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Malaise in John Davidson

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MALAISE IN JOHN DAVIDSON

by

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FOREWORD

Despite a rebirth in the late eighteen-eighties of an energetic and, at times, an over-activated artistic consciousness, a pall of melancholy brooded over the lives and works of the literary men of the nineties, an atmosphere of dark foreboding laced with intermittent flashes of genius and, on occasion, erratic excesses of body and spirit. The age is distinguished by tragedies, personal and artistic. Many of those who cut themselves off from the society in which they lived and who, at the same time, persistently remained aloof from the mystical and religious influences of the period deliberately took their own lives as did Hubert Crakenthorpe, Francis Adams, Lawrence Hope, St. John Hankin and John Davidson.1

While representative of certain aspects and trends of the eighteen-nineties in his writing and personality, John Davidson, unlike several of his contemporaries, refusing to compromise or temporize, remained inflexibly egoistic to the end. There he became a tragic figure, representing most clearly and completely the personal and artistic struggle of the period. His early ballads and poems reflect the optimistic exuberance prevailing during the first year of the decade, his later writings betray the bloom of life fading into the darkness of cynicism and disillusionment of the late nineties. As the age of Wilde and Beardsley burned itself out in the cold ashes of talent and ambition, wasted and spent, frustration, despair and death without issue, so the writings of Davidson, his defiant testaments and essays, clearly reveal the mind and heart of a man driving himself towards the final tragedy of death without hope.

Possessed of an intellectual courage in which he had few equals in his time, Davidson refused to pose or to cloak his true convictions. "In his personality as well as in his tragic end he represented the struggle and defeat of his day in the course of a bigger sense of life and a greater power over personality and destiny."2


2 Jackson, p. 177.
In the simplicity and clarity of Davidson's work are mirrored the strength and weakness of the major writers of the nineties. To study and to trace the effects of the intellectual crises of the day upon a clear and open mind dedicated to the pursuit of truth without compromise or expediency should not be an un-rewarding task. In the person and works of Davidson is represented the perennial conflict in man between the dreams of mankind's potentialities and its actual accomplishment. The conflict unresolved in himself and in the world of men he saw around him, he sickened in soul and mind.

In this discussion, by pointing out the major conflicts and issues in the works of Davidson, I shall trace out the origin and development of the malaise and "soul-sickness," that contributed to his final renunciation and revolt against society.

J.T.W.
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The rise and fall, the personal and artistic tragedy of John Davidson reveal the devastation wrought by the impact and interaction of dynamic issues, new ideas, ecstatic dreams and the training of early youth upon a sensitive personality, a proud mind and a restless heart. When, as a young writer of talent and promise, John Davidson thrust himself upon the London literary scene of the early Eighteen-nineties, he appeared well on his way to achieving fame and fortune as a poet and as a ballad writer of note. Yet, within a period of less than ten years he had fallen from grace, turned bitterly against the world and, apparently driven by perverse desire for divine power and absolute knowledge through self-torture, arrived eventually at a kind of Satanic philosophy of self deification. After having been reared in a Christian household and imbued with the awe and fear of an omnipresent Divinity, Davidson repudiated, in his late thirties, the living faith of his fathers and damned the God of his youth to become, as J. M. \(^1\) Kennedy has pointed out, the "only honest atheist of his time." Yet, after having wrenching himself by his own naked will out of the familiar mode of convention, after having torn himsel out of the web of family ties, for all his

\(^1\) J. M. Kennedy, English Literature, p. 312.
vehement attacks upon Christianity, he remained to the end a Calvinist without dogma, constantly beset by a sense of sin, haunted by the shadows of Predestination, Election, Justification, calling conscience a "galling yoke," "burning fetters" from which no man can escape.

An examination of the main phases of Davidson's mental and emotional growth and deterioration, of his development of a theory of human omnipotence and absolute materialism discloses that he lived a life filled with intense and profound mental and emotional turmoil, excruciating spiritual crises, conflicting loyalties, abrupt and painful ruptures that would never heal. Apart from the aspects of malaise that one would expect to find in Davidson's later work or a natural and logical offscouring of the philosophy of life to which he ultimately adhered, one may find scattered throughout all his works, even in the early writings, evidences that he was by nature and by training predisposed to moods of depression, to criticisms of modern life, to fits of bitter lonely self-laceration. He was early described as a "dour Scotsman," given to long spells of melancholy, and to embittered and unrestrained expression of self-pity.

John Davidson was born in 1857, in the village of Barrhead, Renfrewshire in Scotland, son of Alexander Davidson, minister of the Evangelical Union. Of his early life and youth little is known except what one finds scattered throughout his work in fragments and passages which may be inter-

1 Cruse, Amy, After the Victorians (London, 1938), pp. 77-78.
interpreted as autobiographical. Apparently he was born of a large and poor family and revolted as a youth against the poverty, frugality and austerity of his childhood. One may read in "St. Valentine's Eve" from the first volume of the Fleet Street Elocues, published in the author's thirty-sixth year:

I cursed the father who begot me poor,
The patient womb that bore
Me, last of ten, ill-fed, ill clad, ill-housed,
I cursed the barren common where I browsed
And sickened on the arid mental fare
The state has sown broad-cast, I cursed the strain
Whence sprang my blood and brain
Frugal and dry......

All his life, Davidson remembered his mother with loving affection, regarding with pity and sorrow her hard lot in life. In "A Woman and Her Son," written in the late nineties he emphasizes her work and suffering:

An orphan girl, hurt, melancholy, frail,
Before you learned to play, your toil began;
That might have been your making, had the weight
Of drudgery, the unsheathed fire of woe not
Borne down and beat on your defenseless life.

Upon his father Davidson laid the blame for his mother's hardship and suffering. "You were his Wife," he reminds her, "his servant, cheerfully you bore him children; and your house was hell." Upon his father Davidson also placed the chief responsibility for his own pain, impotency, frustration, conflicts.

1 Davidson, John, Fleet Street Elocues (London, 1896), pp. 23.
Unwell, half-starved, and clad in cast-off clothes,
We had no room; no sport; nothing but fear
Of our evangelist, whose little purse
Opened to all save us; who squandered smiles
On wily proselytes, and gloomed at home.¹

Quite evidently it was principally against his father
that Davidson revolted in the first phases of his struggle
towards total emancipation from tradition, from the past,
from race and family. His father seemed to have repre-
äsented or symbolized all that he most hated and detested —
authority, tyranny, narrow-mindedness, parsimony and re-
ligious dogmatism. He wrote that his father was "a crude
evangelist, whose soul was like a wafer that can take one
impress only;"² that he was "woman-hearted...wilful and
proud, save for one little shrine that held a pinch-beck
cross, (he) had closed and barred the many mansions of his
intellect."³ "A Child," he wrote, "must take the father by
the beard, and say, 'What did you in begetting me?';"⁴ Yet
Davidson would have it that his father could not but be
cruel and rigorous as being conditioned by his background
and inherited racial characteristics towards narrowness
and brutality.

