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James Thomson's Deserts

John Miller

INTRODUCTION: DESERT, APOCALYPSE, ECOLOGY

The poetry of James Thomson B.V. (1834-1882) is haunted by deserts. As a Scotsman by birth and a resident in London for most of his life, Thomson had little personal experience of such environments (although he did spend a short time in an arid region of Colorado); rather, his interest in the desert emerges from a bleak poetic orientation towards exposure, vulnerability and purposelessness. Thomson was notoriously scathing of Victorian orthodoxies: not for him the pieties of the church, faith in technological and economic progress or love of Queen and country. Desert functions for Thomson as the exemplary sign of a world shorn of such grand narratives; in Thomson's deserts meaning and consolation are quickly exhausted. As such, Thomson's representation of deserts is not transparently part of an ecological consciousness. Thomson was certainly no naturalist seeking to imaginatively attend to the biota of desert ecosystems; nor is there much like an explicit discourse of ecological care to be discovered in his writing. Instead, his deserts operate symbolically within a literary aesthetics and philosophical schema that is paradoxically concerned most obviously with the urban.

Among the principle effects of his melancholic masterpiece, *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874) is, as Kevin Mills contends, a blurring of "the distinction between the city and the desert" in order to unveil a city with "wilderness at its heart" (2007a, p. 125). In collapsing the conventional dichotomy between the *civis* and its wild, inhuman negation, Thomson unravels the logics of Western imperial and anthropocentric privilege to disclose the alienated condition of metropolitan subjects. Beneath the city's grandiloquent edifices, the desert persists as a figure for the broken, empty lives of Victorian modernity. Desert also,

connectedly, operates as a figure for Thomson's own depression. As he records in the baldly-titled "Lines, 1878", his life (or at least the life of the poem's speaker) has been one in which his "feet/ Have trodden their old footsteps year by year,/ Circling forever in the desert drear" (ll. 22-24).[1] Desert for Thomson is a "place of the mind" that expresses a primary thematic concern with suffering.[2]

At times, desert is straightforwardly coded in Thomson's verse as a specific metaphor for London, a widespread trope that Thomson shares with many of his contemporaries, most clearly Charles Dickens (see Mills 2007b, pp. 67-71). "William Blake", for example, a short lyric from 1866, sees Thomson repeatedly locate the eponymous poet in "the desert of London town" (Salt ed., l. 1). More usually (in *The City of Dreadful Night* most prominently), Thomson's poetic city remains unnamed so that his work might be read both as a historically grounded engagement with London's materiality, with all the social problems that entails, and as a more abstract commentary on philosophical questions, including what might loosely be identified as the human condition (though in Thomson's thought the human is an idea that requires some unpacking, as we shall see).

The figurative use of the desert Thomson deploys evidently has a long history. Roslynn D. Haynes opens her cultural history of deserts by foregrounding their function as the most over-determined of ecological formations: "'Desert'", she writes, "is not an innocent term. Geographically it is defined in terms of rainfall, but unlike other landforms there is, inbuilt in its very name, a sense of foreboding." "Desert" comes from the Latin *desertum*, signifying an abandonment which comes to "threaten the inner self" and "pose questions about identity" (2013, p. 7), an effect which can easily be transposed to Victorian anxieties about urbanisation. At the same time, as David Jasper recounts, the desert is associated with a "deep sense of the sacred" (2004, p. 2), in part because of its evocation of a limit experience: the human at the edge of civilisation, confronted alone by the divine. Most importantly for

this chapter, desert has a notable role in apocalyptic thinking. Apocalypse often functions loosely as a synonym for catastrophe. In this connection, the desert appears as a paradigmatic image of the end of the world: this is land seemingly bereft of both culture and cultivation with just a few last creatures eking out a meagre existence amongst the dunes. The very real threat posed by desertification, to global agriculture in particular, reinforces the desert's association with ecological ruin. In theological terms, desert, and the broader conception of wilderness, play a significant role in Christian eschatology (narratives concerned with end times, judgement and the second coming of Christ). Derived etymologically from the Greek, apocalypse connotes a revelation or unveiling through which the collapse of a corrupt world order is witnessed as a prelude to the rise of another, often figured (in the Book of Revelation, for example) as the New Jerusalem. The city descends into chaos (and hence desert) before a new city (and with it redemption) arrives as "the apotheosis of civilization that represents the ultimate and irreversible defeat of chaos" (Mills, 2007b, p. 65).[3]

Mills identifies a strong strand of apocalyptic thinking in Victorian literature structured around an "underlying desire to foresee ends, and thus to reimpose order on a threateningly chaotic experience" that developed in relation to the era's many great schisms: industrialisation, secularisation and evolution among other causes. Thinking about Thomson's deserts as part of a wider cultural apocalyptic trend in Victorian letters is necessarily moderated by his fervent atheism and by other heterodox aspects of his worldview.[4] The echoes of the end of days in his writing do more than reproduce an existing Christian apocalyptic figuration of the desert. As Isobel Armstrong summarises, Thomson's literary project was to "single-handedly construct a whole new symbolic language and a wholly new mythological system" (2002, p. 461). Mills sees *The City of Dreadful Night* in particular as simultaneously "apocalyptic and anti-apocalyptic, a revelation and a

concealment" (2007b, p. 77). Thomson's apocalyptic desert landscapes are characteristically idiosyncratic.

