

1983

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### Recommended Citation

Robertson, Ritchie (1983) "Science and Myth in John Davidson's Testaments," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol18/iss1/7>

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*Ritchie Robertson*

## Science and Myth in John Davidson's *Testaments*



The five long blank-verse monologues which Davidson called his *Testaments* were all published during the decade before his suicide in 1909. By then his literary reputation had already dwindled. After the brief popularity of *Fleet Street Eclogues* (1893) and *Ballads and Songs* (1894), written during his association with the Rhymers' Club, his later volumes of verse sold badly, while his original plays were consistently rejected by theatre managers. To support his wife and family Davidson had to rely on hack reviewing and later on reading manuscripts for Grant Richards, his publisher. His acquaintances noticed his naturally kindly character becoming overlaid with bitterness and over-assertiveness. Increasingly he led the life of a recluse, discouraging visitors so that they should not observe his poverty. His *Testaments*, which appeared between 1901 and 1908, were received with indifference, incomprehension or disgust, and regarded as clumsily written, sermonizing expositions of their author's homespun philosophy. Since Davidson's death they have continued to arouse such responses. In the most detailed account of Davidson's life and works, J. Benjamin Townsend discusses them cursorily and gives even qualified praise only to the fifth; and Andrew Turnbull, whose introduction to his edition of Davidson's poems is by far the best study of Davidson, finds the *Testaments* only locally success-

ful.<sup>1</sup>

The form of the *Testaments*, though, in itself entitles them to serious consideration, for despite his many lyric poems and plays, the natural culmination of Davidson's literary efforts seems to be the narrative and dramatic monologue. Some uneasiness with the lyric mode is implied by his constant experiments with ballads, eclogues, and dramatic sketches like "In a Music-Hall." Indeed, his best-known poem, "Thirty Bob a Week," is a dramatic monologue. Yet his dramas proper are unsuccessful, mainly because he had no feeling for the interaction of character. Secondary figures in his plays are seldom more than foils to a central character who delivers lengthy monologues. This is most markedly the case in *The Triumph of Mammon* (1907) and *Mammon and his Message* (1908), which were intended to form parts of a trilogy to be called *God and Mammon*. Their most memorable and most dramatic scene is the confrontation between Mammon and his father, who means to castrate Mammon but is forestalled by Mammon's killing him, in Act III of *The Triumph of Mammon*. In both theme (familial conflict) and method (grotesque and violent exaggeration) this scene anticipates German Expressionist dramas such as Hasenclever's *Der Sohn* (1914).

The *Testaments* permitted Davidson to indulge his talent for monologue and conceal his deficiencies as a dramatist. As with Browning, his dramatic monologues are better than his dramas. Three of the *Testaments* are Browningsque explorations of character--*The Testament of a Vivisector* (1901), *The Testament of an Empire-BUILDER* (1902) and *The Testament of a Prime Minister* (1904). Davidson made it clear that the first of these poems was purely exploratory, with no forensic or moralistic intention:

The poem is artistic, i.e. it /is/ a statement of the Vivisector (the spin of a penny determined whether I should call the poems statements or testaments) not a condemnation or a criticism of him, but a dramatic account of him without any intention on the author's part to persuade the world for or against.<sup>2</sup>

The other two, *The Testament of a Man Forbid* (1901) and *The Testament of John Davidson* (1908), are more personal. Davidson spoke of the latter as "this book, which is my personal poem, which is me."<sup>3</sup> It is not a confessional poem, however; its speaker is the hero of an ambitious poetic myth about the destiny of man and his place in the universe described by contemporary science. This extraordinary poem incorporates elements of Greek and Scandinavian myth and a considerable amount

of scientific detail; the result is a complicated but coherent narrative which satisfactorily embodies Davidson's deepest convictions. I should like to argue that it is his greatest poem, and a striking literary achievement by any standards. The other *Testaments* also seem to me to be works of great interest and imaginative power which have not yet been properly understood. This study is an attempt to render the *Testaments* more accessible to the reader of poetry. But before offering an interpretation and assessment of the poems, it is essential to give a summary account of Davidson's thought and its principal sources.

In the prefaces to his later plays, and in the *Mammon* plays, Davidson stridently proclaimed a doctrine of materialistic monism. Its basis is the metaphysical monism of Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer maintains that all phenomena are objectifications of the Will, which itself is a blind, non-rational force, ceaselessly striving but without purpose. The distinction between animate and inanimate objects is merely apparent, for the same Will objectifies itself in all, though with varying degrees of distinctness:

Spinoza says that if a stone which has been projected through the air had consciousness, it would believe that it was moving of its own will. I add to this only that the stone would be right. The impulse given it is for the stone what the motive is for me, and what in the case of the stone appears as cohesion, gravitation, rigidity, is in its inner nature the same as that which I recognise in myself as will.<sup>4</sup>

Davidson adopts from Schopenhauer the conception of a blind will animating the universe, obscurely present in stones and trees, and most distinctly present in man. He calls this force Matter, and believes it to be the motive force behind evolution. For Schopenhauer the universe had neither purpose nor development; man's capacity for thought was of no significance, except that it equipped man to recognize the nature of existence and free himself from the pressure of the Will by Buddhistic self-surrender. For Davidson, however, human thought and self-awareness represent the goal of evolution. Since man is part of Matter, human consciousness is the means by which the material universe becomes aware of itself.

Chief end

Of Matter--of the Earth aware in us,  
As of that Greater Matter orb'd and lit  
Throughout Eternal Night--is evermore  
Self-Knowledge. (p. 325)

While the groundwork of Davidson's monism comes from Schopenhauer, it was the German biologist Haeckel who helped him to elaborate it. Haeckel's *The Riddle of the Universe*, to whose title Davidson alludes in *The Testament of a Vivisector* (line 145), was a widely-read and influential exposition of scientific rationalism. Yet it acknowledges an equal debt to Darwin and Goethe, and much of its science now sounds eccentric.