For this was in the North, where Time stands still
And Change holds holiday, where Old and New
Welter upon the border of the world,
And savage faith works woe. ⁵

¹Ibid., p. 31. ²Ibid., p. 28.
⁴Davidson, New Ballads, p. 29.
Having started to school at the Highlander's Academy at Greenock, Davidson left the Academy at the age of thirteen, because of lack of family funds, to go to work in the chemical laboratory at Walker's sugar house at Greenock. In the following year, 1871, he became an assistant to the town analyst of Greenock. "In these employments he developed an interest in science which became an important characteristic of his poetry" and which contributed much to his religion and to the formulation of his unique cosmological theories.

In 1872, at the age of fifteen Davidson returned to the Highlander's Academy as a pupil-teacher, and remained there for four years, afterwards spending a year at Edinburgh University (1876-1877). In 1877, at the age of twenty, he received his first scholastic employment as a tutor at Alexander's Charity, Glasgow, and during the next six years he held similar scholastic posts at Perth Academy (1878-1881); Kelvinside Academy, Glasgow, (1881-1882); Hutchinson's Charity, Paisley (1883-1884). During 1884-1885 he was clerk in a Glasgow thread firm, but returned to the scholastic profession the following year, teaching at Morrison's Academy, Grief (1885-1888), and in a private school at Greenock (1888-1889). Of these, Davidson's formative years, one can learn little except the dates and places of his occupation and his marriage to a certain Margaret, daughter of John McArthur of Perth, in 1885. Most probably plagued by poverty.

and discouragement during these years, he rarely remained at
one position for more than a year. William Butler Yeats
wrote of him: "A national schoolmaster from Scotland, he
had been dismissed, he told us, for asking for a rise in
his salary, and had come to London (1889) with his wife and
children. He looked older than his years."¹

During this same period Davidson wrote five early
dramas, marked with many passages of fine lyric poetry, but
wholly without dramatic possibility. From the stilted, im-
mature and sentimental Unhistorical Pastoral, published in
the author's twentieth year to the more polished fantasia,
Scaramouch in Naxos, published in 1888, which he himself
termed "agood-natured nightmare," these early works are
similarly free of manifestation of conflict or unrest save
for one notable exception - Smith: A Tragic Farce. Published
at Grief in 1886, Smith, an account of an artist's tragic
struggle against mediocrity and compromise, presented David-
son for the first time as a critic of society and an
opponent of established authority. "Obey your nature,"
counsels Smith, "not authority," and warns man against the
spells of "hydra-headed creeds....and literature, thoughts
palace-prison fair; Philosophy, the grand inquisitor, that
rocks ideas and is fooled with lies; Society the mud where-
in we stand up to our eyes."²

Though the tenor of the rest of the early plays is one
of passive acceptance of the present order, of a certain light-
²Davidson, Plays (London, 1894), pp. 235-236.
hearted exuberance, one may detect in Smith a concomitant note of dissatisfaction with half-way measures or temporizing, of impatience towards weaknesses or compromises. Apparently a tense, nervous zealot from the beginning, Davidson was intolerant of complacency. As a man in search of the absolute, mediocrity and lukewarmness enraged him. It well may be that his very enthusiasm to live fully, to give himself completely to a cause in which he believed, led to his later restlessness, frustration and ultimate disillusionment. An ardent extremist, he demanded more of human nature than was possible to realize. In Smith he cried out: "One must become Fanatic - be a wedge - a thunderbolt, to write a passage through the close-grained world."¹

Seemingly entirely cognizant that the world of ordinary men is only too prone to equate zealotry with madness or a peculiar form of insanity, he challenged the conventional and complacent of this world to judge or measure him. For the mean or common mind can never hope to experience or even appreciate the ecstasy of the poet, the vision of the mystic. Through Smith the poet, Davidson called out to the bourgeois world of the nineteenth century. "We are not mad, but you - the world is mad. You and the world would make....such a thing as poets still cry out on."²

¹Ibid., p. 230. ²Ibid., p. 245.
In this tragedy, Davidson revealed for the first time his attitude toward the middle class of his day, his defiance of the ideals of a conventional morality, his hatred of hypocrisy and sham. Breaking through the veneer of respectability that lies like a thin scum over so much that is evil in any society, he laid bare the murky depths of greed and ambition lurking beneath. Though innocent as yet of any consistent attitude or philosophy of life, he would ride forth to smash the idols of an age given to a worship of progress and trade.

Business - the world's work - is the role of lies
Not goods, but trade-marks; and still more and more
In every branch becomes the sale of money
Why, goods are now the means of bartering gold!¹

Leaving Scotland in 1889, with his wife and sons, Alexander and Menzies, Davidson moved to London with the object of earning his living as a writer. The very act of moving to London may have represented or symbolized for him the severance of the spiritual roots of his past. For in a bitter poem, entitled "The Wastrel," published in The Rosary after the turn of the century, he satirized a Calvinist minister's sermon, in the course of which the minister compares to the wastrel in the Gospel his own son for going to London against "his father's wish." The scene is vividly described

¹Ibid., p. 226.
"as the preacher drives the lancet home and lays their heartstring bare." But all is lost upon the wayward son, who determines to head "for London town again, where folk in peace can die."

In London, in opposition perhaps to his father's will, working among strangers, Davidson endured for a time a life of direst hardship and penury and "supported his wife and family for years," according to Yeats, "by 'devilling' many hours a day for some popular novelist" and by writing literary pieces for such journals as the Glasgow Herald, the Speaker and the Yellow Book. For four long years Davidson struggled unsuccessfully for artistic recognition. He had attracted attention but little approval by publishing, in 1891, his In a Music Hall and Other Poems, a volume of rather flat, lifeless paintings of ordinary life.

Finally, the enthusiastic acceptance, in 1893, of his first volume of Fleet Street Eclogues launched him on the way to literary success and won him a place among his contemporaries. With the Fleet Street Eclogues he had at last found a voice and an audience. When asked by Yeats one spring morning in 1894 what work he had been doing, Davidson replied:

I am writing verse... I had been writing prose for a long time, and then one day I thought I might just as well write what I liked, as I must starve in any case. It was the luckiest thought I ever had, for my agent now gets me forty pounds for a ballad, and I made three hundred out of my last book of verse.

Though simple and austere, a note of light-hearted optimism pervades most of the early Eclogues; an optimism brightened by an easy-going realism and imagination. The beautiful and delicately wrought "Christmas Eve," full of hope and promise, offers a strange contrast to the violent and angry, hopeless attitude expressed in the testaments of Davidson's later years.

A fearless, ruthless, wanton band,
Deep in our hearts we guard from scathe,
Of last year's log, a smouldering brand
To light at Yule the fire of faith.

From the beginning, one of the most characteristic feature of Davidson's poetry had been his vivid descriptions and portrayal of natural scenes, a simple lyricism in praise of natural beauty. "In the nineties he was like his own birds, full of 'oboe' song and 'broken music'. Seldom has the English river, the Thames, been more sweetly chanted than by him." All of his early work is studded with pieces of sudden, brightly lyrical descriptions of the sea or countryside. He was justly praised for his "lyric rapture" and "keen eye for country sights and sounds." Although Davidson revolted against

1 Yeats, op. cit. p. 389.
2 Davidson, Eclogues, pp. 29-30.
his father and against the tyranny and repression of his life in Scotland he retained a love of the natural beauty of his native Scotland. The Unhistorical Romance of his early period is laid in a beautiful rural setting reminiscent of a Scottish countryside and much of his poetry written in London is filled with homesick memories of the rural scenes of his youth.