Notwithstanding the layers of figuration at work in Thomson's deserts, this essay attempts to uncover their ecological meanings. What kind of environmental politics do these imaginative landscapes foster? In particular, I examine how Thomson's apocalyptic and (following Mills) anti-apocalyptic thought constitute a distinctive if in some ways problematic contribution to Victorian environmentalism. Apocalyptic rhetoric remains a powerful and persistent aspect of environmental discourses and a recurrent element of ecocriticism. Lawrence Buell's foundational work on *The Environmental Imagination* describes apocalypse as the "single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal", a premise that leads to the conclusion that "the fate of the world hinges on the arousal of the mind to a sense of crisis" (1995, p. 285). Apocalypse, by this argument, has a salutary role in ecological politics as the ultimate basis of a cautionary tale about humanity's dire impact on the earth. Greg Garrard, setting out from Buell's starting point, confirms apocalypse as "capable of galvanising activists, converting the undecided and ultimately, perhaps, of influencing government and commercial policy" (2002, p. 104), but also identifies "philosophical and political problems" with eschatological narrative, most prominently a tendency to over-simplify complex issues (p. 105). Claire Colebrook draws attention to the reactionary structure performed by popular cultural versions of the apocalypse, noting the "redemptive and rehumanizing work" performed by "post-apocalyptic films and novels" since the Millennium (2014, p. 39) whereby disaster occurs only in order to facilitate the glib re-installation of a conservative world order at the story's denouement. The planet is saved and capitalism carries on. More scathingly, Pascal Bruckner has identified "catastrophism" as "the infantile disease that is eroding and discrediting" environmentalism (2013, p. 3). Critically, these are hard times for the apocalypse.

I have argued elsewhere (Miller, 2017) that Thomson's work is notable for a distinctive engagement with evolutionary theory that leads him to a philosophical position somewhat akin to Timothy Morton's conception of dark ecology, the commitment in Morton's terms to "stay with a dying world" (2007, p. 185), and also to Jacques Derrida's seminal work on the abyssal texture of the human/animal distinction. By this token, Thomson's well-remarked melancholy operates as a crucial part of a counter-anthropocentric ethical position founded on an abyssal human ontology; the human does not comprise for Thomson an exceptional form of being raised hierarchically over other forms of life, but exists as one of a multitude of different creatures. In this way, Thomson's writing evinces a strong connection with the critical and theoretical territory of animal studies and is helpful in tracing its origins in earlier periods, most obviously through the emergence of Darwinism.[5]

Thomson's apocalyptic desert imagery carries these more-than-human ontologies into the terrain of ecological discourse. What notion of environmental apocalypse (indeed, what kind of environmentalism more generally) proceeds without a solid and committed conception of the human? In a volume of essays on extinction, Colebrook argues that a key structural element of ecological crisis is a philosophical tradition through which "Humanity has been fabricated as the proper ground of all life" (2014, p. 142). It is precisely this that Thomson refuses. In doing so, Thomson's poetry enacts a thought experiment Colebrook proposes: "if art were to be placed outside the human, as the persistence of sensations and matters that cannot be reduced to human intentionality, the 'we' might begin to discern the pulsation of differences in a time other than that of self-defining humanity" (p. 142). Consequently, Thomson may be claimed as a significant figure for understanding the value of apocalypticism as a marginal but important aspect of Victorian environmentalism and for demonstrating the radical potential rather than just the conservative agenda of end-times thinking.

