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James Thomson (B.V.)

*(Concluded from page 742)*

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III.

Thomson's work is so definitely individual that it cannot be compared, as a whole, with that of any other writer; many writers he resembles in excellence; but in his own combination of qualities he is unique. His descent, training, and life-experience were, in many ways, exceptional; and this shows clearly in B.V.'s work. His prose ranges from the sheer poet-beauty of *In Our Forest of the Past* to the fiery satire—a satire that would make even the savage and stupid Jahweh wince—of *Christmas Eve in the Upper Circles*.

In the first-named essay B.V. writes:—

. . . and we came to a broad valley through which a calm stream rippled toward the moon, now risen on our left hand large and golden in a dim emerald sky, dim with transfusion of splendour; and her light fell and overflowed a level under ledge of softest yellow cloud, and filled all the valley with a luminous mist, warm as mild sunshine, and quivered golden on the far river-reaches; and elsewhere above us the immense sweep of pale azure sky throbbed with golden stars; and a wonderful mystical peace as of trance and enchantment possessed all the place. And in the meadows of deep grass, where the perfume of violets mingled with the magical moonlight, by the river, whose slow sway and lapse might lull their repose, we found tranquil sleepers, all with a light on their faces, all with a smile on their lips.

*Christmas Eve in the Upper Circles* begins : —

Poor dear God sat alone in his private chamber,  
moody, melancholy, miserable, sulky, sullen, weary,

dejected, supernally hipped. It was the evening of Sunday, the 24th of December, 1865. Waters continually dripping wear away the hardest stone; year falling after year will at length overcome the strongest god: an oak-tree outlasts many generations of men; a mountain or a river outlasts many celestial dynasties. A cold like a thick fog in his head, rheum in his eyes, and rheumatism in his limbs and shoulders, his back bent, his chin peaked, his poll bald, his teeth decayed, his body all shivering, his brain all muddle, his heart all black care; no wonder the old gentleman looked poorly as he cowered there, dolefully sipping his Lachryma Christi. "I wish the other party would lend me some of his fire," he muttered, "for it is horribly frigid up here."

Compare these passages of beautiful, stern, fluent, opulent prose; and you will recognize a master of the pen; akin both to Shelley and to Eucian. Deliberately I have made a violent contrast to reveal anew the versatility of genius. In range B.V. was approached by only one contemporary—Swinburne; he had not a single peer, this author of the City, in the catholic use of words to the end of beauty. These praise-words of mine may seem exaggerated; but it is impossible for one who loves pen-craft to lack enthusiasm for this perfection of prose. A slight shifting of life's kaleidoscope, and B.V. would have been both an Aristophanes and a Rabelais.

In *A Plea for Xanthippe and Indolence: A Moral Essay* the poet may be read as a purely humanist-humourist essayist; and as such he is in the English tradition with Leigh Hunt and Lamb.

I shall not quote from B.V.'s poems; the City has recently appeared in *The Thinker's Library* for a shilling; and the volume contains a satisfactory selection of other of his metrical work.

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As a translator Thomson is always faithful; never does he try to improve upon his author; he is neither adaptor nor "translator"—to use his own jest; he is the ideal translator—a true renderer. B.V., as I have already written, had the gift of understanding that makes the perfect translator; and so, with B.V. as interpreter and—on occasion—introducer, Goethe, Heine, Béranger and Leopardi speak easily in our tongue.

I have seen many attempts at English versions of Heine, a tremendously difficult, though not impossible, poet to "bring over." Two English poets succeed, I think, as nearly perfectly as may be; these poets are both German-lovers; they are Charles Godfrey Leland ("Hans Breitmann") and B.V. B.V.'s poet-craft can best be measured by comparing his versions with, those of others. He wins nearly, or quite, every time.

A great deal of B.V.'s work is still uncollected; one day, no doubt, the hunter through extinct periodicals will seek-out every scrap of his writing, and advertise triumphantly *The Complete B.V.* That time is not yet. The poet "stands for" something unique and definite in human life; at his characteristic greatest he is The Complete Saturnian. As such he will live.

Politically, Thomson was a Republican, agreeing in this with his friends and colleagues, Bradlaugh and Foote. In religion he was a Secularist and an Atheist. It is to be added that he was assuredly not orthodox, either as Secularist or Atheist. To *The Liberal* B.V. contributed a series of four articles, on "A Strange

Book." This (strange book) is *Songs of the Spirit*, by J.J. Garth Wilkinson, a Swedenborgian and a Blakian, enormously admired by Thomson, who, like all humans of genius, tended at times to be injudicious in his admirations. In this minute and exhaustive examination the poet writes so sympathetically of extraneous inspiration that it is fair to claim him—without prejudice—as a mystic. No one not fundamentally a mystic could write as Thomson does of Blake and of Garth Wilkinson.

