Address on the Opening of the New Hall of the Leicester Secular Society* (Leicester Secular Society, 1881).

⁹⁹ 'A Voice from the Nile', in *A Voice from the Nile and Other Poems*, pp. 1-9 (p. 4).

In other words, what causes man to suffer is the discovery that all his mental and spiritual constructs are only evanescent dreams. Some men though are so blind that they continue to build illusions upon illusions until they finally collapse. The Nile stands for the ever-flowing, eternal course of universal nature opposed to the limited, transient state of mankind. In 'A Voice from the Nile', Nature, represented by the river, is indifferent and patronising towards man's precarious condition, but it is not evil, even if at one point it is called 'serpent of eternity' (p. 9) -- in fact a metaphorical image associated with Celtic mythology, signifying the superior wisdom and all-embracing vision with which the Nile surveys all forms of life. The poem is not marked by a mood of dark pessimism, although the vision of mankind is certainly not reassuring.

The other philosophical poem of the last years of his life is 'Proem. O Antique Fables' (*Poems and Some Letters*), composed in 1882. Once again Leopardi's philosophical ideas lurk behind it. It is essentially based on a series of opposing pairs all deriving from the central antithesis between past and present. On the side of the past are terms such as fables, dreams, belief in natural deities, faith in an after-life; on the side of the present are their opposites, that is, the disappearance of the world of magic and fantasy because of the intervention of human reason, the death of all illusions and dreams and their replacement with spiritual dullness, disbelief in the divinity of nature and in the immortality of the soul. In the essay title 'Great Christ is Dead!', published in the *National Reformer* in March 1875, Thomson had already pointed out that the present age saw the decline of all forms of divinity, since 'Fate, in the form of Science, has decreed the extinction of the Gods'.¹⁰⁰ But in 'Proem' there is a stronger sense of loss and nostalgic regret for an unidentified Golden Age in which man could still perceive and believe in the correspondence between the physical and the metaphysical. Yet the poet still envisages one beam of light in the general darkness of the present human condition, that is, love, which he defines as the 'sole star of light in infinite black despair'.¹⁰¹ He does not specify the nature of this love,

¹⁰⁰ 'Great Christ is Dead!', in *Satires and Profanities*, pp. 105-109 (p. 108).

¹⁰¹ 'Proem. O Antique Fables', in *Poems and Some Letters*, pp. 221-222 (p. 222).

so that it may refer either to the specific relationship between man and woman or to general empathy between human beings.

In addition to poems centred on philosophic issues, Thomson composed two political poems in 1882 which are in step with the political pieces of the 1860s. 'The Old Story and the New Storey' (*A Voice from the Nile*) is a satirical and partly humorous poem about the futile controversial debates between the Members of Parliament, but the poem called 'Despotism Tempered by Dynamite' (*A Voice from the Nile*) is more interesting. It is the last poem Thomson wrote, and therefore his last message of political and moral freedom aimed at his contemporaries. His republican thought is indirectly expressed by presenting the figure of a weak, almost grotesque Tsar who can be identified with Alexander III, the heir of Russian autocracy after his father was assassinated by terrorists. The poem is the Tsar's dramatic monologue, which reveals his anguish and fear of undergoing a similar fate to his father's -- he lives the everlasting nightmare of becoming the victim of another terrorist bomb. His weakness emerges especially when he sets his own anxiety in opposition to the moral and spiritual dullness of his people, whom he describes as individuals with the only daily preoccupation to work until they get wearied, without ever thinking about a better life. This is an advantage though, because, as he says, '[...] with no hope they have no deadly fear,/ They sleep and eat their scanty food in peace'.¹⁰² The first of these lines is a cross-reference to *The City of Dreadful Night*: 'No hope could have no fear' is the reiterated last verse of six stanzas in Section IV.