My argument unfolds in three sections in the course of which, following a notable trajectory in Thomson's oeuvre, the human becomes increasingly peripheral. Section I explores *The City of Dreadful Night*'s apocalyptic energy in the poem's most extended treatment of the desert in Canto IV. Here the poem's unnamed traveller chances upon a nihilistic preacher who recounts a desperate journey across a desolate land in an eidetic and theologically resonant scene that establishes the key elements of Thomson's figurative desert ecology: the threat of predation, the impossibility of direction and a rivenness at the heart of human subjectivity, manifested most strikingly in the image of a mysterious woman holding a lamp made from "her own burning heart" (Canto IV, l. 84). While Section I concerns desert as a geographically unanchored zone of ontological speculation, Section II explores how Thomson's mythic desert ecology emerges from the colonial periphery, particularly through an engagement with Victorian discourses on Egypt. Of most prominence here is the figure of the sphinx, a favourite motif of Thomson's, which embodies the desert's antipathy to man and the endurance of the world beyond human civilisation. Finally, in conclusion, in Section III, I turn to a surprisingly (if problematically) upbeat moment in Thomson's writing and the lines in which he gets closest to an ecological sensibility. "The Voice from the Nile" (1881) is a late poem narrated from the river's perspective and based, Tom Leonard explains, on notes Thomson made for *The City of Dreadful Night* from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* on "the record of civilisation present and past to be found on the Nile's banks" (p. 251). For all Thomson's obsession with disharmony and brokenness, the poem ends with an image of natural harmony and earth consciousness that is apprehended only after total human extinction. While the poem, therefore, concludes by evoking what might be thought an archetypal environmental nightmare – the termination of humanity – "Man's" disappearance is anything but nightmarish, a theme that occurs elsewhere in Thomson's writing too. This oasis in Thomson's desert could easily be construed as nihilism, but the "pulsation of

differences" to which it attends (to return to Colebrook's phrase) also suggests a crucial corrective to anthropocentric drives. For apocalypse, read utopia.

SECTION I. "AS I CAME THROUGH THE DESERT THUS IT WAS": THOMSON'S APOCALYPSE

The twenty-one cantos of *The City of Dreadful Night* alternate between first-person accounts of the experience of the poem's broken world (in the even-numbered cantos) and more abstract, depersonalised depictions of the cityspace (in the odd). Canto IV's central focus on the oration of a prophetic figure with "head uncovered and with streaming hair" (l. 3) shows a close engagement with apocalyptic literary tradition that utilises a strong Biblical connection between desert and prophecy (see Haynes, p. 112). Each stanza of the preacher's address begins with the refrain "As I came through the desert thus it was,/ As I came through the desert" (ll. 7-8) and presents a vignette of his experience in a hyperbolically inhospitable landscape. Central here is one of Thomson's most insistent contentions: a seemingly irresolvable human alienation from the natural world that is manifested most strikingly in the relationships between humans and other creatures. The desert is the domain of abject, predatory (and mostly) mythic beasts: "enormous things" swoop past with "with savage cries and clanking wings" (ll. 12-13); "Eyes of fire" announce "heavy […] carnivorous breath" that emanates from "deep jaws of death" (ll. 17-20); there are serpents "heaped pell-mell/For Devil's roll-call and some *fête* of hell" (ll. 30-31). Humanity, for Thomson, is seldom at home in the world, but is continually beset by an antagonistic nature embodied in violent animality. Such bleak zoopoetics affirm a refusal of cute or companionable creatural relations that extends through much of his work, but also has a crucial metonymic function in depicting the impossibility of ecological dwelling in Thomson's poetic philosophy, a point that is emphasised by some striking (and significantly intertextual) meteorological

disturbances that enact the poem's emotional turmoil (and which it might be tempting to appropriate as a prescient example of Victorian cli-fi).

Canto IV's apocalyptic weather comes straight out of the Book of Revelation. The preacher observes first how "The zenith opened to a gulf of flame,/ [And] dreadful thunderbolts jarred earth's fixed frame" (ll. 36-37). He goes on to note, in some of the poem's most gruesome and unsettling language, how "The sun arose and crowned a broad crag-cleft;/ There stopped and burned out black, except a rim,/ A bleeding eyeless socket, red and dim" (ll. 54-56). In similar terms, the Book of Revelation records a "great earthquake" in which "the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood" (6. 12). Thomson's deliberate echoing of Revelation clearly works towards a rather blunt anti-Christian point. As the Earth's frame is shaken, Thomson registers the arrival of some apocalyptic force (or even, we might speculate, some ecological disaster), but, for Thomson, no second coming could ever arrive to redeem the lost. The preacher's desert travails hammer home a point made in Canto II when the narrator's psycho-geographical meanderings through the city result in the realisation of the "perpetual recurrence" of "three terms, dead Faith, dead Love, dead Hope" (ll. 46-47). The forms and rhetoric of religion survive, but without any meaningful content; the anti-religious coordinates that guide the preacher's desert journey are recalibrated to reveal godlessness rather than the prophetic enactment of a divine plan.