In his later years he found peace only in a sensuous and aesthetic contemplation of nature. He wrote of having to rush from his room to walk in the country and along the seashore at Penzance in the summer and autumn of 1908 to clear his mind of the oppressive incubus of care and depression that was driving him mad. In the midst of trouble and sorrow he found relief, perhaps his only relief, in his kinship with nature. In one of his earliest Eclogues, "St. Valentine's Eve," he suggested a walk in the country, early in the morning, as a cure for mental distress.

At early dawn through London you must go
Until you come where long black hedgerows grow,
With pink buds pearled, with here and there a tree,
And gates and stiles; and watch good country folk;
And scent the spicy smoke
Of withered weeds that burn where gardens be;
And in a ditch perhaps a primrose sea
The rocks shall stalk the plough, larks mount the skies,
Blackbirds and speckled thrushes sing aloud,
Hid in the warm white cloud
Mounting the thorn, and far away shall rise
The milky low of cows and farmyard cries.¹

¹ Davidson, Eclogues, pp. 29-30.
That Davidson was highly regarded by many of the critics of the early nineties is amply attested by reviews that appeared in many contemporary literary journals and periodicals. Various reviewers wrote of his writing as "full of fire and heart," or possessing "sustained power, passion, or beauty," "strength and to spare," "freshness and vigor of imagination," "prodigal beauty of phrase and image." The Saturday Review wrote early of his Ballads and Songs or the work of "a poet who is never tame or dull, who, at all events never leaves us indifferent. His verse speaks to the blood, and there are times when 'the thing becomes a trumpet.'"¹

Though Davidson basked for a time in the sunlight of popular, literary success, he found that he was not able to escape the clutches of a grasping public that demands of a man, if he would live, a lowering of his ideals. He found even as a determined idealist one must placate, must bend to the reading tastes of the popular mind or be rejected in favor of an author more to its liking. He worked long and faithfully at his most serious works, hoping someday to be able to "earn a living by his pen, but this expectation had but meagre fulfillment. As in the case of many other artists he had to pot-boil. This hurt him both in performance and result."²

¹ Reviews taken from the end sheets of the Testaments.
Though Davidson having endured poverty and discouragement so long a time before achieving success, resigned himself at first to a life torn between the practical business of making a living at journalism and the indulgence of his artistic bent, his early writing betrays a conflict already growing within him. In the first series of *Fleet Street Eclogues* (1898) which were for the most part serene and confident accounts, in poetic form, of the daily life and work of the journalist, there are occasional passages which blaze forth as an indictment and condemnation of the journalistic profession revealing the mind and attitude of a man who regarded himself as caught in an untenable position. Newspapers he compared, in "New Year's Day" to a "Covey of dragons, wide vanned", darkening the face of the sky. Because of the cult of journalism, "Beauty and truth are dead and the end of the World begun," and the craft of newswriters has degenerated into "the meanest in art and intention." "In drivel our virtue is spent." 1 As a man of incisive and critical insight who daily observed, first hand, the power and influence of the press upon the masses, he feared what the newspapers could do to the minds and hearts of people. Regarding the daily press as a gigantic monster quite capable of enslaving an entire nation by depriving those that read of the freedom to think as individuals and independent personalities, he foresaw the dreadful possibilities inherent in a national press geared to

1Davidson, *Eclogues*, pp. 5, 3.
sway the emotions and convictions of an entire populace. Neither those who read nor those who wrote for such a press would be free. Already, in the last year of the nineteenth century, he claimed that the world that reads the newspapers was made to

....think what the papers think,
And do as the papers say.
Who reads the daily press,
His soul's lost here and now;
Who writes for it is less
Than the heart that tugs a plough.

Yet for all his hatred of mediocrity and chicanery, Davidson saw that man will compromise almost any principle to assert himself, that most journalists joyfully accepted as their lot to grub for a living on Fleet Street. These are the men who in order to exist must grovel for the favor of public opinion. These are the men, once acutely attuned to the good and the true, now become fawners upon the wealthy and flatterers of the privileged, forced to fill their copy with lies. Nor can the true artist or poet receive inspiration or encouragement to write in such an environment. Even the best poet cannot achieve lasting fame in writing for the hungry press of the modern newspaper or periodical. Poems written by journalists, no matter if they be sheer poetry, are but "ephemeral flowers that smoulder in the wilderness."

What is published in the newspapers fades with the dying sun and

1Ibid., p. 10.
-15-

perishes in a night. Davidson complained bitterly in "St. Valentine's Eve."

I write a poem in a weekly sheet,
To lie in clubs on tables crowned with baize,
Immortal for seven days:
This is the life my echoing years repeat.

In the early Eclogues one may trace, coupled with Davidson's growing discontent and discomfit with his lot, evidences of fear and hatred of the city. Though he has been called the "Virtue of Fleet Street," he possessed little love for the city; most of his Eclogues and poems sing of the beauty and goodness of country living as contrasted to the ugliness and evil of city life. In "Good Friday," one may read that "yesterday the black rain fell in sheets from London's smoky sky, Like water through a dirty sieve," and that to be out of town is to be in paradise. Several of his Eclogues are filled with nostalgic longings for the clean, wholesome countryside of his youth.

Heaven is to tread unpaven ground,
And care no more for prose or rhyme.
Dear Menzies, talk of sight and sound;
And make us feel the blossom-time. 2

1 Ibid., p. 22.
2 Ibid., p. 40.
Unhappy in the city, Davidson stormed against the barrier cutting him off from the beauty and freedom of natural things, against the fate that chained him to his scrivener's desk. "London's a darksome cell where men go mad." London represented for him the epitome of all that is evil in a large city. He was depressed by its dark, bleak ugliness, its dirt and soot, the loathsome fall of perpetual smoke shutting out the bright sunlight, casting over all a ghastly grey light. He cried out against the forces in the chaos and turmoil of city life which dehumanize and brutalize man, atrophying and aborting his creative drives and abilities, curtailing and inhibiting his freedom and total development. The city, a harsh, faceless monster, offers nothing to the artist but stagnation of mind and soul looking upon nothing but the ugliness of slimy prison walls. As if overwhelmed by the chaos and horror around him he cried out in "St. Swithin's Day," addressing a frenzied appeal to those around him, begging that they explain to him the riddle of the universe. What is the meaning of man, of life? And, receiving no satisfactory answer, closed with a prayer to the "sweet powers of righteousness" for salvation from madness. A man of the highest artistic ideals, a perfectionist bilked at every turn in his attempts to express the beautiful and wonderful dreams that lay nearest his heart, Davidson grew

1 Ibid., p. 31.
daily more disturbed in mind and heart. Forced to produce work of inferior quality in the prime of his artistic powers and surrounded by poverty, ugliness and filth, he was beset by fears of going mad. During this period he faced, perhaps for the first time, the possibility of losing his mental balance. From the "city's centre," the "Bedlam of the universe," he called out in anguish:

Help, ere it drive us mad, this devil's din!
The clash of iron, the clink of gold;
The quack's, the beggar's whining manifold;
The harlot's whisper, tempting men to sin,
The voice of priests who damn each other's missions;
The babel-tongues of foolish politicians,
Who shout around a swaying Government;
The grooms of beasts of burden, mostly men,
Who toil to please a thankless upper ten.

