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James Thomson (B.V.)

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II.

The Good Ancients had a theory that every human born was under the more-or-less direct protection of curtain Gods—the influence of some of whom was unfortunate. This theory was to degenerate, on the break-up of Paganism, into the "guardian angel" theory of Christianity; to-day, in the break-up, in its turn, of Christianity, it re-appears as the "spirit-guide" theory of the school of necromancers known as Spiritualists. The Gods of Humanity change; Nature remains.

The God-theory of the Ancients was, at least, large and dignified; James Thomson would have been "placed" by them as being, and hence suffering, under the influence of Saturn—an unfortunate and "fatal" influence that he shared with many another hapless genius, who, despite splendid gifts of heart and head, was foredoomed, so it seems, to misery. The modern astrologers, by the way, would have agreed. B.V.'s life was, in a worldly sense, a disaster.

The poet's masterwork, *The City of Dreadful Night*, and several lesser-known of his masterpieces that are akin to it in both inspiration and expression, are nothing less than paeans in praise of Saturn; and as such they would have been Hailed by the instructed Pagans, who "attributed" their art-works to their various deities.

In truth, "B.V." was himself a Pagan; in his fine, clear and original essays on Blake and Burns, essays that go to the very hearts of his subjects, he shows His affinities. Part of his tragedy was, indeed, that he was out-of-place in our mawkish and degenerate civilization.

Marlowe, Verlaine, Poe, Gissing, were all "Children of the Dark Star"; and instinctively "B.V." turned for consolation—to the incalculable advantage of Art—to his "melancholy brothers," as he calls them in his *City*, Leopardi and Heine, fellow-

partakers in the bitter cup that was only to pass from them with life itself.

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Pessimism is an aspect of life; it is no explanation of life itself. It is an attitude only. "B.V.," like other hapless ones, brooded for so long, and so darkly, that he came to identify life with sorrow; like his correspondent, William Maccall, Thomson unconsciously became a philosophic Buddhist. Again, like Maccall, he never consciously found the Buddhist's consolation. That was his tragedy. From tragedy is born beauty; Nietzsche is again vindicated. "Out of his endless ill," in Heine's phrase, "B.V." came to "fashion" the immortal and supreme set of songs that will probably never be surpassed as expressions of the Saturnine mood.

Thus, out of one of the world's philosophic and historic illusions, we possess a great artist's perfect expression—or pressing-out—of the world's pain. From the dark grapes of sorrow the poet pressed the heavy, potent, bitter-sweet wine of beauty—the beauty of suffering. With complete approval he quotes the great Italian saying, "Better than every victory is a beautiful suffering."

It is idle to discuss the path that Genius takes; it is easy for the comfortable, Philistine mediocrity, who lives all his life in a mental suburb in the provinces, to tell what he "would have done in the circumstances."

It is easy to be a connoiseur in beef and beer; it needs rarer gifts adequately to judge the man who, either for his own good or ill, is possessed by his own genius. Such a human is to be judged only by his equals; and his equals are rare. Shelley was correct in claiming the right of the poet to be judged by his peers. By this judgment B.V., in so far as he gave perfect and final form to a fundamental aspect of life, was supremely successful. And nothing else matters. The Philistines who demand conformity to their own little systems of ethics and superstitions may be "left to it." In the Republic of Genius they have no votes, and do not count.

What matters ultimately in art, as in everything else, is happy achievement. By this exaltation of despair B.V.'s achievement, as an artist, is completely happy. "That is all we know on earth, and all we need to know." It is, once again, an expression of the paradox that lies at the root of art.

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B.V. automatically became the star-turn of any periodical wherewith he was connected for any length of time. There are five periodicals whereto his free-and-independent contributions were welcomed; *The London Investigator*, (1858-9); *The National Reformer*, (1860-75); *The Secularist*, (1876-7); *The Liberal*, (1879); *Cope's Tobacco Plant*, (1875-81). In each case I have given the period covered by B.V.'s contributions, and not the full "life" of the periodical itself; although to *The Secularist* and *The Liberal* (both edited by Foote) B.V. was a contributor from first to last.