Consequently, there is no kind of established path to guide the traveller across the desert: "In heaven no single star, on earth no track" (l. 9). The absence of waymarkers corresponds metaphorically to a lack of spiritual purpose, though the emphatic tone suggests a wider sense of futility as if the lack of religious orientation is matched by a similar lack of social and ideological direction.[6] Reading the poem (perhaps a little too) literally, Thomson is not interested in mapping the strange terrain, but simply in charting its exteriority to any progressive cartographic enterprise. The desert is a hallucinatory space that cannot be known;

to use another favourite term of Thomson's – and one with notable apocalyptic resonances – the world remains veiled. This emphasis on concealment demonstrates the anti-apocalypticism that Mills sees in *The City of Dreadful Night*, a pattern which involves an important aspect of Thomson's version of human-ecological relations. As Thomson recorded in his diaries "Of old I was conscious of an impenetrable veil between myself and nature" (quoted in Ridler, p. xxxiii). The desert is a veiled world pieced together from fragments of exhausted text and febrile fantasy; for Thomson it is simultaneously an over-determined, emptied-out discourse and a phantasmagoria.

The world of the desert – indeed, the world *as* desert – shows humanity alienated from nature and also, importantly, from itself. Thomson's apocalyptic desert is assembled, strikingly, from the ruins of human flesh. The "eyeless socket" that images the failing sun indicates a universe that emanates macrocosmically from the pain of the planet's decimated victims. Accordingly, much of the canto is concerned with a fragmented human ontology, marked by gruesomely wounded bodies. The scene of the encounter with the woman that closes the canto is one of *The City of Dreadful Night*'s most extraordinary and difficult passages. Initially portrayed somewhat romantically as "bareheaded" and "barefooted" as she walks along the strand with a lamp in her hands, the woman is quickly the cause of what we might call the schizophrenic splitting of the preacher. As he explains, "I was twain,/ Two selves distinct that cannot join again/ One stood apart and knew but could not stir/ And watched the other stark in swoon" (ll. 71-74). When the woman approaches, any vestige of romanticism fades into Thomson's default despondency:

> As I came through the desert thus it was,
>
> As I came through the desert: Hell is mild
>
> And piteous matched with that accursed wild;
>
> A large black sign was on her breast that bowed,

A broad black band ran down her snow-white shroud;

That lamp she held was her own burning heart,

Whose blood-drops trickled step by step apart:

The mystery was clear;

Mad rage had swallowed fear (ll. 79-87)

Thomson's depiction of the "accursed wild" leads directly to the woman's appearance; space and body are again held in intimate relation. In conventionally apocalyptic terms, the woman features as the bearer of a revelation. Both the sign with its unrevealed message that she carries and the lamp's function as an image of spiritual illumination suggest the disclosure of some cosmic significance that leads to the stanza's conclusion that the "mystery is clear". The sign, importantly, *is* the flesh, or at least is borne on the body, as in the "large black sign" that appears on her breast. Without any narrative exegesis to explain Thomson's imagery, however, the mystery is anything but clear, offering a parody of revelation which is quickly followed by a parody of redemption. As the blood-drops fall on the "senseless me", the woman tries to cleanse him, murmuring "words of pity, love and woe" (l. 93) before the two of them are washed away by a tide that will hold them perpetually together in an anaesthetic union characterised by the lack of love, hope or fear and the continuation of "doom" (ll. 105-106).

Undeniably, this is a complex moment in the poem that could sustain a greatly extended reading. For the purposes of this chapter, the scene emphasises two key aspects of Thomson's thought. Firstly, Thomson produces a secular mysticism that gestures towards the revelation of profundity only to withhold any sense of revelation. *The City of Dreadful Night* looks like it means something (in the sense of providing some kind of allegorical direction towards a decisive or ultimate truth), but works only to evade or suspend meaning-making. As such, it might even be worth thinking of Thomson's great work as surprisingly

comparable to the nonsense poetry of his near contemporary Edward Lear. Canto IV illustrates the poem's function as something like a riddle without an answer. Secondly, given the stress on the suffering or broken body, this refusal of significance is unavoidably a question about the human. The body is the material out of which significance is gouged: the breast is a sign, the heart a lamp. For all the pity implied in Thomson's attention to human suffering, humanity is empty of meaning. There is no God to be read in the human form. Thomson's desert exposes a creaturely suffering that evades the transcendental status of "man". The apocalyptic desert signals the erosion of human order and foregrounds instead the ungovernable flow of organic energies. As Thomson indicates at the opening of Canto V, humanity can be imaged as "a waif [flung] upon that vast sea-flow,/ Or down the river's boiling cataracts" (ll. 3-4). The depiction of the desert in *The City of Dreadful Night*, therefore, allows Thomson to expose the limitations of anthropocentric conceptions of the human. For sure this can be read – as it often has been – as an urban predicament that testifies to concerns about Victorian metropolitan living, particularly in the context of degenerationist discourses. The deserts of the dreadful night are not just about London, however; they also emerge, at least in part, from nineteenth-century discourses on Egypt which Thomson utilises to reinforce the sense of an epistemological lacuna at the heart of his poetic project while adding empire-building to religion as the target of his (anti) apocalyptic energy.