Evidently he had ceased to be a practicing Christian early in his career in London. Even his earliest Eclogues and poems display a certain critical attitude towards the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. This attitude was no doubt engendered by his study of science, for he spoke of the Church as already decaying or dead, or a museum piece from a former and less enlightened age. From "Christmas Eve" of the early Eclogues one may find passages treating disparingly of Christian festivals and feasts as "old legend" clinging "like ivy round the ruined creeds," of the Christian moral code as "the wondrous message of release that forged another chain," that one should drink only to "Those who grasp the whole world's

1 Ibid., p. 57.
power and wealth." Instead of praising the meek and gentle
the Christian heroes, one should glorify "their foes, the
ruthless heirs of all the earth - the knaves, the pushing men,
and those who claim prerogatives of birth." Davidson
reacted early against restrictions imposed on man by society
and religion. Related to his repudiation of organized
religion is his revolt against all external authority. In
Smith, he had counseled man to obey nature and not authority.
In "A Ballad of Nun" first published in the Ballads and Songs
of 1894, he described the glorious courage of a nun who fled
from the convent to "leave the righteous God behind" to "go
worship sinful man."

I care not for my broken vow;
Though God should come in thunder soon,
I am sister to the mountains now,
And sister to the sun and moon.2

Himself a victim for a time of poverty and insecurity,
Davidson could not help calling the attention of his readers
to the suffering of the underprivileged. He was conscious
of the social unrest and tension around him, the great
glaring social evils infecting mind and factory. In his
own suffering, in being obliged to pay lip service to false
ideals, in having shared for some years previous, the lot
of the poor and oppressed of the city, Davidson could more
deply appreciate and better appraise the ills of the society

2Davidson, Selected Poems, pp. 13, 14.
of his day. Regarding, at this time, man's insatiate
urge for wealth as the root of the distress and sickness
in society, Davidson wrote of the poor, including himself,
as "Prosperity's accustomed foil," as "Human vermin festering"
upon the scores of society defiled by man's passion for wealth.
He insisted that never before has man possessed such terrible
instruments for wreaking his will upon the weaker members of
society. By the present industrial system, by corporation,
trust, syndicate, a man can manipulate the lives and fortunes
of millions and remain apparently free of censure, free of
responsibility. Yet despite the smooth working of flawless
machines with spotless gears grinding man to dust, the poor
cry out in condemnation:

We the rust upon your riches;
We the flaw in all your work.¹

Helplessly caught up in the coils of the very economic
monster that feeds upon their blood and flesh, the masses
no longer may control their economic destiny. Even the
powers that be are helpless to alleviate the misery and
suffering of countless thousands of their fellow men. Since,
according to Davidson, the economic structure of modern
society is a headless, irresponsible monster that cannot be
directed or controlled by any individual or group, whether
of the government or of those who enjoy the spoils the monster
has provided, it is the hard lot of men who labor to continue

¹ Ibid., p. 187.
fighting stoically to the end, to die like men struggling against a hopeless fate. In his famous "Thirty Bob a Week," published in 1894, Davidson wrote:

It's a naked child against a hungry wolf;  
It's playing bowls upon a splitting wreck;  
It's walking on a string across a gulf  
With millstones fore-and-aft about your neck;  
But the thing is daily done by many and many a one,  
And we fall, face forward, fighting, on the deck. 1

Though Davidson was quite preoccupied with the social and economic problems of the eighteen-eighties and early nineties in his early writing, in his plays, first poems and Eclogues, he was unsure of his own attitudes toward the life and world of his time. In many of the early eclogues a note of resignation and acceptance of things as they are, (since they cannot be changed anyway), is interwoven with a growing, ever more dominant tone of conflict and defiance. The dissenting tenor of his writing becomes even more pronounced in the Second Series of Eclogues, published in 1896, as the problems which confronted him only vaguely at first become more acute and more clearly defined. There is much of social criticism and protest in these later Eclogues, much of voicing the grievances and complaints of the oppressed lower classes. In these pieces, for the first time, Davidson began to ask for a reorganization of the social and political order, for righting the wrongs prevalent in modern society:

1Ibid, p. 110.
Earlier Davidson had believed that the least the Church could do for mankind would be to call men to account for economic injustices, to minister to the ills of society, but disillusioned he claimed to have found instead the Church as an agent, an instrument in the hands of the privileged. About the middle of the decade, having become convinced that man in order to rise must emancipate himself from all authority, all restriction, and enraged by the failure of the Church to intercede in behalf of the oppressed masses, he turned away from Christianity completely and began openly to attack all religion as deluding and enervating man and society. The Church he accused in the Eclogue, "St. George's Day," as an open collaborator in the spreading of the disease of commercialization. This is the blight that has infected all of society: office, home, school and church. It has become the popular cult of modern society, the new religion.

But by the altar everywhere
I find the money-changer's stall;
And littering every temple-stair
The sick and sore like maggots crawl. 3

2 Ibid., p. 84.
3 Ibid., p. 79.
Our present time, Davidson insisted through the later Eelôgnes, is a period of petty tyrants. There is no hope anymore left to man, nothing for man who has repudiated the "old religion" and lost his faith in the natural goodness of his fellowmen or in a society composed of men. Industrial England epitomized for him the evils of a mercantile society, for by its mechanization of all means of production, by its factory system, only a few would fully enjoy and benefit from the products of the labor of millions toiling and dying in the misery and squalor of factory town and slum. The voice of the poor cries to heaven for justice, but an indifferent deity turns a deaf ear to their pleas:

I see the strong coerce the weak,  
And labour overwrought rebel;  
I hear the useless treadmill creak,  
The prisoner, cursing in his cell;  
I see the loafer—burnished wall;  
I hear the rotting match-girl whine;  
I see the unslept switchman fall;  
I hear the explosion in the mind;  
I see along the leadless street  
The sandwichman trudge through the mire;  
I hear the tired quick tripping feet  
Of sad, gay girls who ply for hire.  

Any dream that Davidson may have entertained of the laboring man rising under a great leader "to forge and mould the world anew" soon began to fade in the cold light of reality and he began to despair of ever seeing the working classes led out of the darkness that shrouded their minds and lives. A swelling note of fatalism begins to prevail over much of what he writes after 1895. This fatalistic attitude was bound up

\footnote{Ibid., p. 81.}
with his own literary and personal life in London, one of constant disillusion and disappointment despite a brief period of literary success. A man of intense and fiery passion for knowledge and perfection, he was daily irritated by the quality of writing he was forced to do in order to live, he was frustrated in his artistic drives by the lack of order in his own life and the lack of beauty to inspire him, he was disgruntled by the failure of the Church to set right the wrongs caused by the sins of mankind and, last of all, he saw his dreams of a revitalized mankind, roused to life by a great ideal, begin to fade into empty fantasy. The disquiet and impetuosity of his early years developed first into the positive conflict and warring against all restriction and limitation of his artistic powers and evolved eventually into the hopelessness and futility expressed in the writings of later years. The protagonist of the later Eclogues (1896) bewails the futility of life without meaning or significance and the emptiness of all values and goods that men hold dear. Nothing endures; nothing brings true lasting happiness. All men pursue "a flickering wisp of the fen," which constantly dances before them, enticing them into the bogland of darkness and despair. He who seizes the object of his most ardent dreams will soon find beauty, love and truth fading like a dead flower within his grasp. Yet empty visions will continue forever to beckon men across the darkened world, for
We must play the game with a careless smile,
Though there's nothing in the hand;
We must toil as if it were worth our while
Spinning our ropes of sand;
And laugh and cry, and live and die
At the waft of an unseen hand.

