It is the image of the city that contains and barely controls the many concepts and forms which lend power to much of James Thomson’s poetry. It is true that urban settings, characters and language had become a strong force in much of the poetry of the second half of the nineteenth century, throughout Europe. But Thomson’s work – and, in particular, his poem *The City of Dreadful Night* – occupies a unique position. Not only does it contain most of the motifs, themes and images connected with the concept of “the city in literature”, as examined in many recent and less recent studies, it also forms the locus where other strands of analysis intersect. Quite apart from the useful function of illustrating the multiform perceptions of the city in literature, *The City of Dreadful Night* narrows the focus Thomson had already developed in his earlier poem, “The Doom of a City”. In particular, his use of stone figures and monuments reveals a process of intensification in the development of Thomson’s poetics and of the poetics of the period. An analysis of these monuments in the later poem highlights an important moment in the shift from Romantic to Modernist poetics. Moreover, an analysis of the formal aspect of the poem – the specific nature of the techniques used by Thomson – sheds some light on the dynamics of this intermediate stage.

James Thomson’s *The City of Dreadful Night* is one of the texts in the English language in which a very large number of the various concepts involved in the trope of the city, or the “word-city”, are most comprehensively developed and explored. At the beginning and end of the poem the description of a specific geographical layout suggests the possibility of an ordering view from above, whereas the body of the poem traces the labyrinthine routes by which the half-lost walker goes on his aimless quest. The city is a semi-generalized “Venice of the Black Sea”, but it can also be viewed specifically as London; at the same time, however, like Italo Calvino’s Venice, it also stands for any city. Indeed, rather than a real
or even an “unreal city”, it represents a vision of civilization and of the human life within it. This mythical four-gated or four-square city turns into its five-gated counterpart when, in the course of the poem, the cathedral becomes increasingly more prominent in the geography of the city.¹ Large buildings, squares and monuments – Christian and pagan – add their bulk to the “ruins of an unremembered past”,² but also to the mental ruins of the half-remembered lives some of the characters recount for the benefit of the persona and the reader. Thus we find here a perfect illustration of Freud’s use of the layered city as an image of the psyche in Civilization and Its Discontents. More aspects which make up the trope of the city in literature emerge in Thomson’s poem. Along the network of interlocking streets the persona walks, a silent observer and spectator recording his personal viewings, but at important nodes we also hear the very different, public voice of a prophet addressing a mass of people. Yet to read the poem is to enter an inner space; from first to last the shapes and figures are shadows moving within the mind, and this holds the fragments together. All these elements – and this also gives the poem part of its cohesion – are explored in one direction only, that is, in terms of the demonic city. My main aim is to analyse how this text relies for its cohesion and significance on the idea of the City considered as the epitome of a man-made construction – the city as the book of man where nature is the book of God – and how the text’s cohesion is created by means of various other man-made constructions, such as poetic techniques.

Lothar Hönnighausen has briefly discussed Thomson in the book translated into English in 1988 as The Symbolist Tradition in English Literature. Hönnighausen mentions Thomson’s use of a “modified form of allegory” and states that “In this modified form of allegory, a strange oscillation between symbolic indefiniteness and allegorical definiteness arises”. This, according to the critic, has been seen as contributing to the poem’s “lack of coherence”.³ I want to show to what extent Thomson was systematically exploring and displaying in his city a view of allegory and symbolism which in itself communicates a view of civilization and human life. I do this by first extracting three specific examples of strategies – beginning with allegory – and then considering a feature central to the structure of the poem and the thematics of the city, that is, certain monuments or monumental figures which are described in the last two parts of the poem. I argue that it is Thomson’s concern with literary strategies and their significance that gives the poem coherence, and that this coherence is due to

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