The Importance of Being London: Looking for Signs of the Metropolis in James Thomson’s City of Dreadful Night

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Since its first appearance in 1874, James Thomson’s City of Dreadful Night has initiated a long line of texts with titles strikingly alike. One of its most noticeable descendants is Rudyard Kipling’s short story that bears exactly the same title ‘City of Dreadful Night’. [1] More examples of similar titles could also be found amid contemporary works such as John Rechy’s novel City of Night (1963) and Judith R. Walkowitz’s City of Dreadful Delight (1992). Just as its title has been emulated in succeeding city narratives, the poem itself has inspired vigorous discussions revolving Thomson’s urban experience. Ian Campbell, William Sharpe, and Peter C. Noel-Bentley, among many other scholars, associate the dark recesses of ‘City’ with the poet’s psychological turmoil.

Whether duplicated as a title or studied as a text, Thomson’s “City” is generally referred to as a London poem. In 1880s, Philip Bourke Marston and Bertram Dobell respectively wrote articles on their beloved friend’s “City,” linking Thomson’s life with his work, and the city with London (Crawford 26-27).[2] Marston’s and Dobell’s explications of Thomson’s poetry inaugurated the trend of weaving the poet’s biographical details into his literary creation. This biography-centered approach continues to dominate contemporary discussions of the poem. Imogene B. Walker, William Sharpe and Robert Crawford, among many, respectively in their interpretations of “City” endorse the widely held assumption that Thomson’s city is undoubtedly London the metropolis.

“City,” however, exhibits ample evidence for an alternative reading. In his introduction to the 1993 reprint of “The City of Dreadful Night,” Edwin Morgan compares the textual city to an urban collage in which the poet draws from fragmented memories of various cities:

[Thomson’s City] is not any actual city, though it is certainly based on London, and possibly incorporates some of Thomson’s early memories of Glasgow and Port Glasgow. But he makes it clear that it is not to be identified: it has ‘great ruins of an unremembered past’, which is not London, and the landscape to the north of it is a wilderness of mountains and savannahs which has been influenced by his travels in American (especially Colorado) and possibly Spain (the Pyrenees). (14)

Morgan’s introduction touches on an issue that remains largely under-discussed: throughout the twenty-one sections of the poem, “London” as a word never appears nor does the urban topography delineated in
Thomson’s poem accords with that of London.

The disparity between Morgan’s reading and most Thomsonian scholars’ interpretations leads one to question which location Thomson’s city actually refers to, and whether or not the identity of this location remains pivotal to the study of “City.” This paper will start with a close reading of Thomson’s poem, search for recognizable signs of London, and determine if Thomson’s city actually refers to the metropolis. It will then read contrapuntally “City” and Kipling’s City so as to judge to determine how and why the two texts are interrelated. Ultimately, this essay aims to unravel the web of cultural expectations, literary conventions and colonial connection that fosters the deliberate invoking of the metropolis by expatriate writers such as Kipling and the ready association of Thomson’s city with London in popular imagination.

**Thomson’s City and London**

Thomson’s “City” opens with three epigraphs from Italian authors: the first one from Dante’s Inferno and the other two respectively from Giacomo Leopardi’s “Canti XXIII: Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell’Asia” and “Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie.” The line from Dante, “Per me si va nella città dolente,” is translated as “Through me is the way into the city of pain.” The following are the two passages from Leopardi:

“Poi di tanto adoprar, di tanti moti
D’ogni celeste, ogni terrena cosa,
Girando senza posa,
Per tornar sempre là donde son mosse;
Uso alcuno, alcun frutto
Indovinar non so. (93-98; qtd. in Thomson 25)

Sola nel mondo eterna, a cui si volve
Ogni creata cosa,
In te, morte, si posa
Nostra ignuda natura;
Lieta no, ma sicura
Dell’ antico dolor…
Però ch’ esser beato
Nega ai mortali e nega a’ morti il fato. (1-6,31-32; qtd. in Thomson 25)