The second group among the last poems is formed by works composed in 1881 and 1882 which share a central love theme. It includes 'Richard Forest's Midsummer Night', 'At Belvoir', 'The Sleeper', 'Modern Penelope', and 'He Heard Her Sing', all included in *A Voice from the Nile and Other Poems*. The first of these poems resembles the juvenile 'Ronald and Helen' in the description of natural scenery, and 'Sunday up the River' in the composed, light-hearted tone assumed by the poet. It is an astonishing composition, especially if we consider that it was written only six

months before Thomson's death. Particularly striking is the sense of serenity, the quasi-idyllic contemplation which emerges from the lines; it looks as if the poet, probably aware of his forthcoming death, intended to prove to himself and to his readers that he was still capable of perceiving the sense of harmony inherent in the world, even if the other, opposed sense of chaos and anxiety was dominant most of the time. Richard Forest is a city dweller who, one night, decides to leave behind the urban hell and move to the Eden-like countryside where his lover Lucy lives. Section VII is like a poetic transposition of one of Millet's paintings: the central image is the rural idyll of Lucy's family and their humble life in the cottage. The scenery would appear to be that of an island, given that the sea is not far from his lover's dwelling, and it is on contemplating the natural wonder of the sea married with the sky that Richard turns into the Romantic, melancholy hero who gives voice to the poet's inner thoughts, as in the following words:

What specks are we in this vast world,
 Our little lives how fleeting!
 While star on star is throbbing far,
 What matter two hearts beating?¹⁰³

The poem is significant for two main reasons: first, it invalidates the critical assumption that Thomson completely discarded his Romantic or pseudo-Romantic heritage after the early 1860s, when he began to turn his inner-directed writing towards the outer reality of nature and of other men; secondly, it corroborates my hypothesis that Thomson's poetry did not really undergo an evolution, but a wavering development within which the dialectics of opposites, including that of Romanticism/realism, were constantly operating.

'At Belvoir', 'The Sleeper', and 'Modern Penelope' were composed during the period in which the poet was entertained several times by the Barrs in their villa

¹⁰² 'Despotism Tempered by Dynamite', in *A Voice from the Nile and Other Poems*, pp. 89-91 (p. 90).

¹⁰³ 'Richard Forest's Midsummer Night', in *A Voice from the Nile*, pp. 10-27 (p. 24).

'Forest Edge', set in the village of Kirby Muxloe near Leicester. The female figure described in all three poems is very likely to be Harriet Barr, the twenty-year-old sister of his friend Jack Barr with whom the poet was supposedly in love. In fact, Thomson probably felt just a strong affection for the girl, as he shows in 'At Belvoir', which describes his visit to Belvoir Castle together with Jack, Harriet and their friend Mary Patten. Thomson here depicts his walking with the girl in a very optimistic and serene mood, which is mirrored in the surrounding Spring landscape. 'The Sleeper' is the poetic portrait of the same woman while she is dozing. The description by the poet/observer is very accurate and realistic, but it is followed by one of Thomson's familiar observations:

Sweet sleep; no hope, no fear, no strife;
 The solemn sanctity of death,
 With all the loveliest bloom of life;
 Eternal peace in mortal breath:
 Pure sleep from which she will awaken
 Refreshed as one who hath partaken
 New strength, new hope, new love, new faith.¹⁰⁴

In the last two years of his life Thomson suffered increasingly from insomnia, which helps to explain why he attributed to sleep such a purifying, regenerating effect. In 'Modern Penelope' the girl appears once again, but this time she is not sleeping but crocheting in her chair. It is another idyll, although this Modern Penelope proves to be more roguish than her famous classical ancestor. About her the poet says: 'You have caught twin loves in the toils of your art',¹⁰⁵ which is probably an allusion to the gossip that Harriet Barr had two suitors at Forest Edge. 'Modern Penelope' is therefore an unusual love poem; the poet here looks at the emotion of love with more objective and realistic eyes than in the poems of his youth, and the figure of the

¹⁰⁴ 'The Sleeper', in *A Voice from the Nile*, pp. 62-65 (p. 65).