According to Haeckel, the basic material of the universe is ether, "a simple primitive substance, which fills the infinity of space in an unbroken continuity."<sup>5</sup> The ether cannot be weighed or measured, for it is not itself composed of atoms, but fills the spaces between the atoms. Davidson is following Haeckel when he enthusiastically describes the ether as

one subtile tension of entire  
Immaculate energy, omnipotent,  
Eternal, stretching taut in boundless space.  
(p. 404)

This conception does not indicate that either Haeckel or Davidson was a crank. For nearly three centuries most scientists believed in the existence of ether. The mechanist world-picture devised in the seventeenth century, obliged to explain how one body could act upon another at a distance, hypothesized that the two bodies were separated not by empty space but by ether. Both the theories of light proposed in the seventeenth century, Newton's corpuscular theory and Huygens' wave theory, assumed that light was transmitted by the ether. When Clerk Maxwell in 1862 devised the electromagnetic theory of light, he supposed that electric and magnetic forces were situated in the ether. Tyndall explained to laymen in 1865:

The notion of this medium must not be considered as a vague or fanciful conception on the part of scientific men. Of its reality most of them are as convinced as they are of the existence of the sun and moon. The luminiferous ether has definite mechanical properties. It is almost infinitely more attenuated than any known gas, but its properties are those of a solid rather than of a gas. It resembles jelly rather than air.<sup>6</sup>

As Tyndall's summary indicates, it was becoming necessary to ascribe dubiously compatible properties to the ether. It could not be material in the ordinary sense, for material bodies passed through it without resistance, yet it had to be

strong enough to resist the gravitational pull of stars and planets. The Michelson-Morley experiment of 1887 tried to ascertain how the earth moved in relation to the ether, and concluded that either the earth was stationary, or else the ether moved at the same velocity as the earth and was therefore undetectable. The ether was finally discredited in 1905 by Einstein's theory of relativity, which made it unnecessary to suppose that light was transmitted by a material medium.

Haeckel, writing in 1899, stoutly defends the ether, as he does several other exposed positions in science (for instance, he ridicules the notion of entropy). He maintains that the ether is engaged in a perpetual cyclical process in which it condenses to form larger bodies; these bodies subsequently disintegrate into atoms and the atoms back into the ether. The energy behind this cycle is not mechanical force but "the inherent primitive properties of substance--feeling and inclination" (Haeckel, p. 248). Haeckel's universe is as animate as Schopenhauer's:

The two fundamental forms of substance, ponderable matter and ether, are not dead, and only moved by extrinsic force, but they are endowed with sensation and will (though, naturally, of the lowest grade).

(Haeckel, p. 224)

This contrast recalls that drawn by Wordsworth between "a universe of death" and "that which moves with light and life informed."<sup>7</sup> Davidson, a passionate admirer of Wordsworth, actually identified Haeckel's cosmology with Wordsworth's, claiming that the famous lines from "Tintern Abbey" about

A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things (lines 100-2)

were a description of the universal ether.<sup>8</sup> Monism therefore seemed to Davidson to be supported by both poetic and scientific testimony, and to combine imaginative appeal with factual truth.

Haeckel is not content to ascribe sensation and will to matter, but asserts that the chemical elements have a complex and passionate emotional life:

Every shade of inclination, from complete indifference to the fiercest passion, is exemplified in the chemical relation of the various elements towards each other, just as we find in the psychology of man, and especially in

the life of the sexes. (Haeckel, pp. 228-9)

Following Haeckel, Davidson asserts that "the elements have individuality, character, genius; have passions--fierce passions, some of them; have memory, more or less positive, far-reaching, and reliable." He goes further than Haeckel in providing character sketches of the principal elements. Oxygen is "the chief male element, the sultan of Matter, with his seraglio of dazzling metals, earths, vapours"; hydrogen, with its "delicate and fluent being," is the most feminine element; while carbon represents "the proletariat of Matter." "These three highly individualized, genial, passionate and many-sided forms," Davidson concludes, "...constitute the body of man. Consider it! In this alone there is a new world of poetry, a new world of humour."<sup>9</sup> These remarks might lead one to expect a Jamesian narrative about emotional conflicts among the elements, a chemical counterpart to Erasmus Darwin's *Loves of the Plants*. However, Davidson is less interested in the elements than in man and the consequences of man's position at the top of the evolutionary ladder. A major consequence, for the Victorians, was that evolution meant an increase in man's capacity to feel pain. T.H. Huxley said in a lecture in the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford in 1893:

Where the cosmopoetic energy works through sentient beings, there arises, among its other manifestations, that which we call pain or suffering. This baleful product of evolution increases in quantity and in intensity, until it attains its highest level in man.<sup>10</sup>

This notion lies behind H.G. Wells's presentation, in *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), of a vivisector who tries to accelerate the evolutionary process by transforming animals into men by means of plastic surgery without anaesthetic. The Beast-Men he produces have a religion based on the worship of pain. Davidson's *Testament of a Vivisector* reveals a similar fascination with pain, enhanced not only by evolutionary theories but also by Schopenhauer, who describes life as oscillating between pain and ennui, and by Nietzsche. In *A Genealogy of Morals*, of which the first English translation appeared in 1899, Nietzsche argues that in order to live in organized society man had to acquire a conscience, i.e. a memory for prohibitions. Conscience was imposed on him by prolonged and painful discipline. Civilized man has not outgrown the primitive enjoyment of cruelty; he has merely become accustomed to exercising cruelty against himself, repressing his instincts by means of his conscience. "We modern men," says Nietzsche,

"we are the heirs of the vivisection of conscience and self-torment of thousands of years."<sup>11</sup> Davidson reproduces this analysis of conscience in *The Testament of an Empire-Builder*. However, he denied being a disciple of Nietzsche, though he admitted in 1902 that a year or two earlier he had known by heart the three translated volumes of Nietzsche (*A Genealogy of Morals*, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and *The Case of Wagner*).<sup>12</sup> In *The Triumph of Mammon* Nietzsche is accused of trying to revive the defunct worship of Dionysus and of offering mankind Christianity in a new guise. Mammon, however, wants to liberate mankind from all religions:

I want the world to be much more the world;  
Men to be men; and women, women--all  
Adventure, courage, instinct, passion, power.<sup>13</sup>