The above passages are respectively translated as such: “Then out of such endless working, so many movements of everything in heaven and earth, revolving incessantly, only to return to the point from which they were moved: from all this I can imagine neither purpose nor gain”; “Eternal alone in the world, receiver of all created things, in you, death, our naked being comes to rest; joyful no, but safe from the age-old pain … For happiness is denied by fate to the living and denied to the dead” (Morgan 73-74).[3]

All three epigraphs refer to psychological states rather than actual sites: while Dante’s lines associate city of suffering with the hell, Leopardi’s passages articulate the dreadful loneliness and eternal despair of human existence. Weaving Dante’s lines and Leopardi’s into his text, Thomson creates a surrealistic cityscape that defies the constraints of eras, borders, and even reality.

Just as the three epigraphs call forth glimpses of imaginary locations, the fourth and fifth stanzas of Section One in “City” delineate an urban topography that no one can identify in any existing map:

A river girds the city west and south,
The main north channel of a broad lagoon,
Returning with the salt tides from the mouth;
Waste marshes shine and glisten to the moon
For leagues, then moorland black, then stone ridges;
Great piers and causeways, many noble bridges,
Connect the town and islet suburbs strewn.
Upon an easy slope it lies at large,
And scarcely overlaps the long curved crest
The topography in description bears some resemblance to numerous cities but matches with none of them; fragmented memories of various sites seem to converge in this indefinable city.

The “trackless wilderness” stretches neither to the north nor to the west of the city. The River Thames, though running through London, does not girdle its south and west. Moreover, London’s dense population and rapid growth leave no room for “mountains,” “moorland,” “marshes,” “savannahs,” or “lagoon.” Maps of Victorian London immediately prove improbable the assumption that Thomson’s city is London. Mountains, savannahs and lagoons are sights a visitor least expects to see in London: they are sceneries of various geographical locations rather than one particular site.

One of the very few details that vaguely link Thomson’s city to London appears in Section Two, which alludes to Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” (1840). Observing the passers-by in London from the window of a coffee house, Poe’s narrator is intrigued by an old man, whom he later trails for some distance before forgoing altogether the wearisome pursuit. Thomson’s narrator takes a similar action; he, too, follows a man “who seemed to walk with an intent” for “many a long dim silent street” (2.1, 5; Thomson 32). But even this parallel can only tenuously connect Thomson’s city with London, for it is more Poe’s fictive London than the actual metropolis.

The hypothesis that Thomson’s city is London largely originates from the overlaying of the factual and the fictional. General readers and literary scholars share a propensity to equate, or confine, the spatial scope of an author’s imagination to the geographic parameters of his/her live. In Thomson’s case, readers and critics allow their knowledge of the poet’s long-term residence in London to dictate their approaches to his poem. Imogene B. Walker, for instance, maintains that “City” reflects Thomson’s reaction to the pervasive apathy of London:

… As he walked along the river or up Whitehall street, he sought in the faces of those he met a spirit of friendliness or a glow of happiness. But every man seemed like himself, dull and despairing and alone, and he recognized the insignificance and helplessness of the little human cogs in London’s unceasing, unconscious machinery. The city became for him the City of Dreadful Night, as its net of despair and loneliness enveloped him and atrophied his hope… (79)

In his proposition that one know Thomson’s life before learning to read “City,” William Sharp similarly relates the narrator-wanderer’s despondency in the city to Thomson’s anguish in London:

Orphaned in London in 1842 at the age of eight, Thomson spent most of his often lonely life in that city … [he] was afflicted through his life by increasingly violent and protracted bouts with chronic alcoholism, insomnia, and depression. At such times he incessantly walked the nighttime streets of London, trying to exhaust himself, but all the while unable to escape sights and thoughts that only deepened his melancholy… (65)

When examining Thomson’s impact on T. S. Eliot’s, Robert Crawford also associates the city with London: “… it was Thomson who let Eliot see Dante as a poet of modern London, who let Eliot connect Dante with other modern urban writing, and who showed him that London, like Dante’s infernal city, could be seen as a city of the mind as well as a city of the external world” (35). Walker, Sharpe and Crawford unanimously superimpose the London Thomson lives onto the urban topography that he sketches. Their interpretations of “City” reflect that in the collective imagination, the textual city and the actual city often converge.