SECTION II: "BETWEEN THE MONSTER'S LARGE QUIESCENT PAWS": THOMSON'S EGYPT

Like many of his generation, Thomson was fascinated by Egypt.[7] Egyptian archaeological researches had been widely reported in Britain from the beginning of the century and had given rise to an enormous volume of public debate and cultural production with a profound impact on Victorian intellectual life (Luckhurst, 2012; Gange, 2013). In the years leading up to *The City of Dreadful Night*'s publication, Egypt had proved particularly newsworthy. The

opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 under French administration was a moment of sharp imperial anxiety due, in large part, to the improved sea access to India it offered to Britain's colonial rivals. At the same time that geopolitical tensions heightened, information about Egyptian antiquities continued to grip Victorian readers. Interest in the Egyptian past was so strong that Georg Ebers could claim in 1878 that "Every one, high and low, has heard of Egypt and its primeval wonders" (p. iii). As David Gange argues, in the last decades of the nineteenth century "the developing meanings of Egypt began to be rooted deep into British culture" (2013, p. 2). Importantly, Roger Luckhurst notes that by the 1860s "the Egypt of the imagination began to darken" (2012, p. 166). Gange, moreover, discusses how developing Victorian debates around ancient Egypt revolved (among other themes) around "the viability of evolution (Darwinian and otherwise)" (p. 2) and involved significant reflection on and revision of established religious views of the Middle East and Biblical history. Evidently, the atmosphere surrounding Egypt in the 1860s and 1870s contained some notably Thomsonian elements that feed into his formulation of a melancholy desert ecology.

There are many examples of Victorian "Egyptomania" (Luckhurst, p. 90) in Thomson's writing ranging from the apparently trivial to the philosophically central. It is worth noting, for instance, some reflections on Egyptian cigarettes in an essay titled "Stray Whiffs, from an Old Smoker", published in the trade journal *Cope's Tobacco Plant* to which Thomson contributed extensively (and which kept him just about financially solvent). This curious comparative study of national smoking styles makes for niche reading, but it does reveal Thomson's familiarity with some of the key Egyptological texts of his day (see Leonard, p. 206).[8] It is the sphinx, however – a mythical creature with a lion's body and a human head – that draws Thomson's attention to Egypt most powerfully, in *The City of Dreadful Night* and elsewhere.[9] Sphinxes exist in a number of mythological traditions (the Greek and Persian, for example), but they are most widely recognised in the Egyptian

context, especially in the form of the Great Sphinx at Giza in Egypt, one of the world's most ancient statues and a form associated perennially with mystery.

Victorian Egyptology was concerned greatly with decipherment; although the long-cryptic Egyptian hieroglyphics were unravelled in the 1820s, Gange notes that it was not until the 1880s that "the impact of decipherment really began to make its present felt" (p. 1). The desire to bring the enigmatic deep past of Egypt into the hungry gaze of Victorian colonial culture represents an important background to Thomson's adaptation of Egyptian motifs and of the sphinx in particular. The sphinx is synonymous of course with riddling; in literature, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* relates the story of the hero's encounter with a sphinx whose riddle he must solve to rescue the city of Thebes. The Great Sphinx at Giza had its riddles too and offers a specific case study of the interplay between the epistemological drive of Victorian colonialism and the orientalist allure of unknowability. At the time Thomson was composing *The City of Dreadful Night*, the sphinx was both a symbol of the inscrutability of the past and also, paradoxically a symbol for the resolution of the world's mysteries. So, on the one hand, Eber describes the sphinx rather ominously as "the most mysterious of all mysterious images" (p. 153). Contrastingly, on the other hand, the 1877 preface to Amelia B. Edwards's work of Egyptian travel *A Thousand Miles up the Nile* uses the sphinx as a specific illustration of the march of geographical and imperial progress. In closing the Preface, Edwards refers to a "very beautiful picture called *The Secret of the Sphinx*", painted in 1863 by the American artist Elihu Vedder (and now known more commonly as *The Questioner of the Sphinx*). The picture features a raggedly dressed Arab traveller with his ear held up to the sphinx's lips, evidently hoping to divine some arcane knowledge. Vedder's work signifies for Edwards both the "whole uninterrupted and undiscovered past of Egypt" and the "hidden significance of the human-headed lion" (p. xiv). But crucially, against this enigmatic background, Edwards announces that following the work of "students in their