Mammon's denunciation of Nietzsche is intended to obscure Davidson's considerable intellectual debt to him. The values Mammon proclaims are those of Nietzsche's master morality. Mammon himself, a vital and powerful enemy of Christianity, is based on Nietzsche's prophet Zarathustra. So is the hero of *The Testament of a Man Forbid*, who, like Zarathustra, enters the marketplace, urges mankind to take the final evolutionary step by discarding religion, and is rejected with mockery and hatred. This emancipatory aspect of Davidson's beliefs has hitherto been disregarded. Davidson denied any possibility of further evolutionary ascent, such as Nietzsche's Superman represents. For Davidson, present-day man is the pinnacle of evolution, if he would but realize it. The main obstacle between man and his self-realization is religion, which man has invented in order to avoid facing and mastering the inevitable pain of consciousness:

Man is the Universe alive and conscious, and with the capacity of entire self-consciousness. This capacity, undeveloped and misunderstood, is the source of all man's misery, the hotbed of the idea of Sin and the idea of God. Unable to comprehend it, the Greek and the Norseman projected their trouble into Olympus and Hades, Asgard and Nifelheim, gods and goddesses, titans, giants, furies, valkyrs. Every people cast out and projected its self-consciousness as Other World in some form.

*(The Theatrocrat, pp. 71-2)*

Now, however, science has put the truth about the universe--that it is material and godless--within man's grasp. Religions are no longer credible, as the Man Forbid proclaims:

The rainbow reaches Asgard now no more;  
 Olympus stands untenanted; the dead  
 Have their serene abode in earth itself,  
 Our womb, our nurture, and our sepulchre.  
 (p. 330)

But it would be wrong to imply that Davidson considers religion solely an intellectual error. Alasdair MacIntyre has pointed out that there are two kinds of atheism: the speculative atheism of Hume and Russell, which seeks to expose religion as a series of intellectual mistakes; and the atheism of Feuerbach and the young Marx, which argues that in religion, "in a profoundly misleading form deep insights, hopes, and fears are being expressed," and wishes "to transform society so that men will no longer need to resort to religious forms of expression."<sup>14</sup> Davidson professes both kinds of atheism. His *Testaments* take it for granted that "Gods and God / Are man's mistake" (p. 408). But *The Testament of John Davidson*, in particular, assumes the prophetic mission of restoring to man that strength, beauty and nobility which religion has made him project on to the gods he has hitherto worshipped. Here Davidson's thinking coincides with Feuerbach's, though it is not clear whether Davidson had any direct knowledge of Feuerbach:

Religion is the disuniting of man from himself; he sets God before him as the antithesis of himself. God is not what man is--man is not what God is. God is the infinite, man the finite being; God is perfect, man imperfect; God eternal, man temporal; God almighty, man weak; God holy, man sinful...But in religion man contemplates his own latent nature.<sup>15</sup>

Feuerbach concludes that the turning-point of history will occur when man realizes that religion is simply a projection of his own nature. Man will then reclaim the elements of his being which have been estranged from him. We shall see presently that *The Testament of John Davidson* describes such a process of reclamation.

Davidson's enmity towards Christianity is thus both intellectual and moral. His poetry is also full of moral outrage at the degradation of human life in modern industrial society. The Man Forbid reports seeing

in fields and cities hordes  
 Of haggard people soaked in filth and slime  
 Wherewith they fed the jaded earth the while

Their souls of ordure stank; automata  
 That served machines whose tyrannous revolt  
 Enthralled their lords. (p. 329)

Such shorter poems as "A Northern Suburn," "Waiting," and of course "Thirty Bob a Week" describe urban and suburban poverty with equal compassion and greater realism. Davidson's social concern and emancipatory intentions remind us that it was during his lifetime that British Socialism became a political force, with the foundation of the Democratic Federation (later the Social Democratic Federation) in 1881, the Fabian Society in 1884, and the Independent Labour Party in 1893. *The Testament of John Davidson* could profitably be compared with the Utopian visions of Morris's *News from Nowhere* and Edward Carpenter's *Towards Democracy*. However, Davidson was not a Socialist. The Socialists who figure in *The Triumph of Mammon* are portrayed as egalitarian levellers impelled by *ressentiment* and personal ambition. Mammon dismisses their creed as "the fishy glow / Upon the putrid carcass of religion" (p. 116), and as a malicious conspiracy of the weak against the strong.

The ideal community appeals less to Davidson's imagination than does the embattled individual. Throughout his work there recurs the figure of the strong, energetic, natural man who refuses to accept the restrictions of civilized society. The hero of *Smith: A Tragic Farce* (1888), a play more farcical and less tragic than Davidson intended, is "barbarous as a Lapp" but an arresting personality, "the kind of man that healthy girls / Yield to at once."<sup>16</sup> Similar figures include Mammon, Urban in *Self's the Man* (1899), and the subjects of *The Testament of a Vivisector* and *The Testament of an Empire-BUILDER*, though the latter two are portrayed with more critical detachment. Davidson's natural preference for such figures was strengthened by his discovery in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* of the distinction between master morality, the code of strength, pride, generosity, and greed, and slave morality, the code of the weak who invent doctrines of humility, sinfulness and egalitarianism in order to exalt their own weakness. *The Testament of a Prime Minister* includes a Nietzschean vision of the Last Judgment in which kings and conquerors are placed on God's right hand while all practitioners of life-denying virtues such as humility, chastity and mercy are despatched to hell.