Yet, even amid the desolation and disillusion wrought
by man’s inhumanity to man Davidson retained a certain
idealism, remaining convinced of man's high destiny as
ruler of the universe. In many of the eclogues it is the
idealistic view which prevails; it is the optimist who
refutes the bitter pessimism of the cynic.

And I swear by the light,
And the noon and the night,
It is good, it is good to be here!\(^2\)

He can yet look with pride upon England's great
accomplishments in the past. The memory of past glory,
brings hope to the present and the future.

All are ours
And will be ours while Nelson's fame endures \(^3\)
Great lives, great deaths for England and the sea.

Though he envisioned mankind as a race as destined
eventually to attain a glorious goal in the distant future
the individual man of the present age must suffer alone as the

victim of the world, of life and of his own nature. In "Lammas," one of his last Eclogues, Davidson wrote of man as being impotently caught up in the "subtle coils" of his own desires and weaknesses. Such is the ironic lot of man, and man cannot hope to escape from himself except into madness or death.

Meanwhile for me no lulling opiate,
No dream, no mystic solvent: I must watch
Hopeless, unhelped, till I go mad or die. ¹

Although Davidson defied classification into any special literary group, clique or coterie, since he belonged to the Rhymer's Club and wrote for the Yellow Book, since he manifested certain fin de siècle characteristics in his disdain for the popular mind, in his revolt against authority and tradition, he was associated by many with the decadents of the early nineties.² Because he was identified by the English reading public with the decadents, he suffered the same fate as they when that movement was ended by the fall of Wilde. With the loss of popular approval in the late nineties, Davidson suffered a decline in fortune and talent and he was translated from "an artist pure and simple into a philosophic missioner using literature as a means of propaganda." He became alternately fatalistic and enraged by the loss of his own artistic powers and by the jibes of the literary public. In A Rosary, a group of essays and poems

¹Davidson, Eclogues, 2nd Series, p. 39

²Cf., Muddiman, pp 91 ff., Jackson, pp 177 ff, and Kennedy, pp 310 ff.
published in 1904, he proclaims that society is in a terrible condition and that "nothing that can be done avails. Poor-laws, charity organizations, dexterously hold the wound open, or tenderly and hopelessly skin over the cancer. Poetry has no spell to cure it. The world cannot be changed until it falls back into the sun."1

In the throes of blackest despair, Davidson expressed in the manner of a solipsist the ultimate blight that man is heir to - his basic inability to communicate to others what is deepest and dearest within himself. The most articulate of men cannot really express himself. He cannot make known his deepest drives, ambitions, dreams, his true needs to others; he cannot tell others even what he suffers, his pains, his despair, his fears. Each man is cut off from any satisfactory communication with his fellowmen within the prison of his own being. There is no real and lasting contact between man and man. "Thought and feeling," Davidson asserted, "are themselves, and cannot be expressed....It is probable that the whole literature of the world is a lie."2 Man is in a bad way for it is impossible to discharge that which is locked within.

1Davidson, Rosary, p. 39
2Ibid, pp. 49, 50.
All speech, all Literature, all Art...
is only the tapping and scratching on
the walls of their cells of prisoners
who have never been anything else but
prisoners, and can have no
closer communication with each other
than such muffled noises as their
adamantine walls permit.

A Rosary presents a doctrine of utmost despair and
absolute nihilism. While, pointing out that "despair is
the highest power of hope," Davidson would ask whether
"hope is only the subtlest form of cowardice." There is
malignity inherent in all men, "the moment a man understands
himself he becomes mad or commits suicide; and whenever
one man understands another he tries to kill him." Life
itself is an evil, "life is something which should never
have been; and so in fiery moments of intelligence we kill 2
each other."

Thus Davidson entered upon the last decade of his life;
raging, lonely, overborne by pessimism and despair. Fearful
of the world and having lost confidence in his own artistic
energy and power, he could visualize no hope left for
mankind or himself, except in a kind of overturning of all
ideals and values. As early as 1886, in the play, Smith,
he had written what might have been a prophetic precis of
his own defeats and frustrations. In this tragedy he had
described the despair of a poet, who, obliged to barter
his talent at a mercenary trade, loses the inspiration of
his youth and takes his own life rather than live off the
charity of friends.

1 Ibid., p. 16.  
2 Ibid., p. 85.
The wretch whose early fervour, burnt away,
Leaves him, for lack of ease to smite his thought
To white-heat - since the brazier of youth,
That needs no sweat is cold - incapable
Of any meaning, but with loathsome itch
That still essays, and still produces nought,
Or horribly emits untempered scraps -
Foods, cinders, smokes, nameless aborted things,
The hideous castings witchcraft vomited,
Maybe to live on grudging charity
Of friends estranged, sneered at by smug success;
Called poetaster: Such had been my life!
But I have chosen death.¹

¹ Davidson, Plays, pp. 238-239.
CHAPTER II

MALAISE IN THE TESTAMENTS AND OTHER LATER WRITINGS

Davidson's last works, most of those written after 1900, are filled with pessimism, despair, and a fatalism which soured and hardened him. Disclaiming allegiance to any leader or artistic movement he became ever more vehement in his attacks upon society, as he sought to salvage his pride, utilizing the doctrines of Nietzsche and materialism, by recourse to a philosophy of self-gloration. Driven by a perverse desire for divine power and absolute knowledge through self-torture, he eventually arrived at a kind of Satanic philosophy of self-deification:

"Lo ye shall be as Gods!" - the serpents cry -
Rise up again," Ye shall be the sons of God,"
And now the closing word is in the air, "Thou shall be God by simply taking thought."

As Davidson suffered and struggled to express the hungers of his heart and mind, as he pondered the paradoxes of nature and man, he developed a stoical philosophy of life which denied to man the comforts of the softer virtues. His philosophy, which he ultimately formulated in his testaments, was a resultant of a constant

1Davidson, Selected Poems, p. 86.
bitter struggle against the forces of circumstance and fate. On his fiftieth birthday he could write:

Nine-tenths of my time and that which is more precious, have been wasted in the endeavor to earn a livelihood. In a world of my own making I should have been writing only that what should have been written.

Davidson's last writings, reflecting his frustration, voice a vehemently impassioned appeal for control over destiny, over life itself. He looked for a master who should be an absolute ruler over society, believed that by applying some of the doctrines of Nietzsche to the present situation he had arrived at a solution to the problems of mankind. Although Davidson claimed that he repudiated some of the main tenets of Nietzsche, labeling the Übermensch as "Absurd Neologism," there can be no doubt that he was strongly affected by Nietzsche's philosophy.