libraries [and] excavators under Egyptian skies" the "very mystery of the Sphinx has now been disclosed". The sphinx, she determines "has no secret now, save for the ignorant" (p. xiv), a bold contention that would still make Egyptologists nervous. Reflecting this sense of intellectual progress, Eber concedes, rather reluctantly, that during "the present century […], the Sphinx has been compelled to reveal its lion body, and stand confessed to daylight and curiosity" (p. 153). More decisively, Gardner Wilkinson in *The Ancient Egyptians: Their Life and Customs* (a text cited by Thomson in *Cope's Tobacco Plant*) offers a full, even complacent summary of the sphinx's function as "an emblematic figure, representative of the King [and] the union of intellect and physical force" (pp. 93-94).

Thomson's deployment of a sphinx in the closing stages of *The City of Dreadful Night*, therefore, participates in an ideologically loaded dichotomy between knowledge and unknowability. It is worth reiterating that Thomson was no patriot. In the era of Disraeli's popular imperialism, Thomson was, in the words of William David Schaeffer consistently infuriated by "Tory imperialism and particularly jingoism" (p. 107). A late essay in the free-thinking paper *The Liberal*, sees Thomson condemn Disraeli's foreign policy explicitly as that "'costly and bloody burlesque of imperialism" (1879, cited in Leonard p. 230). For sure, Thomson's use of Egpyt, and the sphinx in particular, to materialise a somewhat abstract set of philosophical positions about man and nature shows that he was not immune from his era's orientalism; Thomson's Egypt is undeniably a phantastic projection rather than a historically precise and ethically sensitive rendering of a distinctive culture and landscape. That said, the sphinx's appearance at a pivotal moment of *The City of Dreadful Night* characteristically works against any conventional Victorian ideological determinations. Most significantly, the sphinx is the key presence at the moment the embodied human form disappears from Thomson's poem.

The sphinx figures in *The City of Dreadful Night*'s penultimate canto, the last canto focused around the first-person account of the traveller. Reclining on the base of the pillar, the traveller is faced by two stone figures: a "couchant sphinx in shadow to the breast" (l. 9) and an "angel standing in the moonlight clear" (l. 10). The angel appears to gaze intensely on the "placid" creature (l. 16); the traveller watches lethargically until a "sharp and clashing noise the stillness broke" (l. 23) and the angel's wings crash down around the "unchanged sphinx" (l. 35). Shortly afterwards, the angel himself falls too and the traveller is left to contemplate a scene of destruction:

> My eyelids sank in spite of wonder grown;
> A louder crash upstartled me in dread:
> The man had fallen forward, stone on stone,
> And lay there shattered, with his trunkless head
> Between the monster's large quiescent paws,
> Beneath its grand front changeless as life's laws.
>
> The moon had circled westward full and bright,
> And made the temple-front a mystic dream,
> And bathed the whole enclosure with its light,
> The sworded angel's wrecks, the sphinx supreme:
> I pondered long that cold majestic face
> Whose vision seemed of infinite void space (ll. 37-48)

Unsurprisingly, this passage has generated a good deal of critical attention. Most notably, the scene unfolds a descent from the divine to the human to the animal that supports evolutionary readings which have been elaborated by several critics. For Mills, the sphinx represents

"some kind of missing link" (p. 130), indicating that humanity's "very existence is threatened by disorder and evolutionary reversal" (p. 129). In similar terms, for Walker, the sphinx is "symbolic of the immutable unconscious laws of nature" (p. 110). More bluntly, for Byron the sphinx is "simply that against which man destroys himself" (p. 109). Leonard makes more specific use of the Egyptian context by exploring the sphinx in relation to the figure of Melencolia who appears as the focal point of Canto XI.[10] For Leonard, Melencolia should be understood as a version of the Egyptian Goddess Isis, conventionally depicted as covered by a veil that represents nature's concealment from the human mind (see Leonard p. 78 and p. 146).[11]

The poem departs at this moment, then, from anything that might remain of human exceptionalism so that the sphinx's most notable role in Thomson's desert ecology is to intensify the destabilisation of the human. As a hybrid beast, part man and part lion, the sphinx is necessarily positioned to contend against any sense of human integrity. Moreover, as the angel, described significantly in this passage as "man" falls from its eminence, it comes to rest on the sculpture's animal part, landing significantly "Between the monster's large quiescent paws". The tension between human and animal the sphinx embodies does not exhaust its ontological complexity, however. The sphinx is also, read literally, a stone. Stones and other inanimate forms, strangely, are the main actors in the poem's final two cantos. After the sphinx has disappeared from the cityscape, attention turns in the final canto to the "superhuman" figure of Melencolia, a "bronze colossus […]/ Upon a graded granite base foursquare" (ll. 6-7). Melencolia is both inert and active, a static work of art that labours on "sustained by her indomitable will" (l. 52). Just as the human-animal distinction erodes, *The City of Dreadful Night* also produces a curious situation in which, as David Seed remarks, "the distinction between animate and inanimate collapses" (p. 96). A further element can thus

be added to Thomson's evolutionary descent: we shift from divine, to human, to animal, to stone. *The City of Dreadful Night* moves towards something like a lithic consciousness.