Davidson's cult of natural vitality, like Lawrence's, has its more and less acceptable aspects. One cannot but sympathize when he acclaim the natural energies which industrial civilization suppresses or degrades. But one is soon repelled

by figures like Urban, Mammon, or the financier in "The Aristocrat" (1898) for whom Nature merely sanctions a ruthless struggle for supremacy:

Though Corner, Trust and Company  
 Are subtler than the old-time tools,  
 The Sword, the Rack, the Gallowstree,  
 I traverse none of Nature's rules;  
 I lay my yoke on feeble folk,  
 And march across the necks of fools.  
 (p. 135)

Admittedly, the frank gusto of the Aristocrat is exhilarating in the same way as the opening of Thom Gunn's "Lines for a Book":

I think of all the toughs through history  
 And thank heaven they lived, continually.  
 I praise the overdogs from Alexander  
 To those who would not play with Stephen Spender.<sup>17</sup>

But in other poems an imaginative vision is replaced by doctrinaire rant. After 1900 the assertive side of Davidson's character led him into vociferous support for Imperialism. He drew his ideas from the book *Reflections on the Origins and Destiny of Imperial Britain* written by his friend John Adam Cramb, Professor of Modern History at Queen's College, London. But Davidson went further than Cramb and declared that Nietzsche's Superman was already present in such Imperialists as Cecil Rhodes, and potentially present in the entire English nation. "The Englishman is the Overman: and the history of England is the history of his evolution," he wrote in the "Dedication" to *The Testament of John Davidson* (p. 541). This aberration produced poems in which Davidson outdoes the tawdriest efforts of Kipling or Newbolt: "A New Song of Empire" (1901), the "Ode on the Coronation of Edward VII, of Britain and of Greater Britain, King" (1902), and "Song for the Twenty-fourth of May" (1909), which Davidson wished to be set to music by Elgar and sung as an Imperial anthem.

Having sketched Davidson's principal ideas, I shall now endeavour to show how these ideas function in the three dramatic monologues, "Thirty Bob a Week," *The Testament of a Vivisector* and *The Testament of an Empire-Builder*, and in the mythic narrative *The Testament of John Davidson*.

Even sympathetic readers of "Thirty Bob a Week" have found it difficult to reconcile the earlier stanzas, in which the underpaid clerk describes his hardships, with the later stan-

zas in which he expounds his "most engrugious notion of the world" (p. 64), an amalgam of Schopenhauerian and Darwinian thought. Turnbull calls this transition a "not wholly successful attempt to incorporate metaphysical argument into a Kiplingesque framework" (p. xxv). By realistic standards, it is certainly implausible that the clerk should have devised such a philosophy. But a brief examination of that philosophy will, I think, dispel the apparent incongruity by revealing the twofold method which Davidson uses to characterize the clerk.

What the clerk asserts is that he has existed continuously as an individual on various evolutionary levels. Originally "a little sleeping seed," he has been reborn countless times, each time by an act of deliberate choice:

I woke because I thought the time had come;  
Beyond my will there was no other cause;  
And everywhere I found myself at home,  
Because I chose to be the thing I was;  
And in whatever shape of mollusc or of ape  
I always went according to the laws.

I was the love that chose my mother out;  
I joined two lives and from the union burst;  
My weakness and my strength without a doubt  
Are mine alone for ever from the first:  
It's just the very same with a difference in the name  
As "Thy will be done." You say it if you durst!  
(p. 65)

These statements presuppose Schopenhauer's distinction between the intelligible and the empirical character. Through introspection one knows oneself as will, and hence as part of that single Will which is the true being of the world. Experience acquaints one with the empirical character which biographical contingencies have helped to form. This distinction underlies Schopenhauer's discussion of death and its relation to the indestructibility of our essential being. To us, as inhabitants of the empirical world, it seems that individuals perish while only the species survives. But Schopenhauer argues that since each individual is essentially a portion of the Will, only his empirical self perishes, while his intelligible self shares in the indestructibility of the Will. In the intelligible world, there is thus no distinction between the individual and the species:

As a self-asserting will to live man has the root of his existence in the species. Accordingly death is the loss of one individuality and the assumption of another, consequently a change of individuality under the exclusive guidance of one's own will. (Schopenhauer, III, 299)

In Davidson's poem, the speaker has survived as will while assuming diverse empirical identities. Accordingly, he is characterized on both the intelligible and the empirical plane. The voice that utters the earlier stanzas is that of his present identity--a London clerk speaking the demotic language also found in poems by Kipling and Henley. But as he expounds his philosophy, the demotic register is largely superseded by dignified and simple diction, and we hear the voice of the Will speaking through its temporary embodiment. This method of dual characterization endows the speaker of "Thirty Bob a Week" with increased dignity and ensures that detachment from the everyday personality which tragic utterance requires.

In his *Testaments* Davidson uses similar methods to characterize the Vivisector and the Empire-Builder. These poems resemble Browning's dramatic monologues, but differ in that their speakers are not, like Fra Lippo Lippi or Bishop Blougram, intriguingly complex personalities, moulded by their social circumstances, and viewed in relation to other people and to God. The Vivisector and the Empire-Builder have few individualizing traits; their empirical personalities are sketchily suggested by the brief autobiographical narratives they provide. More important is the powerful will which forms the core of their being and links them to the blind striving of Matter. Their empirical personalities, engaged in pursuing knowledge or power, are vehicles for their essential wills. These two layers of character correspond to the two narratives into which each poem is divided. The autobiographical narratives which take up most of *The Testament of a Vivisector* and form the conclusion of *The Testament of the Empire-Builder* recount the fortunes of the empirical personality in which the will has manifested itself. The fantasies in which the Vivisector briefly indulges and the visions which compose most of the Empire-Builder's narrative reveal the underlying will and its relation to the universe. (It was appropriate for Max Beerbohm to entitle his parody of Davidson "I and Matter."<sup>18</sup>) In both poems there is a tension between these fantasies and the biographical situations of the speakers. We gradually realize that their single-minded, self-centred pursuit of their respective goals has entrapped each in a vicious circle. The speculations or adventures of the essential will can therefore be understood as projections of, or compensations for,

the frustrations that the will encounters when objectified as an empirical individual.

The situation in which the Vivisector is trapped can be summarily described. Like Wells's Moreau and Conrad's Kurtz, he is one of a few "strong minds, delivered and elect" (p. 326) who have isolated themselves from humanity in order to follow pursuits which society abhors. His ostensible motive is scientific curiosity. But the same intellectual passion which made him practice vivisection also enables him to acknowledge that his experiments are a sublimation of his will to power and that their basic impulse is sexual. When he vivisected a horse,

The whip's-man felt no keener ecstasy  
When a fair harlot at the cart's-tail shrieked.  
(p. 327)

He realizes further that his sadism is the instrument used by Matter to spur on his research so that through him the material universe can become conscious of itself.