Thomson’s City and Kipling’s Calcutta

Like most of Thomson’s readers, Kipling relates Thomson’s city of dreadful night with the metropolis. Duplicating the title of Thomson’s poem, Kipling depicts the vices of colonial Calcutta. ‘City of Dreadful Night’ begins with a colonial’s nostalgia for the metropolis when roaming squalid streets of Calcutta. On the opening
pages, Kipling’s narrator immediately declares that Calcutta preserves “lost heritage of London” (161, 162; ch.1). London, as it is thus ushered into the narrative of Calcutta, serves as the indispensable symbol for the British dominance in India. The link between Kipling’s prose and Thomson’s poem is cemented to accentuate London’s progress and Calcutta’s backwardness. The connection, nevertheless, is assumed only sporadically.

Among the fifteen chapters that centre on the filth, odour, and corruption of Calcutta, only two of them retain a loose link with Thomson’s city: they are Chapter Five, “With the Calcutta Police,” and Chapter Six, “The City of Dreadful Night.” Recollection of Thomson’s poem is invoked primarily by their shared title, the title of Chapter Six, and the epigraphs in Chapter Five and Six. Adopted as the epigraph of Chapter Five are Thomson’s opening lines, and perhaps his most memorable ones: “The City was of Night — perchance of Death,/But certainly of Night.” These lines inaugurate the nightly excursion of Kipling’s narrator into the indigene city (206; ch.5). The epigraph of Chapter Six is extracted from Section Thirteen of Thomson’s poem:

And since they cannot spend or use aright
The little time here given them in trust,
But lavish it in weary undelight
Of foolish toil, and trouble, strife and lust —
They naturally claimeth to inherit
The Everlasting Future — that their merit
May have full scope …. As surely is most just. (Kipling 215)

Except for these lines, which Kipling deliberately incorporates into his text, his Calcutta bears negligible resemblance to Thomson’s city.

Unlike the phantasmagoric realm Thomson’s narrator trudges, the strolls of Kipling’s narrator chart a trajectory of tangible senses, upon which objects come alive with comprehensible sight, audible sound, and distinct smell. Kipling spares no words when constructing the olfactory image of the colonial city: “[the reek of Calcutta] resembles the essence of corruption that has rotted for the second time-the clammy odor of blue slime” (165; ch.1). The odor so relentlessly permeated in the city is “remarkably like sleeping with a corpse” (169; ch.1).

When Kipling’s narrator reports that “the darker portion of [Calcutta]…does not look an inviting place to dive into at night” (214; ch.5), he relates “darkness” to “night,” not to melancholy that lurks in Thomson’s nocturnal city. Kipling’s narrator does not travel alone; he ventures into the seedy alleys of Calcutta under the protection of the local police. The officers of law enforcement in Calcutta offer the service because they firmly believe that “there were places and places where a white man, unsupported by the arm of the law, would be robbed and mobbed; and that there were other places where drunken seamen would make it very unpleasant for him” (206; ch.5). The terror that prowls in the night of Calcutta originates from the prevalence of crime against Westerners. The fear of Kipling’s narrator, thereafter, proves to be effable and hence resolvable.

Thomson’s urban stroller, on the contrary, neither hears audible utterances nor detects distinct odours. The roaming takes place in a nightmarish urban labyrinth of muted signs and gestures: “…as in some necropolis you find/ Perchance one mourner to a thousand dead, / So there; worn faces that look deaf and blind/ Like tragic masks of stone”(1.50-53; Thomson 30). In Thomson’s poem, the “darkness” of the city derives only faintly from the absence of light, for it primarily corresponds to the ineffable despair from which the narrator fails to escape.