Stone invites contemplation of what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen calls an "alien scale" (p. 27) that "vexes human history" (p. 79): "stone's time is not ours" (p. 16). As the sphinx's stony gaze remains abyssally fixed on the ruined city, the poem reaches towards an inhuman planetary consciousness. Accordingly, after the angel has crashed onto the sphinx, there is little left for the human to do in the poem. The final canto makes a passing reference to Melencolia's "subjects" in the closing stanza who impassively "gaze up to her" (l. 81), but what remains of the human comes in the last stanzas of Canto XX: the sinking eyelids and then the pondering of the sphinx's "cold majestic face". As humanity fades away, it has discovered nothing except the impossibility of discovery and its own ephemerality on a larger geological timescale. This anti-humanist conclusion sounds a strong apocalyptic note, if we consider apocalypse as a general signifier of a cataclysmic species event, rather than as part of a transcendent theological narrative. Such is the bleak desert vision the poem leaves us with. But the sphinx's endurance signifies, crucially, that this is not the end of the *world*: the world lives on beyond the human, a theme Thomson returns to in much less despondent mood in "A Voice from the Nile".

SECTION III: "A VOICE FROM THE NILE": THOMSON'S MORE-THAN-HUMAN ECOLOGY

"A Voice from the Nile" is set, as the title implies, in the fertile strip at the heart of the Egyptian desert. For all the arid emotional texture of Thomson's writing, there is a good amount of attention paid to fecundity in his oeuvre. Admittedly, this usually serves only to give emphasis to the desert's bleakness as in "Lines, 1878" when the poem's speaker addressing his dead lover affectingly claims that

> You would have kept me from the Desert Sands
>
> Bestrewn with bleaching bones,
>
> And led me through the friendly fertile lands,
>
> And changed my weary moans
>
> To hymns of triumph and enraptured love,
>
> And made our earth as rich as Heaven above (ll. 73-78)

The experience of the desert functions oppositionally; its antidote is the “friendly fertile lands” that evoke a meaningful spiritual life away from the deathly Godless ambience of the “Desert Sands”. The location of “A Voice from the Nile” evidently contains something of this sense of a symbolic environmental dichotomy, but with a greatly different philosophical emphasis and emotional texture.

The river’s narration operates on a pointedly vast historical scale and the poem’s essential message is straightforward and a conventional part of Egypt’s role in the Victorian imagination as something like a synonym for deep time. The Nile was flowing long before humanity arrived on the scene and will continue long after it has departed (although pedants might wish to remind the river of the significant impacts of human cultures on riverine ecologies). In its journey from the deep past to the distant future, the river makes numerous reflections on “most admirable, most pitiable Man” (l. 112), signalling alienation as the one characteristic exceptional to *Homo sapiens*: humanity is “homeless where all others are at home” (l. 73). Evidently, the river has some affection for mankind, but is nonetheless blithe about its extinction in the poem’s concluding verse paragraph:

> And I through all these generations flow
>
> Of corn and men and gods, all-bountiful,

Perennial through their transientness, still fed

By earth with waters in abundancy;

And as I flowed here long before they were,

So may I flow when they no longer are,

Most like the serpent of eternity:

Blessèd for ever be our Mother Earth (ll. 199-206)

The poem's valedictory note is strengthened by an echo of the secular funeral service composed by Thomson's friend Austin Holyoake with its emphasis on the "bountiful mother" Earth to which the dead return (cited in Leonard, p. 193). Moreover, the "serpent of eternity" or *ourobouros* is associated with Egyptian ideas of death and rebirth to further the morbid theme. Yet, unsurprisingly for Thomson, the moment is far from depressing. In an oeuvre so despondent, the tone here can easily seem out of place;[12] the poem's concluding Earth blessing appears almost saccharine in comparison with Thomson's signature gloom.