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Besides the books that I have mentioned as being issued in B.V.'s lifetime, several, as I have indicated, have been published since his death. Here is a brief list: *A Voice from the Nile*, with Memoir by Bertram Dobell; *Satires and Profanities*, with Preface by G.W. Foote; *Shelley, a Poem* (Privately Printed): *Poems, Essays and Fragments*, with Preface by J.M. Robertson; *Selections from "Cope's Tobacco Plant,"* with Introduction by Walter Lewin; *The Story of a Famous Old Jewish Firm*, etc., with an Introduction by B.E.; *Biographical and Critical Studies; Walt Whitman; Translations from Leopardi*; the last three with Introductions by Bertram Dobell. Dobell is also the Editor of the *Poetical Works* in two volumes. The dates range from 1884 to about 1911. (These notes are written far from my library.)

Very nearly the whole of the contents of these books consists of reprints from B.V.'s contributions to periodicals. Once

again; it is not easy to overpraise the labours of Bertram Dobell in furthering his friend's fame. I rejoice to add my own modest tribute to a love that was far stronger than death.

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All the books that are listed above contain immortal prose, or immortal verse, and frequently both.

I ask my readers to remember this as they read the last quotation that I shall give. The author is "Saladin" (W. Stewart Ross); and the essay, *A Last Interview with a Man of Genius*, appeared in *The Agnostic Journal* for April 6, 1889, being reprinted the following year in *Roses and Rue*:—

I shall never forget the last time I met Thomson. I met him at the office of this journal, accompanied by one of his last remaining friends (G. Gordon Flaws, "Gegeëf"). This was in May 1882, after his return from Leicester. The hand of death was on the poet's shoulder, not solemn and stately death—only the mournful abjectness of dissolution, met by a calm and suffering rather than a fierce and defiant despair. . . . The glance of a moment sufficed to show Gegeëf and myself that our companion was in the sodden state which succeeds a prolonged debauch. . . . Gegeëf advanced a small loan, and in spite of his remonstrances the bar at the Holborn Restaurant was the only mart in the world where Thomson would consent to have the little sum disbursed. . . . He stands before me now as he did nearly seven years ago among the well-dressed people at that glittering bar—he, the abject, the shabby, the waif. . . . His figure, which had always been diminutive, had lost all dignity of carriage, all gracefulness of gait. When the miserable hat was raised from the ruined but still noble head, it revealed the thinning away of the ragged and unkempt hair, deeply threaded with grey. His raiment had the worn, soiled, and deeply-creased aspect that suggested that, for some time back, it had been worn day and night, and had been brought in contact with brick walls and straw pallets, and even the mud of the street. The day, for May, was a raw and cold one, with a drizzle which ever and anon merged into a downpour of rain; and the feet of the author of the *City of Dreadful Night*

were protected from the slushy streets only by a pair of thin old carpet-slippers, so worn and defective that, in one part, they displayed his bare skin.

B.V. died tragically at University College Hospital, on the evening of June 3, 1882, "from utter exhaustion consequent on internal bleeding," says Salt, in his indispensable *Life*. The broken body was buried at Highgate Cemetery, in a grave where already lay the body of his friend, Austin Holyoake, who had passed-out in 1874. With B.V.'s body "were buried a small purse and locket containing a tress of yellow hair—his one memento of his lost love."

Since Salt's *Life* was published (originally in 1889; since several times re-issued; and still in print) a new fact concerning B.V. may be given. At the time of His passing, the poet was engaged to Miss Barrs, of Leicester, to whom he addressed several exquisite poems in the last few months of his life. A dangerous freak of B.V.'s, committed during an attack of dipsomania, when he was a guest of the Barrs', caused his hurried departure from Leicester; and there is little doubt that remorse for this social delinquency was a main cause of the poet's deliberate and "willed" passing. Affectionate and sensitive, he could no longer face himself. This has never yet been said; but there is no reason now to conceal what I believe to be the truth. To Genius all is forgiveable; and B.V.'s gift to the world is enough, and more than enough.

My source for this addition to the public knowledge of B.V. is my old and gifted friend and colleague, Vanoc II., of the *Sunday Referee*, himself a Leicester man, and probably the greatest living authority on B.V.'s life and works. To him herewith I express my thanks.

Later I hope to amplify and extend these meagre and desultory notes upon the life and death of a neglected genius—James Thomson (B.V.).

Victor B. Neuburg.