Thus far the Vivisector's situation might seem equally satisfactory to himself and to Matter. But near the end of the poem he admits that besides inflicting pain he also suffers it: his wife and daughters have left him, and his sleepless nights are tormented by memories. His only escape from pain is the pleasure of inflicting pain by vivisection. But it is his commitment to vivisection that has isolated him from all other humans. He is therefore caught in a vicious circle: to avoid the pain of isolation, he inflicts pain and thus confirms his isolation.

Since isolation leads to loss of meaning, it might be possible for the Vivisector to break out of the circle by identifying himself with the will of the universe and thus restoring meaning to his life. But this does not work, for he knows that the universe is itself meaningless: "the stolid Will, Matter supreme," is simply "the infinite vanity / Of the Universe," "In me accomplishing its useless aim" (pp. 329, 325, 327). His only recourse is to aggrandize himself by projecting his sufferings onto the universe and imagining that it too suffers pain:

Think you the sun is happy in his flames,  
Or that the cooling earth no anguish feels,  
Nor quails from her contractions? Rather say,  
The systems, constellations, galaxies  
That strew the ethereal waste are whirling there  
In agony unutterable. (p. 328)

Yet even this speculation enlarges and strengthens the Vivisector's prison, for if "Matter in itself is pain" (p. 328), and he himself is part of matter, even suicide can provide no release from pain.

In exploring the Vivisector's character, the poem examines the complex interdependence between the empirical and the essential layers of his character. When objectified as an individual, the will becomes entangled in painful conflicts. But it cannot escape from these conflicts into harmonious identification with the will of the universe. Trying to do so, it finds the same conflicts replicated on a cosmic scale.

Another kind of entrapment is presented in *The Testament of an Empire-Builder*, though it does not become apparent till near the end of the poem. For most of the poem the Empire-Builder narrates three dream-visions. The first concerns an assembly of beasts discussing their prospective extinction by man, a being higher in the evolutionary chain and therefore destined, by the law of the survival of the fittest, to outlive them. The scene then shifts to the English countryside and elicits a diatribe on the degrading effects of modern civilization. Wishing himself out of it all, the speaker is carried aloft by a cloud which leaves him standing on the verge of heaven. The Keatsian sensuousness with which it is described increases the shock when it proves to be a Nietzschean rather than a Christian heaven. It is reserved for the strong-willed and the sensual. Its denizens include all history's unscrupulous conquerors, statesmen and millionaires, and all those victims who, although defeated, remained (like the clerk in "Thirty Bob a Week") defiant to the last. Having feasted his eyes on heaven, the visionary wonders where hell is. In the midst of heaven he notices a divine figure playing on a jewelled keyboard. This gives him a clue: music results from discipline, and discipline from pain, so the music must emanate from hell. Straining his eyes, he gradually perceives that heaven is surrounded by a prodigious amphitheatre composed of the bodies (not the souls) of the damned. Their shrieks provide the celestial harmony and add the last spice of pleasure to the bliss of the saved. The membership of hell consists of all those who submitted to oppression on earth:

Materials of Hell? The altruists;  
 Agnostics; dreamers; idiots; cripples; dwarfs;  
 All kinds of cowards who eluded fact;  
 Dwellers in legend, burrowers in myth;  
 The merciful, the meek and mild, the poor  
 In spirit; Christians who in very deed  
 Were Christians; pessimistic celibates;

The feeble minds; the souls called beautiful;  
The slaves, the labourers, the mendicants;  
Survivors of defeat; the little clans  
That posed and fussed, in ignominy left  
By apathetic powers; the greater part  
Of all the swarthy all the tawny tribes;  
Degenerates; the desultory folk  
In pleasure, art, vocation, commerce, craft;  
And all deniers of the will to live,  
And all who shunned the strife for wealth and power.  
(pp. 347-8)

In his peroration, the Empire-Builder makes it clear that his vision reveals the true nature of the present-day world. Mankind is divided into oppressors and oppressed; and the Empire-Builder, a character evidently modelled on Cecil Rhodes, is determined to be an oppressor. The frankness of his explanations shows that the poem is not simply a transposition into verse of the Imperialist doctrines of John Adam Cramb. Cramb's *Origins and Destiny of Imperial Britain*, written during the early stages of the Boer War, justifies the war, in vaguely Hegelian and evolutionary terms, as a stage in Britain's historic mission to spread democracy, freedom and justice. He indignantly repudiates the suggestion that one object of the war might be the acquisition of gold and diamonds, declaring: "the thing simply is not British."<sup>19</sup> Being also a conspiracy theorist, he imputes all such criticisms to the influence of the Jesuits. This is a characteristic specimen of his rhetoric:

And that army of ours which day by day advances...ir-  
resistibly across the veldt of Africa, that army upon  
which the eyes of the world are fastened, in rancour or  
in prayer, what does that army portend? That army brings  
with it...the assurance of England's unbroken might, of  
her devotion to that ideal which has exercised a conscious  
sway over the minds of three generations of her sons, and  
quicken in the blood of the unreckoned generations of  
the past--...to liberate God within men's hearts, so  
that man's life shall be free, of itself and in itself,  
to set towards the lodestar of its being, harmony with  
the Divine.  
(Cramb, p. 24)

This is the spirit of such embarrassing pieces as Davidson's "Song for the Twenty-Fourth of May," but not of *The Testament of an Empire-Builder*. There is an extreme contrast between Cramb's gullible inanities and the spirited brutality of the

Empire-Builder's final exhortation:

The English Hell  
 For ever crowds upon the English Heaven.  
 Secure your birthright; set the world at naught;  
 Confront your fate; regard the naked deed;  
 Enlarge your Hell; preserve it in repair;  
 Only a splendid Hell keeps Heaven fair. (p. 349)

The Empire-Builder does not share Cramb's lofty ideals of freedom and justice. He explains that colonial expansion is a means of enlarging hell--of intensifying and extending oppression in order to secure the privileges of the oppressors. But this process is futile, because it can never stop. Since hell perpetually "crowds upon the English Heaven," the Imperialists can never relax with their spoils, but must continually keep strengthening their defenses against the oppressed. Only in the vision can hell be kept at a safe distance from heaven. In reality, Imperialism appears as a spiral no less vicious than the circle in which the Vivisector was trapped.