Without recognizable signs of urban streets, slums and gambling houses, Thomson’s city remains geographically unascertainable. The journey of Thomson’s urban wanderer does not, or more precisely does not intend to, call upon any street or alley that one can readily identify in London or any actual city. Throughout “City,” no proper name regarding a person or place is given; devoid of tangible emblems, the necropolis primarily exists as a stage on which the stroller perpetually meanders. The journey constitutes of twenty-one excursions, each of which is embarked by chance and terminated in defeat, and none of which seems to carry any sequential connection with another.

Thomson’s wanderer saunters into the dark maze alone. Even though he occasionally follows or encounters nameless figures, he does not travel with any of them; these figures serve merely as props to accentuate the solitude of his journey. The unidentified “he” in Section Two performs as one of these props. In the second half
of Section Four, “a woman with a red lamp in her hand” serves for similar purpose (line 64; Thomson 37). The mysterious woman emerges as the narrator walks through a desert, but she disappears immediately after the encounter: “She clasped that corpse-like me, and they were borne/way, and this vile me was left forlorn” (100-101; Thomson 38). The rambler resumes his disoriented solitude as Section Four ends: “But I, what do I here?” (107; Thomson 38). The bewilderment of the rambler mirrors the disorientation of the reader: “here” is at once everywhere and nowhere.

One may hence pursue an unattainable objective if one insists on matching the surrealist landscape in Thomson’s necropolis with the actual streets and districts of London. Thomson’s urban topography corresponds solely to an individual’s mental state; the journey in the city of dreadful night parallels the wanderer’s sauntering into the dark recesses of his inner self. The journey, hence, proceeds with no progression because every step forward paradoxically brings the wanderer back to where he starts — despair in solitude.

Colonial Connection & Literary Convention

If little can validate Kipling’s wishful thought that Thomson’s city is indeed London, what then necessitates and even perpetuates such a presumption? Colonial relationship has always remained pivotal to Kipling’s writing about India; it proves to be particularly crucial in his portrayal of Calcutta. He intends Calcutta, with its rampant violence and putrid surroundings, to resemble the dark side of London: “An unknown city full of smell that makes one long for rest and retirement, and a champing naukar, not yet six hours in the stew, who has started a blood-feud with an unknown chaprissi and clamors to go forth to the fray” (169; Ch.1). Writing about Calcutta, Kipling evokes in his readers collective imagination of impoverished neighbourhoods in London; he superimposes fragmented images of East End onto Thomson’s city and then correlates the city’s wretchedness with Calcutta’s decadency.

Kipling’s intention hence compels one to ponder whether urban similitude derives from the actual resemblance between/among cities, the author’s rhetorical contrivance, or both. The city, as Burton Pike observes:

has a double reference, to the artifact in the outside world and the spectrum of refractions it calls into being in the minds of author and reader. The associations of “city” are already highly charged for a reader before he picks up a book which has a city in it. Within the literary work this image becomes part of a coherent system of signs, and its meanings may be only tenuously involved with the empirical city itself. (ix)

This remark characterizes the multitude of references that every city occasions; it remains equally illuminating when extrapolated to explain why Kipling associates Thomson’s city with London, presents his prose as a succession of Thomson’s poem, and portrays Calcutta as a duplicate of London. Colonial Calcutta in Kipling’s narrative does not merely exist as a “double reference” to the real city and the imagined city of Calcutta, but it also serves as a doubling of London, the metropolis.

With its intentional invocation of London, Kipling’s Calcutta has a quadruple allusion; the narrative evokes in the reader both Calcutta and London in the empirical world and in the literary imagination. The invocation of the metropolis is expected. Though residing in and writing from the periphery of the British Empire Kipling writes primarily for the metropolitan reader, and his strong connection with India and his heavy dependence on a metropolitan readership inevitably complicate his presentation of Calcutta and necessitate the allusion to London. Writing about Calcutta, Kipling evokes in his readers collective memory of London; he superimposes literary representations of the metropolis onto Thomson’s city and then correlates the textual city’s desolation with Calcutta’s decadency.