¹⁰⁵ 'Modern Penelope', in *A Voice from the Nile*, pp. 66-69 (p. 69).

idealised, angelic lady is replaced by that of a much more human woman, with her own weaknesses and wiles.

Another poem belonging to Thomson's 'Indian summer' of the last years is 'He Heard Her Sing', a celebration of love and music, which was one of the disciplines Thomson enjoyed most at school. The whole poem is characterised by a ballad-like rhythm, and indeed this is one of the few poems in which Thomson's Scottish cultural heritage crops up. Alice, the female protagonist of the poem, looks like a traditional shepherdess or a milkmaid singing folk ballad tunes while she is working. When the poet hears her singing, he remarks: 'Those ballads of Scotland that thrill you, keen from the heart to the heart,/ Till their pathos is seeming to kill you, with an exquisite bliss in the smart'.¹⁰⁶ After leaving his country girl, like the protagonist of 'Richard Forest's Midsummer Night', the poet stops on the shore, and there he has a vision: he sees a boat in which Raphael and Fornarina, the famous singer he portrayed, are sailing, and the poet is enraptured by the love songs of the woman. It is only a dream, but when he awakens the enchantment of those tunes mingled with the sweetness of Alice's airs are still with him. 'He Heard Her Sing' is both an homage to the magic power which music exerted on the author and an expression of his Scottishness.

Having spent most of his life outside Scotland, Thomson felt less strongly than other Scottish writers a patriotic link with the ancient, oral traditions and the legendary, mythical lore of his native country. Yet he did not dismiss their value, nor did he deny his Scottish origins. Moreover, there is a voice speaking through his verses which sometimes echoes the radical voice of many Scottish writers from Burns until MacDiarmid, in particular that of his contemporaries, such as Davidson, Buchanan and Geddes, who similarly denounced certain aspects of Victorian and Edwardian society through their ironic and subversive treatment of the established values.

¹⁰⁶ 'He Heard Her Sing', in *A Voice from the Nile*, pp. 41-54 (p. 44).

Finally, the third group of poems include two of the best examples of Thomson's poetry of dark pessimism: 'The Poet and His Muse' and 'Insomnia' (*A Voice from the Nile*). 'The Poet and His Muse' is a more mature and elaborate version of the poem 'The Fire That Filled My Heart of Old' (*Vane's Story*), written exactly eighteen years before. Yet the poet's terror of creative sterility and intellectual aridity is now more acute, and his anxiety resembles the sense of existential void expressed by Baudelaire in 'Spleen'. The poet invokes the Muse of poetry, because she represents the only source from which he could derive the ability to release, at least temporarily, his heart and brain from the 'burthens of dark thoughts'.¹⁰⁷ In the last months of his life Thomson found it more and more difficult to write sanguine poems; hence his appeal to the Muse to send him some new 'afflatus' allowing him to write something different from the gloomy, pessimistic verses which take shape in his mind.

The Muse answers his address, but when she appears to him, the poet realises that she is as dead as his spiritual life, as wan and weak as his creative energy, as 'nerveless, soulless, lightless' (p. 58) as his inner life. Indeed, it is only the ghost of the Muse who visits him, no longer able to help him. She tells him that the revival of his spiritual and poetic strength does not depend on her but uniquely on his own will not to give up, but to breathe new life into his outworn soul. She describes his present state in these words:

Though you exist still, a mere form inurning
 The ashes of dead fires of thought and yearning,
 Dead faith, dead love, dead hope, in hollow breast and brow.
 (p. 59)

The death of the Muse makes him despair and see darkness all around him; the struggle the Muse suggested appears worthless, and the vision of his whole life utterly bleak and hopeless:

¹⁰⁷ 'The Poet and His Muse', in *A Voice from the Nile*, pp. 55-61 (p. 55).