The spiral of perpetually increased oppression is replicated in the Empire-Builder's personal life. He resembles those people of whom Davidson wrote in "The World's Failure" (1904):

Here each promoter's face,  
 Employer's, owner's, broker's, merchant's, mean  
 As any eunuch's and as evil, tells  
 How souls unsexed by business come to love  
 Elaborate torture and the sullen joy  
 Of coining men and women into wealth.  
 (p. 154)

From the Empire-Builder's brief autobiographical retrospection, it emerges that he too has been "unsexed by business":

The authentic mandate of imperial doom  
 Silenced the drowsy lullaby of love,  
 (Though now my turbid blood and nerves disused  
 Complain of mystery unrevealed, and haunt  
 Imagination day and night with looks--  
 With beckoning looks, soft arms and fragrant breath;  
 For even in Heaven each ransomed soul frequents  
 A private, an inevitable Hell!) (p. 348)

His concentration on finance and politics has left him no opportunity for sexual fulfillment, and now he is haunted by intimations of the happiness he has missed. He is obliged to

impose painful restrictions on himself so that he may more effectively oppress others. His last words indicate that the heaven of his vision offers no release from this vicious spiral. If fixing the will on one object means that others, equally important, must be neglected, then the strong-willed are bound to suffer from having developed part of their personalities at the expense of other aspects. The Empire-Builder's heaven is therefore partly a compensation for and partly a projection of the deficiencies inseparable from his ideal of the will.

The next Testament, that of the Prime Minister, is a more openly ambivalent work. It contains a speech, supposedly delivered by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons, expounding materialism and Imperialism in the same terms as the Empire-Builder, and a meditation on the death of God which concludes that the English should revive or invent a religion of their own. Since proponents of old and new religions (the Neo-pagans, the Inceptors of the Teutonic Religion, the Will-to-Power Men of the Nietzsche Guild) are ridiculed in the *Mammon* plays, it is not likely that such thoughts are presented without qualification here. Indeed, the Prime Minister's beliefs are put in question by the squalor and misery he sees all round him. The poem stresses the ideal of the natural man who is at present crushed by industrial civilization. In the Prime Minister's vision of the Last Judgment, those condemned to hell are not the oppressed (as in *The Testament of an Empire-Builder*) but the people who, for religious or commercial motives, have suppressed man's natural strength and chastity.

The Utopian aspect of Davidson's thought, emerging here, is fully developed in *The Testament of John Davidson*, which is also his most sustained attempt to incorporate science into imaginative literature. It begins at the point where the earlier *Testament of a Man Forbid* left off, with the exile of the prophet from a disbelieving and hostile world. The speaker differs from those in the earlier Testaments, however, in having no empirical nature. As "the first of men / To be and comprehend the Universe" (p. 380), he is freed from the confinements of empirical world and can retire to the Milky Way and feel his body being transmuted into light and sound, the most elemental forms assumed by Matter. However, he returns to earth in order to die, but while poised for suicide on a mountain-top he senses the approach of a supernatural being. It proves to be the goddess Diana in a chariot drawn by a winged dragon. The speaker pursues her to a sensuously described glen, kills her dragon, and announces that he is the only man able to look upon Diana and live. To support this claim he describes how he encountered and defeated the gods

Aidoneus (i.e. Pluto), Thor and Apollo. His main weapon was resolute disbelief in the gods' powers. Hence he was able to see through Aidoneus' helmet of invisibility, kill him, and enter hell, which proved to be only a long-abandoned lumber-room containing

spoke-sprung wheels with gizzened hubs,  
Fruit in a ropy puddle petrified,  
Dead vultures, splintered stones, and tattered sieves,  
Lumber of specimens unlisted left  
To moulder in a cellar underground!      (p. 399)

Apollo was a more formidable opponent. He challenged the speaker to a singing contest, the loser to be flayed like Marsyas. Apollo sang of the gods; the speaker's song, however, recounted the origins and history of the material universe, beginning with the omnipresent ether. The condensation of ether into atoms, the nebular origin of the solar system, the formation of the chemical elements, the geological history of the earth, and the evolutionary ascent of man are described in some 160 lines of blank verse in which Davidson tries to give modern science poetic expression, as Lucretius had done for classical atomism and Milton for Renaissance astronomy. In conclusion, the speaker told how man's imagination produced the gods, and meanwhile Apollo shrank into a fragment of shrivelled matter which the speaker annihilated.

This narrative about the triumph of science over religion illustrates what Alasdair MacIntyre calls speculative atheism. It is complicated by the anomalous survival of Diana. To explain how she still exists, the poem shifts from Hume's type of atheism to Feuerbach's. At first the speaker thinks that Diana's divinity is illusory and that by deflowering her he will reduce her to human status. But then he discovers that the nectar and ambrosia which she has shared with him have supplemented his human nature with divine strength: that is, he has regained the fully human nature which, as Feuerbach said, man had previously denied himself and attributed to the gods. By acquiring divine power he has made himself fully human. And he realizes that Diana's situation is the reverse of his: she has survived because her divinity is still incomplete, and she needs human qualities to become fully divine. Her nature is incomplete, firstly, because she is still a virgin:

the sin of heaven  
That sapped Olympian power, unguessed till now,  
Was lodged in you, the cult of maidenhood.

Virginity is never, will never be,  
Divine. (p. 419)

Secondly, her virginity represents a deficiency which, being common to all the gods, "sapped Olympian power": that of remaining immaterial beings whose nature needs to be completed by acquiring material embodiment. The speaker's mission is to reclaim divine power on behalf of humanity; Diana's is to assume material existence on behalf of the gods. But the accomplishment of these missions will annul the distinction between gods and men: for humanity to become divine is the same thing as for divinity to become human--in either event, the qualities which man projected onto his gods will return to man and be realized in material form. Further, by having its unity restored, human nature will regain harmony with a monistic universe in which there is no distinction between matter and spirit. The reabsorption of the divine into the human, advocated by Feuerbach, corresponds to Haeckel's attribution of spiritual faculties to matter. Thus Davidson has at last combined his monism and his Utopianism to form a coherent myth.