In addition to the colonial relationship which Kipling intends London and Calcutta to illustrate, literary conventions of urban narrative also dictate how he interprets Thomson’s poem and subsequently how he sketches his Calcutta. As Deborah Epstein Nord points out, early Victorian writers employed literary conventions that their predecessors had expressed about urban life: London is presented as “a stage” where “the urban spectator ... experience[s] the sights and people of the street as passing shows or monuments to be glimpsed briefly or from afar” (Nord 159-60). The spectator and the city simultaneously serve as the foregrounds and backdrops of each other: they perform on the stage each other functions as. Following the footsteps of their literary predecessors, Thomson and Kipling adopt certain narrative conventions in their texts; their narrator-walkers capture the urban landscape in glances noticeably resembling those in earlier city
narratives.

In addition to the spectator’s ubiquity, the city is conventionally set against the backdrop of nocturnal gloom. Noting the solitary figure as a key component in Victorian urban narrative, Raymond Williams writes: “... a character enters a sleeping city and is overwhelmed by the thought of all the hidden lives to him,” and “[s]truggle, indifference, loss of purpose, loss of meaning have found, in the City, a habitation and a name” (234; 239). Julian Wolfreys likewise notes: “... after Blake and after Dickens, the act of writing the city is to a large degree overdetermined by the experimental forays of the earlier writers” (17). As Williams and Wolfreys astutely point out, neither Thomson’s urban narrative nor Kipling’s is entirely free from earlier writers’ influence. Thomson’s city, though noticed for its unprecedented pessimism, continues the lineage of urban despair that one can trace back to Blake and Wordsworth.

In Blake’s “London” (1798), the urban wanderer roams chartered streets near the Thames, where he meets in every face “[m]arks of weakness, marks of woe” and hears in every voice “[t]he mind-forg’d manacles” (4, 8). Wordsworth sketched a similarly bleak picture of the metropolis after residing there for three and half a months in 1791. In Book Seven of The Prelude (1805), he writes:

An undistinguishable world to men, The slaves unrespited of low pursuits, Living amid the same perpetual flow Of trivial objects, melted and reduced To one identity by differences That have no law, no meaning, and no end- Oppression under which even highest minds Must labour, whence the strongest are not free. (700-707)

In Thomson’s city, glimpses of London that Blake and Wordsworth once captured linger, and these trailing images of despair subsequently blur the distinction between the textual city and the actual metropolis.

A Thomson’s reader, Kipling possibly takes these remaining glances of urban gloom for familiar signs of London and delineates Calcutta with these imagined metropolitan traits rather than explores the actual resemblance between Thomson’s city and his Calcutta. Kipling depicts Calcutta within the web of literary conventions that the city embodies corruption and decadence, that the city for British readers is essentially London, and that the narrator must saunter into the dark alleys so as to uncover the hidden truth of the city.

Imitating earlier representations of London, Kipling weaves into Calcutta widely practiced narrative conventions, in particular the double acts of walking and seeing the sinister streets of London. Like the social investigators who explore the dark side of London, Kipling’s investigator-narrator ventures into the forbidden realm of Calcutta: “Everywhere are the empty houses, and the babbling [sic] women in print gowns ... [The Police] plunge hither and thither, like wreckers into the surf; and each plunge brings up a sample of misery, filth and woe” (233; ch.7). Of these gambling houses, the narrator continues to note: “The houses with their breakneck staircases, their hundred corners, low roofs, hidden courtyards and winding passages, seem specially built for crime of every kind” (ibid). Passages such as above in Kipling’s City readily call forth gruesome scenes of the East End that one often reads about in London narratives.