The later writings furnish ample evidence that Davidson possessed first hand knowledge of the works of Nietzsche. In *A Rosary*, (1904), a collection of poems, essays and aphorisms, abounding with references to the main idea of Nietzsche's will to Power, of Hegel's doctrine as producing "the first germ...of Nietzsche's antinomy in morality," and specifically pointed out the

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1 Jackson, p. 130.
A great man; a man of unexampled divulsive power... Such a tonic the world of letters has not had for a thousand years. Nietzsche set himself, smiling, to dislodge the old earth from its orbit; and it is something against such odds — the dint of his shoulder will remain forever.

In the same volume, largely the offscourings and accidental by-products of more formidable philosophical works, Davidson ceased to be a poet "pure and simple" and became instead a philosophic missioner using verse as a means of propaganda.

No longer is his philosophy glimpsed in occasional flashes or cloaked in the language of poetry. Striving to express philosophical convictions, which he may not have been able earlier to formulate adequately for his own satisfaction, Davidson accepted without challenge most of Nietzsche's ideas, especially the attacks upon Religion and Christianity. "But are not the Gospels," asks Davidson, reflecting a Nietzschean conviction, "are not all Gospels either gospels of cowardice or gospels of ruffianism? — the latter being only an allotropic form of cowardice...

1 Davidson, A Rosary, pp. 66, 87, 98, 60, 132.

2 Davidson, The Man Forbid And Other Essays, (Boston 1910), pp. 178, 180.
the gospels are for the weak; the strong need no gospel."

As a basic principle he assumed as true what Nietzsche so boldly asserted to be the starting point and governing principle of all life and knowledge, that all life is governed by one instinct alone – the will to power, sometimes expressed as the will to a stronger and higher existence. This will to power, governing the acts and intentions of every man, lies behind and beyond the ruling values of our civilization. Being more powerful and more important than any of the "old" values, – the good, the true and the beautiful – it uses them merely as a means to affirm and promote life. Both Davidson and Nietzsche held that the old values are not ends but merely means to an end, – the assertion of the will to power, since someone is always using these values as instruments to further his own ambitions. Only by liberating himself from Christianity and all that it brought with it, from the old beliefs in God and the other world, in the "soft" virtues of poverty, meekness and charity, only is short, by emancipating himself from the Judaico - Christian morality could man be said to be truly free. Then and only then could he begin to build a new society upon the ashes of the old, a new race of free men living in accord to a "master morality."

1 Davidson, Rosary, p. 81.
governed by the strong "virtues" of hardness, cruelty, and selfishness. Davidson declared that the "stable" order of the traditional Christian society has crumbled and that we have left only the

old, effete, economic world of Christendom; for centuries a dull evolution by degeneration, arrived now at the barracks of the Salvation Army, and no-government by agitation; Christendom, ascendent to the heyday of the Papacy, decadent ever since....debris and wreckage of Christianity clamouring to be put together again.1

Since it is too late in his opinion to restore the dilapidated structure, there is nothing to do but to raze it to the ground and build "from a new foundation."

As the herald, with Nietzsche, of the new era, as the seer who holds all in the balance and weighs past, present and future, Davidson insisted that he was the only man that is truly free. Because he had liberated himself from the past, he was the only man who could stand erect while the multitudes of mankind, shackled since the beginning of time by the galling fetters of creeds, doctrines, ideals, philosophies and systems bent beneath the burden of centuries of ideas, paraded in review before his critical eye.

In his testaments Davidson attempted to outline a program of thought and action by which man could free himself for all time from all mental and emotional fetters. It was in his testaments, primarily that he tried to set forth a complete, clear and formal statement of his own philosophical views upon art and life. The testaments reflect the spirit of uneasiness and unrest that possessed Davidson's later years. In the Testament of the Man Forbid published in 1901 he lashed out against many of the institutions of the Western World. As the harbinger of future glory he saw churches, schools, libraries and businesses as already dead monuments of the past:

Their brothels, slums, cathedrals, theatres, asylums, factories, exchanges, banks, the patched-up world of heirlooms, hand-me-downs that worm and moth disuse, of make-believe, of shady, pinchlucked sweepings of the street; of visored war and advertised chicane.... Where patient hodmen on their rounded backs sustained the thoughts of thirty centuries....

To rise unencumbered into the bright new world of the future, man must rid himself of the burden of all knowledge and "begin to know." He must begin by chopping off the roots of tradition which bind him to the earth, must caudate that monstrous spiritual tail which "men must outgrow, if spirit would ascend." Man's intellect must be-

come in very truth a tabula rasa. Mankind must "unknown
the past and names renowned, religion, art, inventions,
thoughts and deeds." Since it is well nigh impossible
to construct a stable new order while destructive forces
remain potentially capable of creating chaos Davidson
called upon mankind to commit an act that Nietzsche himself
had not the temerity to suggest to his followers - to
destroy all monuments of past knowledge:

Stand erect, for few are helped by books,
What! Will you die crushed under libraries?
Lo! thirty centuries of literature
Have curved your spines and
Overborne your brains!
Off with it - all of it.....
Weed out and tear, scatter and tread them down;
Dismantle and dilapidate high heaven.....
I say, uproot it, plough the land; and let
A summer-fallow sweeten all the world.....
Only then can any seed of change have room to grow.

To realize his freedom and power man must rid himself
of the old affections, must become hard, egoistic, give
full rein to his will to power. Both Nietzsche and
Davidson as philosophers of pride and egocism, regarded
themselves as standing above and beyond the rest of men,
living on the top of the mountains among the stars. Both
regarded themselves as calumniated, slandered, battling
alone against apathetic indifference or positive antipathy.

Ibid., pp. 9, 10, 11, 16, 20.
The common mass of men cannot hope or dream to aspire
so high, cannot even live in such a rarefied atmosphere
as they. Aware of the consequences that would follow
upon his declaring himself an egocist, a believer in the
harsh values that Nietzsche taught, Davidson opened

**The Testament of the Man Forbid** simply:

Mankind has cast me out....
With mud bespattered, bruised with staves and
stoned....me from their midst they drove
Alone I went in darkness and in light,
And life and death, the ministers of men,
My constant company.....
But one arose to represent the World.....
"Your well-earned portion of the Universe
Is isolation and eternal death.....1

Conjoined to his egocism and to his philosophy of
pride was Davidson's doctrine of materialism. In **The
Testament of the Vivisector** published in the same year
as **The Testament of A Man Forbid** Davidson proposed to
introduce an all important new statement of the universe,
a philosophy of the New Materialism. Upon the acceptance
of matter as the ultimate explanation and cause of existence
rested his entire cosmological system. Though all five
of the treatises are impregnated with scientific spirit,
interlaced with allusions to chemical elements and
compounds, the physical components of matter, it was bluntly
asserted in **The Testament of the Vivisector** that the

1 Ibid., pp. 5, 16, 20, 23.
philosophy of the future age was to be Materialism.

The new statement of Materialism which it
(The Testament of the Vivisector) contains
is likely to offend both the religious and
the irreligious mind. This poem, therefore,
and its successors, My Testaments are addressed
to those who are willing to place all ideas
in the crucible, and are not afraid to fathom,
what is subconscious in themselves or others.1

The universe of John Davidson was a uniquely unified
whole and therefore is an extreme simplification of the
world of the philosophers and theologians of old. In
his cosmology there was no duality of co-principles, no
conflict between material and spiritual, no fusion or
integration of matter and form. There was only one
principle or cause - Matter. Matter is of itself capable
of sensation, consciousness and the highest cerebration.
The nature and origin of man and the universe was
perfectly explained through a material cause without re­
course to any spiritual principle or divine first cause,
so, invoking the principle of Aockam's razor, the entire
system of other world can be dispensed with. Only matter,
nature and physical power exist. Even the intellect is
a purely physical faculty.