The speaker's mission proves unexpectedly arduous, however, for, as Huxley, Nietzsche and others had warned, every evolutionary advance has to be paid for by increased pain. The speaker makes love to Diana, and the act, though enjoyable and successful, is fatal; both die and descend to the hell of the gods, where the gods are enduring excruciating agonies. Since he represents the fullest combination of human and divine powers, the speaker has to suffer the utmost imaginable pain, but only momentarily, for by doing so he conquers, not pain itself, but the terror of pain which has made man invent religions. Thus he abolishes both the gods and the hell of the gods, and restores mankind to a natural and harmonious relationship to the world:

And thus I made the world a fit abode  
For greatness and the men who yet may be;  
And can myself with joy become again  
The mountains and the ocean, the winds, the flowers,  
And life and death, and fear and love and hope,  
And tender sorrow and heavy grief, and all  
Humanity, and all that thinks and is. (p. 425)

In his greatest poem, then, Davidson has incorporated classical myth into an ambitious new myth appropriate to the scientific age. His poetic treatment of science is a conscious attempt to practice what Wordsworth advocated in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*:

If the labours of Men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the Poet will sleep then no more than at present; he will be ready to follow the steps of the Man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself....If the time should ever come when what is now called science, thus familiarized to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man.

In the "Introduction" to *The Theatocrat* Davidson quotes this passage and acknowledges Wordsworth's influence in a section entitled "Wordsworth's Immorality and Mine." He chiefly admires Wordsworth's independence of inherited theological and moral systems, and his determination to "think and imagine the world and the universe for himself" (*The Theatocrat*, p. 10). Similarly, Davidson wishes to confront directly the universe revealed by modern science, and to render it imaginatively accessible. "The two potentates of English literature in the nineteenth century, Carlyle and Wordsworth, had the same ambition--to furnish imagination with a new abiding-place," he writes (*ibid.*, pp. 13-14), and he shares this ambition: "I have no system; I have no dogma; it is a new poetry I bring" (*ibid.*, p. 27). At its most powerful, Davidson's poetry exploits Christian and classical myths for their imaginative resources while stressing their fictional character. Sometimes Christian myths are more indirectly and more potently suggested: even though Davidson makes Mammon condemn Nietzsche for hawking a revamped version of Christianity, his hero in *The Testament of John Davidson* who suffers to redeem mankind is impressive because of the implicit resemblance between himself and Christ.

The case for Davidson's poetic achievement must rest not only on the content but also on the language of the *Testaments*. Two features require particular comment: his use of blank verse and his curious preference for images drawn from decorative crafts.

Davidson adopted blank verse for poems (he has already used it in his plays) at the same time as he developed his monistic doctrine. Before 1901 he used blank verse only for a few of his *Fleet Street Eclogues*; from 1901 to his death he used it for all his more ambitious poems--the *Testaments*, "A Ballad in

Blank Verse," "The Crystal Palace," "The Thames Embankment," and others. In preferring the direct impact of blank verse to what he considered the confusing ornamentation of rhyme, Davidson was following Schopenhauer's chapter "On the Aesthetics of Poetry":

Metre, or measure, as mere rhythm, has its existence only in time, which is a pure perception *a priori*, thus, to use Kant's language, belongs merely to *pure sensibility*; rhyme, on the other hand, is an affair of sensation, in the organ of hearing, thus of *empirical sensibility*.  
(Schopenhauer, III, 205)

Davidson concluded that blank verse lacking the decorations which rhymed verse borrows from the empirical world, must be the most direct verbal expression of Matter. He thought it the linguistic equivalent of sculpture: "Blank verse is nude poetry, barbarous and beautiful, or athletic and refined, but always naked and unshamed" (p. 536). Blank verse was therefore the medium best fitted to express the essential wills of the speakers in the *Testaments*, and their relations to the will informing Matter.

A passage from *The Testament of a Man Forbid* will illustrate the most striking features of Davidson's blank verse:

I haunt the hills that overlook the sea.  
Here in the Winter like a meshwork shroud  
The sifted snow reveals the perished land,  
And powders wisps of knotgrass dank and dead  
That trail like faded locks on mouldering skulls  
Unearthed from shallow burial. With the Spring  
The west-wind thunders through the budding hedge  
That stems the furrowed steep--a sound of drums,  
Of gongs and muted cymbals; yellow breasts  
And brown wings whirl in gusts, fly chaffering, drop,  
And surge in gusts again; in wooded coombs  
The hyacinth with purple diapers  
The russet beechmast, and the cowslips hoard  
Their virgin gold in lucent chalices;  
The sombre furze, all suddenly attired  
In rich brocade, the enterprise in chief  
And pageant of the season, overrides  
The rolling land and girds the bosomed plain  
That strips her green robe to a saffron shore  
And steps into the surf where threads and scales  
And arabesques of blue and emerald wave  
Begin to damascene the iron sea;

While faint from upland fold and covert peal  
 The sheep-bell and the cuckoo's mellow chime.  
 Then when the sovereign light from which we came,  
 Of earth enamoured, bends most questioning looks,  
 I watch the land grow beautiful, a bride  
 Transfigured with desire of her great lord.  
 (pp. 333-4)

The verse of this passage, like the blank verse of Milton and Wordsworth, derives much of its strength from the tension between metre and syntax. The long periodic sentences pull against the regular pattern imposed by the iambic pentameter. Line-divisions force apart such closely associated parts of speech as verb and object ("diapers / The russet beechmast," "overrides / The rolling land"), two coordinated nouns ("enterprise in chief / And pageant," "scales / And arabesque"), verb and subject ("peal / The sheep-bell"), or noun and following adjective ("a bride / Transfigured"). The numerous active and semantically powerful verbs ("thunders," "whirl," "overrides," etc.) increase the energy of the verse.