The Past a great regret, The Present sterile,
 The Future hopeless, with the further peril
 Of withering down and down to utter death-in-life. (p. 60)

But suddenly another voice, antagonistic to the pessimistic one, starts to speak inside him, which reminds him that he still has a 'beating heart', a 'burning brow', and a 'spirit gasping in keen spasms of dread/ And fierce revulsion that it is not dead'. Thus he can exclaim 'Dear Muse, revive! we yet may dream and love and sing!' (p. 61). The struggle which is taking place inside the poet's consciousness is certainly one of the most striking aspects of the poem: he feels that his inspiration is deserting him together with both his spiritual and physical energy, but as he cannot resign himself to this distressing idea, he uses all his remaining vigour to fight his last battle against darkness and despondency. The poem offers further evidence that even in the year when he died, Thomson's gloomy thoughts were sporadically brightened by moments of light and hope, though too fleeting to have any significant effect on his general mental state.

Insomnia (A Voice from the Nile) is about the hallucinatory states which frequently afflicted the poet in the last phase of his existence, before he eventually descended into a state of irrecoverable destitution leading to his death in 1882. Echoing what he said in 'The Sleeper', here he writes that with sleep comes 'new strength, new health, new life', because the human spirit enters the world of 'divine unconscious',¹⁰⁸ whereas insomnia condemns man to a wearisome, never-ending state of self-tormenting consciousness. In the darkness of the night, the poet feels an anxious sense of aloofness from other men, since, unlike them, he cannot appease his exhausted spirit through sleep. He portrays himself in these lines:

But I with infinite weariness outworn,
 Haggard with endless nights unblessed by sleep,

¹⁰⁸ 'Insomnia', in *A Voice from the Nile*, pp. 28-40 (p. 28).

Ravaged by thoughts unutterably forlorn,
 Plunged in despairs unfathomably deep,
 Went cold and pale and trembling with affright
 Into the desert vastitude of Night,
 Arid and wild and black. (p. 29)

The sleepless night turns into a sort of phantasmagoria: inside his bedroom the poet has the impression that there is 'some dark Presence' (p. 30) watching him, and, after making the effort to figure out what it might be, he perceives 'Sad weary yearning eyes, but fixed remorseless/ Upon my eyes yet wearier' (p. 31). The image he sees is just the object of his hallucination, but he describes it very realistically; it is the personification of the second hour of the night, an allegorical figure which on the one hand evokes the classical representation of the hours as mythological images, and on the other is connected with the Victorian obsession with the inevitable passing of time.

The poet attempts to close his eyes in order to sleep, but the effect is different: his eyelids are shut but the nightmarish hallucination continues, and now he sees the night as a 'black waste of ridge-walls' (p. 32), a surrealistic landscape consisting of ravines and crags that he has to climb up and down, and each time he reaches the ridge, he hears the bells chime, meaning that another hour has passed. The visionary scenery calls to mind both Dante's depiction of the infernal abyss and the horrifying grandeur of certain representations in Poe's and De Quincey's writing; it is fantastic but, at the same time, Thomson may have derived some of its features from the sublime panorama of the Rocky Mountains, which he had the opportunity to see when he went to Colorado in 1872. The ravines he has to overcome with his imagination become increasingly steeper, and the hours of the night which he progressively encounters are increasingly frightening figures marked by more and more visible signs of death. Thomson anticipates modern literary surrealism when he writes:

I had no heart to say a single word,
 But closed my eyes again;

And set me shuddering to the task stupendous
 Of climbing down and up that gulph tremendous
 Unto the next hour-ridge beyond Hope's farthest ken. (p. 34)