Adopting Thomson’s title, Kipling’s prose actually bears greater resemblance to East End that Frederick Engel, Henry Mayhew, and William Booth have depicted.[6] As a title, The City of Dreadful Night chiefly serves to induce the sensation Thomson’s poem has stirred; whether Kipling’s Calcutta and Thomson’s city are truly alike remains secondarily important. Resorting to the title of a well-known poem and popular recollection of East End, Kipling not only allies himself with writers in England but also reassures metropolitan readers that the colonial city is undoubtedly inferior to the metropolis.

A textual city does not simply spring from its author’s fantasy, and nor does it retain the form he/she originally intends. In addition to what the author describes in words, the construction of such city involves the wishful imagination of a reading community. What a literary city signifies to the reader eclipses the material city whether or not the empirical and the imaginary metropolis actually accord. Approaches to “City of Dreadful Night,” as discussed in earlier part of this essay, undoubtedly testify to the mutual determination of extrinsic facts that a reading community generally knows about the author and the intrinsic meanings that his literary text actually contains. Through unraveling the intricate web of literary conventions and cultural expectations that foster the false similitude between Thomson’s city and London, it can be seen that the landscape of a textual city is constituted partially by the author’s fragmented memories of a specific city (or cities) in reality and partially by
the readers’ collective imagination. Trailing Thomson’s footsteps in the city of dreadful night, one is bound to encounter signs of urban terror and despair that are perchance of London the actual city or perchance of a phantom city in which real and illusory cities converge.

Endnotes

[1] Kipling read Thomson’s “City” after his second year at school. He writes: the poem “shook me to my unformed core” (1990; 22). Years later in the street in Calcutta, Kipling captured glimpses of Thomson’s city. Hence, the prose about his nocturnal sauntering in Calcutta bears the same title with Thomson’s poem.

[2] According to Crawford, Thomson’s obituary (1882) written by Marston, inaugurates the approach of reading Thomson’s biography into his poetry. Dobell’s preface to Thomson’s posthumous publication, A Voice from the Nile, and Other Poems (1884), furthers associating Thomson’s life with his writing, and of his city to London (Crawford 26-27).

[3] All the English translations are based on Edwin Morgan’s notes in City of Dreadful Night.

[4] Both Renolds’ Map of Modern London 1859 and Renolds’ Shilling Coloured Map of London 1895, both available on website, gives clear topographic images of Victorian London. Though thirty-six years apart, these two maps are almost identical.

[5] The epigraphs in Kipling’s prose do not follow the exact wording of Thomson’s poem. In “City,” the two epigraphs originally appear as the following: “The City is of Night; perchance of Death, /But certainly of Night...” (1.1-2; Thomson 29); “And since he cannot spend and use aright/The little time here given him in trust,/But wasteth it in weary undelight/Of foolish toil and trouble, strife and lust,/He naturally claimeth to inherit/The everlasting Future, that his merit/May have full scope; as surely is most just” (13.22-28; Thomson 29). Italicised are words or punctuation marks that Kipling alters.


Works Cited


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Thomson was born in Port Glasgow, Scotland, and raised in an orphanage after his father suffered a stroke. The City of Dreadful Night came about from the struggle with insomnia, alcoholism and chronic depression which plagued Thomson's final decade. In 1880, the publication of his volume of poetry, The City of Dreadful Night and Other Poems elicited encouraging and complimentary reviews from a number of critics, but came too late to prevent Thomson’s downward slide. He died in London at the age of 47.

Thomson's pseudonym, Bysshe Vanolis, derives from the names of the poets Percy James Thomson: James Thomson, Scottish Victorian poet who is best remembered for his sombre, imaginative poem “The City of Dreadful Night,” a symbolic expression of his horror of urban dehumanization. Reared in an orphanage, Thomson entered the Royal Military Academy, Chelsea, became a regimental schoolmaster. What are you looking for? Search. Click here to search.