Thinking about the world from a more-than-human or ecocentric perspective reconfigures Thomson's approach to the world and allows him to step out of the desert. Put simply (and at the risk of seeming glib), once humans are out of the picture, the outlook seem much sunnier. Although the poem's composition from the leftovers of Thomson's research for *The City of Dreadful Night* encourages a sense of the relationship between the two works, it would be too neat to see "A Voice from the Nile" operating simplistically as the happy-ending to the earlier poem: the two poems though thematically linked are too distinct in emotional texture and setting. It does, however, provide a resolution of sorts to the dilemma of the city/desert and one that is clearly a long way from the facile re-imposition of a conservative order widely associated with apocalyptic writing. Inevitably, Thomson's

construction of the river-speaker is susceptible to criticism on the grounds of its anthropomorphism, but the sense of beatitude Thomson ends with – and without a human to administer the blessing – focuses attention on human limits and on an ethics and aesthetics that exceeds Colebrook's "self-defining humanity". Thomson's work is geared towards life beyond the human in a way that recalibrates the ethics and politics of the apocalypse. An earlier poem "In the Room" (1872) provides another telling example of this pattern. Like "A Voice from the Nile", "In the Room" is mediated from a nonhuman perspective – a mirror, curtain, cupboard and bed all have their say – and is concerned with the scene around the corpse of a suicide victim (and as such with a personal rather than a species catastrophe). For sure, the topic bears all of Thomson's depressive hallmarks and his characteristic emphasis on suffering, but the opening stanza's attentive interest in the "subtle thrills, the pulse and breath/ Of multitudinous lower life" (ll. 7-8) foregrounds not the human tragedy but a creaturely flourishing that shows an ecological consciousness unanchored to anthropocentric determinations.

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[1] Unless otherwise stated line references are to *Poems and Some Letters of James Thomson* (London: Centaur Press, 1963).

[2] *Places of the Mind* is the title of Tom Leonard's biography of Thomson, the best extended study of the poet to date.

[3] For a discussion of the role of the desert in Christian thought more widely see David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell's, 2004).

[4] I give more detail on Thomson's crusade against Christianity in my essay "Creatures on the 'Night-Side of Nature': James Thomson's Melancholy Ethics". A*nimals in Victorian Literature and Culture*. Eds. Larry Mazzeno and Ron Morrison, Palgrave, 2017, pp. 189-212.

[5] For a discussion of Thomson's adaptation of Darwin's thought in addition to Miller 2017, see Mills 2007b and, for a much earlier approach, Forsyth.

[6] The absence of a road or track is a recurrent point of emphasis in Thomson's depiction of deserts. "Lines, 1878", for example, sees the narrator "plod the pathless ways;/ Of all my fellow creatures dry bleached bones" (ll.26-27).

[7] There is also a consistent interest in the East more generally in Thomson's poetry. His most extended Eastern composition is "Weddah and Om-el-Bonain" (1869), a "long narrative poem in the fashionable genre of Oriental tale of dramatic tragic fate" as Leonard summarises it, which is based on a story of Stendahl's and set on the Arabian Peninsula (see Leonard, p. 141).

[8] Interestingly, Thomson's comments on Egyptian cigarettes provide another example of Thomson's desert fixation when he describes his own tobacco addiction to be "as keen as the water-thirst of the desert" (cited Leonard, p. 206).

[9] Leonard notes an unfinished prose story by Thomson titled *Sarpolus of Mardon* dating from 1858 in which in a clear prototype of the final cantos of *The City of Dreadful Night* there figures a "Mammoth-Sphinx upon whose countenance gazed steadfastly a mightier angel" (p. 65).

[10] Although the Isis allusion is the most productive link for thinking through the role of Egypt in unpacking the ecological implications of *The City of Dreadful Night*, there is an important textual echo at the end of Canto which highlights another tradition at work. Thomson was a keen admirer of Shelley (indeed he composed a long early poem under the title "Shelley" in 1861) and the angel's "trunkless head" that ends up between the Sphinx's paws recalls the figure of "Ozymandias", based on the historical Pharaoh Rameses II, who appears in the desert with "trunkless legs of stone" (l. 2).

[11] Leonard's summary of the relationship between Isis (as Melencolia) and the sphinx proceeds as follows: "Isis here and in Schiller – whom Thomson was now reading – can be seen as representing a different set of fundamental questions from that represented by the figure of the Sphinx. The latter might stand for the unknowable process of History, while Isis might stand for the unknowable process of present reality" (Leonard p. 78). The two figures of sphinx and Isis are put together by Thomson more explicitly in "Vane's Story" (1866) when an unusually upbeat prophecy describes the veil of Isis melting away whereupon the "marble Sphinx" shall "yearn/ And melt to flesh" (ll. 664-668). Isis was also an important figure in Victorian heterodox thought more generally, as in Madame Blavatsky's 1877 book of occult lore *Isis Unveiled*, or Winwood Reade's 1861 account of druidism, *The Veil of Isis*.

[12] Thomson did write a handful of lighter poems. See, for example, "Sunday at Hampstead" or "Sunday up the River".