The early twentieth-century surrealist writer Jean Paulhan described his night hallucination in very similar terms. It is interesting to notice that, within the visual world, whereas the time dimension is completely overturned (time seems to be much longer than in real life, a single instant can turn into an eternity), the space dimension has not changed, and it is still possible to speak of an 'up' and 'down' direction. This combination allows the author to mingle realism and supernaturalism without arousing inconsistency. When the Fifth Hour of the night arrives, the poet feels he cannot stand that black, death-like presence any longer, and therefore he decides to go out of his dim room. An obscure urge pushes him outside, a force which wins over the antithetical desire to make a definitive end, and enter eternal oblivion. Yet what he finds outside his house is nothing but a denser and more overwhelming gloom. The outward urban world assumes the same dusky and tenebrous hues of his soul, because the city he is walking through is not only a real place but also the visible image of his subconscious life. Moreover, as James Sambrook points out, it is 'the hell of Thomson's consciousness'.¹⁰⁹ Thus the poem is another example of the kind of mixed representation which characterises *The City of Dreadful Night*.

Indeed the two poems are very similar in their half-real, half-fantastic landscape, or in the surrealistic quality of their scenery: there are elements of the real, architectural and topographic dimension of the city, such as bridges, houses, squares, streets, but they are inserted into a weird, chimerical atmosphere. Such is the urban world the poet enters in *Insomnia*. Its inhabitants, hardly seen, look like ghostly figures, its houses are like tombs, and a natural phenomenon such as the rising of the sun sweeping away the moonlight becomes a manifestation of the violence and the conflicts inherent in nature. There is also another similarity with *The City of Dreadful*

¹⁰⁹ James Sambrook, 'The Rossettis and Other Contemporary Poets', in *The Penguin History of Literature*, ed. by Arthur Pollard, 10 vols (London: Penguin Books, 1993), VI: *The Victorians*, pp. 435-462 (p. 462).

Night. While wandering in the city, the poet reflects about the meaning and worth of human life, and he comes to the conclusion that 'our poor vast petty life is one dark maze of dreams' (p. 40), which duplicates what Thomson had written in the previous poem. He makes this general statement about existence after considering his own individual condition, but how valid is such a view? Previously in the poem he stressed the difference between himself, unable to sleep, and other men, peacefully resting in the night. Thus life is not a nightmare for everyone. Such paradoxes are part of the poet's mental outlook, the poetic expression of his own inner conflicts and vacillations.

James Thomson exercised a strong influence on subsequent writers whose work focuses on the problems of modern society and man's metaphysical questions confronting it. Morgan sees echoes of Thomson's masterpiece in *The Waste Land*, but also in some novels, such as Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903) -- where London East End is called 'the City of Dreadful Monotony'¹¹⁰ -- and John Rechy's *City of Night* (1963).¹¹¹ Ridler has acknowledged Thomson's influence on Muir and Yeats,¹¹² and I would like to add that MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man* contains some symbolic images and ideas which recall Thomson's philosophical vision, such as the Nietzschean concept of eternal recurrence, symbolised by the mill in Thomson and the Great Wheel in MacDiarmid (rotating and releasing evil and good), and the anti-Romantic vision of universal nature. Moreover the two poets are generally linked by their common experience of Scottish writers who, in different ways, attempted to cope with the cultural divisions of the time.

Apparently they went in opposite directions -- Thomson away from and MacDiarmid back to the Scottish tradition -- but in truth, although MacDiarmid did not experience the geographical displacement which profoundly affected the older poet's personality and work, in both his public and private life he displayed constant doubts and made contradictory choices which clearly undermine his apparent moral

¹¹⁰ Jack London, *The People of the Abyss*, 2nd edn (London: The Journeyman Press, 1977; repr. 1992), p. 88.

¹¹¹ Morgan, Introduction to *The City of Dreadful Night*, p. 7.

resolve and ideological firmness. The following chapter analyses John Davidson, who was another such eccentric Scottish writer, greatly admired by MacDiarmid, and recently reassessed by critics.

¹¹² 'Introduction' to *Poems and Some Letters*, p. xlv.