The poet also got occasional work on other publications; in 1882 there was printed his surpassingly-good blank verse poem, "A Voice from the Nile." To John Morley—later Lord Morley—is due the honour of printing B.V. in *The Fortnightly Review*. For almost the first time Thomson got a poem in a first-rate, non-specialized magazine; and at about the same time he contributed a poem, "The Sleeper," to *The Cornhill Magazine*, then edited by Leslie Stephen. The only other important contribution to an "orthodox " magazine seems to be "Sunday up the River," which appeared in *Fraser* in 1869.

The dawnings of public recognition coincided—under Saturn—with the twilight of the poet's life. A few month's after his appearance in *The Fortnightly* and *The Cornhill* B.V. was dead.

By an ironic fate, continued misfortunes and unhappinesses had made B.V. incapable of grasping at any chance of worldly success. His shaking hands could no longer grasp the cup of happiness; towards the end of a rue-strewn career, fame meant less to him than oblivion. Oblivion B.V. sought in minor and ignoble ways, until the greater oblivion of earthly Nirvana released him from a short, glorious, tragic immortally-echoing life of toil and sorrow. Such was the gift of Saturn to his overweighted son of Genius.

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Those who, like myself, are more or less experienced in the ways of publishers, will learn without wonder—if they do not know already—that for years B.V.'s masterpiece was rejected by the book-producers of his time. *The City of Dreadful Night* appeared serially, in four instalments, in the spring of 1874, in *The National Reformer*. It was hailed as a great and original work on its appearance, and the numbers containing it went out-of-print almost immediately. It remained unobtainable for six years, every publisher refusing to issue it, because, being

"unusual," it would not "sell." This same slogan, by the way, is used to-day. Like all over-worked and widely-spread slogans, it is a fallacy. At length, in 1880, a friend who had followed B.V.'s literary career since his early *National Reformer* days contrived, in collaboration with a progressive and a live firm, Reeves and Turner, to issue a volume whereof the chief item was *The City of Dreadful Night*.

To the astonishment, no doubt, of the eternally-stupid tradesmen who deal in book-production, the volume not only paid its expenses, but yielded a few badly-needed pounds to the genius who wrote it.

The loyal, disinterested, and patient friend to whom the world owes the publication in book-form of *The City of Dreadful Night* was himself a poet; he was also a bookseller, a publisher, a bibliophile, an editor, and an essayist; and his name was Bertram Dobell, the writer of the noble and sympathetic study of the poet prefixed to his "Poetical Works," of which Dobell was also part-publisher.

Dobell, be it here recorded anew, helped B.V. in many ways; he bore with him in his often all-but-intolerable infirmities; he lent him valuable books that he never saw again; he aided him with encouragement and money; and—loyalist that he was—he tried never to lose sight of his stricken and gifted friend. There were times when this last service became extremely difficult to perform. If loyalty could have saved him, B.V. would have been saved. Dobell, it is surely superfluous to say, was a Freethinker; incidentally, he was an occasional contributor, in both prose and verse, to this journal when Foote was its editor.

If for a moment I may be autographical, I may say that I remember Bertram Dobell in his old age. He was a delightful old man; surrounded by books, piled around him on the floor and shelved; and also in heaps on the table whereat he sat and talked. His mind was a storehouse of memories of the past.

Dobell issued two more volumes of B.V.'s writings, *Vane's Story, Weddah and Om-El-Bonain, and Other Poems* (1881), and the prose *Essays and Phantasies* (1881), in his friend's lifetime; and several more B.V. books after the poet's death. One of Dobell's chief interests lay in aiding the growing reputation of his dead poet-friend.

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(*To be continued.*)

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