A prominent and puzzling feature of this passage is the frequent imagery drawn from decorative crafts: "diapers," "attired / In rich brocade," "robe," "threads and scales / And arabesques," "damascene." Some of these words are quite rec-ondite: "diaper" means to decorate with a diamond-shaped pattern; "damascene" means to ornament steel by incising designs on its surface and filling them with gold and silver. These and other artificial images occur in Davidson's verse as early as *Smith*, where waves on the sea are "like shavings pinned / Upon a watered silk" (*Plays*, p. 226), and become more frequent in his later descriptions of nature. "Rain in the New Forest" (1909) describes how

a wash of rain  
 Like glistening, silvery lacquer flowed  
 On the purple woods where the birch-buds glowed  
 On the swarthy ground like a crimson stain;  
 (p. 193)

and *The Testament of John Davidson* describes the evening sky in these words:

At sunset on the mountain of my choice  
 I stood above the catafalque of day,  
 And watched the quilted vapour harness heaven  
 In chrysolite and ruby of countless hues.  
 (p. 382)

Since Davidson prefers blank verse precisely because it lacks decoration, it seems incongruous that he should favour images drawn from the decorative crafts. An explanation can be inferred from "The Thames Embankment" (1908), which begins by describing the Thames at low tide, the smoky atmosphere, and the adjacent cranes, chimney-stacks and trains. Then the sun emerges and transfigures the scene:

Woven of rainbows a dewdrop can dissolve  
And packed with power a simple lens can wield,  
The perfect, only source of beauty, light  
Reforms uncouthest shapelessness and turns  
Decoloured refuse into ornament;  
The leafless trees that lined the vacant street  
Had all their stems picked out in golden scales,  
Their branches carved in ebony; and shed  
Around them by the sanction of the morn  
In lieu of leaves each wore an aureole.

(p. 180)

Meanwhile, song-birds transform familiar sights and sounds into auditory beauty: the larks "Render the coloured sunlight into song" (p. 180) and nightingales "Transmute the stormy equinox" into melody (p. 181). The artificial imagery explicitly represents the transmutation of the mundane world by the elemental forces of light and sound. In other poems the process of transmutation is not described, but Davidson's favorite vocabulary ("diaper," "damascene," "brocade," etc.) remains as a sign that the transmutation has taken place.

Andrew Turnbull's remarks about "Davidson's intense apprehension of the physical world, his almost visceral response to nature" (p. xxvii) therefore need qualification. Davidson becomes increasingly interested in the elemental forces underlying nature, just as his dramatic monologues are more concerned with the essential will than with the empirical personality. His nature-descriptions therefore combine sensuous immediacy with a more distanced, scientific, almost abstract apprehension of natural forces at work transforming the appearance of the world. This transformed natural world is the setting for Davidson's Utopian aspirations: he wishes man to become fit to inhabit such a world.

Thus both the verse-form and the imagery of the *Testaments* can be shown to embody Davidson's intentions. He wished to present in imaginative form the material universe revealed by science and the new, Utopian possibilities for human development which science had released by dethroning religion. Accordingly he sought means of presenting those elemental forces

which were the most immediate embodiments of Matter. Light and sound were elemental forces in the natural world; blank verse was such a force in literature. His artificial imagery prevents the reader from lingering on the sensuous surface of the world and draws attention to the transfiguration of the natural world by these elemental forces. Such a transfigured world is then offered as a more suitable habitation for human beings than the industrial civilization of the late nineteenth century. The intrinsic interest of Davidson's vision of life, his incorporation of classical myth and modern science into his poems, and the power and variety of his poetry, all make the rediscovery of his later works overdue.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See J. Benjamin Townsend, *John Davidson: Poet of Armageddon* (New Haven, 1961); Andrew Turnbull, "Introduction," *The Poems of John Davidson* (Edinburgh, 1973), p. xxx. Henceforth Davidson's poems are quoted from this edition and identified by page number only. Turnbull also reprints Davidson's essay "On Poetry" and the "Dedication" to *The Testament of John Davidson*.

<sup>2</sup>Letter to William Archer, 15 June 1901, quoted in Townsend, p. 342.

<sup>3</sup>Letter to Grant Richards, 20 July 1908, quoted in Townsend, p. 414.

<sup>4</sup>Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp (London, 1883-6), I, 164.

<sup>5</sup>Ernst Haeckel, *The Riddle of the Universe at the Close of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Joseph McCabe (London, 1900), p. 222.

<sup>6</sup>John Tyndall, "The Constitution of the Universe," *Fortnightly Review*, III, xiv (1 December 1865), 129-30.

<sup>7</sup>*The Prelude* (1850), XIV, 160-1.

<sup>8</sup>"Epilogue," *The Triumph of Mammon* (London, 1907), p. 156.

<sup>9</sup>"Introduction," *The Theatrocraat* (London, 1905), pp. 37-8.

<sup>10</sup>T.H. Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics* (London, 1893), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *A Genealogy of Morals*, trans. William A. Haussman and John Gray (London, 1899), p. 66.

<sup>12</sup>"A Poetic Disciple of Nietzsche," *Daily Chronicle*, 23 May 1903, quoted in David S. Thatcher, *Nietzsche in England 1890-1914* (Toronto, 1970), p. 84. See also John A. Lester, Jr., "Friedrich Nietzsche and John Davidson: A Study in Influence," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 18 (1957), 411-29.

<sup>13</sup>*The Triumph of Mammon* (London, 1907), p. 103.

<sup>14</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (London, 1971), p. 13.

<sup>15</sup>Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (London, 1854), p. 32.

<sup>16</sup>*Smith: A Tragic Farce*, in *Plays* (London, 1894), pp. 221, 244.

<sup>17</sup>Thom Gunn, *The Sense of Movement* (London, 1957), p. 30.

<sup>18</sup>Max Beerbohm, "I and Matter. By J\*HN D\*V\*DS\*N," *Saturday Review*, CII (8 December 1906), 703-4.

<sup>19</sup>J.A. Cramb, *Reflections on the Origins and Destiny of Imperial Britain* (London, 1900), p. 35.