Seeking unity and simplicity in the ultimate cause
of all being, Davidson postulated matter as creating its

1 Davidson, The Testament of a Vivisector, (London,
own form, its own self-bounding principle of self-limitation through a kind of "tension" and "equilibrium" of opposing forces of molecules, atoms and electrons.

Thus Davidson posited a universe in which an eternal conflict rages within every sphere of the material world, from man to the smallest electron. Ultimately this conflict was to be directed by the will of man, the universe conscious of itself. Such conflict is for man, as for the universe, a means of growth towards power.

In *The Testament of The Prime Minister* (1904), he asserted:

Matter, Substance, Universe became self-conscious by its own innate desire invincibly impelled through trials, tests of instinct and brutality. Man crowns the adventurous effort. Matter knows itself; and Man, the organ of its knowledge, bound forever on this torture-wheel, the earth, in agony confesses what he is.

Having posited that all matter was composed of dynamic elements in eternal strife, Davidson concluded that any being can continue in existence only so long as it dominates through mastery over the conflicting elements of which it is composed and through control and utilization for its own end being outside of itself. Thus there is no life without conflict. All life depends

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upon this drive for dominance and mastery of self and others. Thus the highest form of life and the crown of the universe, man, is essentially an egoist and the will to power, his life force, is the logical resultant of a world eternally coming to be through strife. Man by the means of knowledge gained through a philosophy of absolute materialism, shall possess an abundance of power and life. All conscious beings must ruthlessly strive for absolute self-knowledge. Let there be no more mystery, no more self-delusion or self-deception. Man must "create indomitable will to truth, an open mind at home in space and time, a stainless memory splendidly endowed with actual knowledge, a Material soul at one with the Material Universe."¹

As a truly dedicated materialist, Davidson was only too aware of the consequences of self-knowledge, of the price one must pay to make known the mysteries of the material world. "It may be," he wrote, "Matter itself is pain."² Yet he must have knowledge; he hungers for it, thirsts for it, since knowledge is power and increase of power is the only good that man really seeks. Yet it is power achieved at a terrible cost; for to know deeply and

¹Ibid., p. 81.
proudly is to torture oneself. Only in suffering comes knowledge worthy of the name. "Since knowledge kills or cures,"¹ and men are "the naked nerves of matter! Matter loves its aches and pains, it knows itself thereby."²

The materialist, at the risk of body and mind, must strive to become the "lord of the riddle of the Universe." As the leader of all true materialists he proffered to lead man along the way of self-knowledge through pain and suffering. "To the Materialist there is no unknown; all, all is Matter. Pain? I am one ache."³ He could allow himself no rest, hope, comfort or peace, for he must "study pain - pain only. I brooch and top the agony of Matter, and work its will."⁴

An examination of the concept of suffering, of conflict and torment, that form the warp and woof of Davidson's "cosmology of pain," gives one a new insight into his malaise and his eventual distress of mind and heart. He was sorely troubled and perplexed by the apparent contradictions inherent in the nature of man. Though he envisioned man as the master and center of the universe, as the apex of all life, man supreme, unique and unsurpassed by any being

² Davidson, *Prime Minister*, p.39.
³ Davidson, *Vivisector*, p.25.
above or beyond him, man is capable of further development.

Man of the present age he regarded as but a link or bridge to the master race of a future generation of men. In his essay "On Poetry" written at the same time he was working on his testaments he declared:

The world is only beginning. We have done nothing, sung nothing. The history of the past is the history of one empire at a time. Now several empires must compete together. The world will yet know more essential personalities than Buddha and Christ; greater men than Caesar and Napoleon, deeper passion and wider humanity than Shakespeare's, a music still more elemental than Wagner's, a sadder soul than Schopenhauer's, a more triumphant intellect than Nietzsche's, beauty more enthralling than Helen's.¹

Yet, at the same time, he was plagued by another vision of man as a blight or blister upon nature and self-consciousness as a disease. Though he respected and regarded the self-consciousness of man with awe and esteem, he also feared this power as rendering man capable of the most exquisite suffering, of enduring pain infinitely more intense than the highest brute could ever know. To be self-conscious in the mind of Davidson was to suffer profoundly, infinitely without surcease. For knowledge gained through self-consciousness man must endure "under a penalty without reprieve...discomfort, pain affliction, agony."²

¹ Ibid., p.23.

² Davidson, Holiday and Other Poems, p.136.
I study pain, measure it and invent -
I and my compatriots; for I hold again
That every passionate Materialist,
Who rends the living subject soon is purged
Of vulgar tenderness in diligent
Delighted tormenting of bird and beast.

Later, in The Testament of the Prime Minister (1904)
in which he presented the final triumph of Materialism
over Christianity, Davidson further defining his concept
of self-knowledge or a torturing maddening process finally
concluded that "madness is the flowering of the soul."
In the same testament he wrote of man facing at all
times and everywhere the possibility of instant and profound
dissolution because of the fearful tension and attenuation
inherent in all material things. Even in sleep the warfare
continues. In fact, it is while sleeping that man becomes
most acutely perceptive of the frightful battle for self-
identity or at that time fear and terror of the unknown
rise up within him. If man be nothing but matter, once
his body dissolves he ceases to be forever. In the closing
lines of The Testament of a Prime Minister, Davidson cried
out in terror:

The conscious Matter which I am,
Beginning to surrender consciousness,
Recalls from dissolution and divorce.
To lie dispersed in elemental sport
Of heedless energy - the uncontrolled
Imagination of the Universe....

Davidson, Vivisector, p. 22.
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Afflicts the human race with hope, attunes
The nightingale and launches in the deep
The monstrousrorqual; to be left once more
A scattered wreck of groping elements
Without remembrance, judgment, wisdom, choice,
Perturbs the diverse stuff that men are of;
Wherefore when sleep in mimicry of death
Dissolves self-consciousness the hideous dreams
That wake me shrieking when sleep rehearses
death, or death itself
Takes up the cue: no dreams of mine are they,
But Matter's dreams of old experiences wrought
In imperceptive atoms....

Having embarked upon a course of supreme self-glorification through sacrifice and denial, Davidson would tolerate no master or superior human force and rejected and denied that very man from whom he borrowed so much. In his "Essay On Poetry" he had predicted that the world would "yet know... a more triumphant intellect than Nietzsche's." Since Nietzsche regarded his doctrine of the Übermensch as the most important postulate in his message to mankind, it is significant that at this point of the basic doctrine of Nietzsche, Davidson makes his departure from the Nietzschen thought, based on his glorification, evident throughout his writing, of the Englishman. At first glance there seems to be in the works of Davidson an utter repudiation of the superman

1 Davidson, Prime Minister pp.101-102.
doctrine, for in the Introduction to *The Testament of John Davidson* (1908) he belittled both Nietzsche and his concept of **Overman**:

Your absurd neologism, **Overman**, was accepted by the panic stricken as an index of evolution in humanity; but not by the English. You must remember that Nietzsche, the fugleman in this business, was a Pole. The Poles being the Celts of Eastern Europe, an inferior race, unable to conquer and unable to be conquered, the idea of a higher type of man than they is natural to them. But such an idea could never occur to an Englishman. The Englishman is the **Overman**; the history of England is the history of his evolution.¹

While purporting to reject Nietzsche's concept of **Overman**, he subtly adapted the same concept to his own ends. By assuming that the English race by virtue of unique power and freedom granted no other nation had achieved the stature of Supermen and by regarding himself furthermore, as pre-eminently the most self-conscious, enlightened, and emancipated individual of the entire English race he looked upon himself as a super-**Overman**, the **Overman par excellence**. "Ethereal tissue of eternity," he was to be the "first of men to be and comprehend the Universe," and when he died the Universe should "cease to know itself." He did not claim to be a superman or a god precisely, but such a man "as was not in the world" before his time, who "cannot be again."²

¹ Davidson, John Davidson, p.18.
² Ibid, pp.43, 50, 66.
Thus he, the new Messiah, was to inaugurate the Golden Age. "Soberly I say, this twentieth century begins no other age than the Millennium.... The Golden Age appears. He, the first born of the Golden Era, would lead all mankind to divinity and total emancipation. As his own precursor he announced his own Advent as the new Redeemer of man, his own omnipotence as possessing in their total perfection marks, qualities and powers of the Nietzschean Overman.

In this his last and final testament, Davidson exhibited many of the characteristics of one suffering from Megalomania, tending at times to lose control of himself altogether. The magnificent dream of man as divine and omnipotent was fading under personal frustrations and failures, so that in this testament he stormed and tried to seize again by violence power and control over his own destiny. Altogether too insistent, too vehement, he claimed that this testament was to be "the prologue to the literature that is to be" he would establish himself as a New Savior of mankind:

Thus I break the world out of the imaginary chrysalis or cocoon of Other World in which it has stumbled so long.... This is the greatest thing told since the world began.

1Davidson, Prime Minister, pp. 17, 24.
It means an end of the struggling part; an end of our conceptions of humanity and divinity, of our ideas of good and evil, of our religions, our literature, our art, our polity; it means that which all men have desired in all ages, it means a new beginning, it means that the material forces of mind and imagination can now re-establish the world as if nothing had ever been thought or imagined before; it means that there is nothing greater than man anywhere; it means infinite terror, infinite greatness, and that is the meaning of me, and of my Testaments and Tragedies.

It is in this testament that Davidson consciously attributed to himself the characteristics by which Nietzsche claimed the world would know the **Overman**. He claims for himself the distinction of being the first man to clear the Universe of all the phantoms of the past, especially of the spectres of God and Other World, he pointed out that he had passed the first test, fulfilled the first requirement demanded of that superior being who is to usher in the Golden Age, be he superman or god. Concurring with Nietzsche in placing the Master Race above and beyond the moral order, Davidson, conceiving of himself as the first man of that race, considered that he was bound by no moral law or Christian precept. He would "destroy the world of the soft-hearted," would invert the values of the present Christian order and strive towards

1 Davidson, *John Davidson*, p.31.
growth in the new natural "virtues" of "voluptuousness, passion for power, and selfishness." He attested that he had hardened himself to have nothing but contempt for the weak of this world, for the humble, the meek and the merciful. Paraphrasing the Sermon on the Mount, he would preach a new list of beatitudes. Only the powerful and the strong shall inherit the earth, possess the heaven of the fleeting moment. Only those who have made the most of opportunities presented them, who have employed every ruse and strategem to clamber over the backs of the weak, the stepping stones to the heaven of the powerful, shall attain beatitude.

All who challenged fate and staked their lives To win or lose the prize they coveted, who took their stand upon the earth and drew Deep virtue from the centre, helped themselves, Desired the world and willed what matter would. 1

In a temporal hell Davidson found only those who had denied themselves pleasures and delights, who had given themselves to any ideal beyond themselves, and those who through no fault of their own are deprived of the heaven of the strong - any who by mental or physical deprivation have been prevented from asserting themselves. As long as man suffered any mental, physical or moral evil he was regarded by Davidson to be already living in hell - All

1 Davidson, Empire Builder, p.65.
those who "live in loathsomeness, debility, disgrace, humiliation, travail, terror, woe."

Logically a sine qua non condition for residence in Davidson's temporal heaven is the possession of the power of ruling over others. Only a limited number can remain on top, exploiting the masses grubbing in hell. Heaven on earth, by necessity must be limited to the few who possess the power to seize it by force. It is these chosen few that Davidson dedicated and addressed his last work, The Testament of John Davidson: only to them did he say:

"Secure your birthright, confront your fate, regard the naked deed; enlarge your Hell; preserve it in repair; only a splendid Hell keeps Heaven fair."

Attributing to himself characteristics or qualities more commonly attributed to a god than to a man, Davidson spoke of himself here as exalted above the skies, a man like whom none has lived before nor is likely to live again. By freeing himself from other world and from the old inhibiting conventions, he set out to forge a new universe, to control the stars. In "A Ballad of Blank Verse" published in the Collection of Selected Poems of 1904, Davidson announced:

1 Ibid., p. 81.
Henceforth I shall be God: for consciousness
Is God: I suffer: I am God: This Self,
That all the universe combines to quell,
Is greater than the universe; and I
am that I am....

Ultimately Davidson's entire credo of liberation
might be regarded as a supreme glorification or expression
of his own ego. Through freedom and emancipation from
spiritual divinity man, he held, becomes a god or some-
thing more than a god, and he, John Davidson, was the
first of men to realize and to utilize fully and completely
his ultra-divine prerogatives. In The Testament of a
Prime Minister, he chanted a hymn of worship to his naked
ego:

Above beneath

About me, or within, nothing is great;
I only, I am great: greater than thought
But I, the individual, I am more
Than soul and body: insubmissive me
The ego? Ha, the ego....
Why every man
Is every instant instantly himself....
I am the only individual, I:
The truth itself is nothing: to believe
The highest truth would be to abdicate
The individual: all things disappear
Before the sovereign me.²

Out of the evidence from the plays, poems, eclogues,
theses and testaments of Davidson one may fairly accurately
review the main aspects of the growth of Malaise in his

¹ Davidson, Selected Poems, pp.73-72.
² Davidson, Prime Minister, pp.41-42.
life, an uneasiness that grew yearly more oppressive until it disturbed his mental balance. He was a kind of tragic hero. He was from the beginning a perfectionist who demanded more from life and nature than he received. His own tragic flaw lay in his inability to accept life as he found it. Possessed of wilful and headstrong temperament he resented the unknown and all forms of weakness, and rebelled against all and everything that stood in his way.

His life is one of continual frustration, filled with the heart break of one who sincerely believed in the goodness of nature and found her lacking in perfection, of one who sought beatitude fruitlessly in a world full of misery and sorrow, of one who looked upon man as divine and found him wanting the graces of a god. "There was no reality for him without omnipotence; he repudiated life on any other terms. That was the root of his depression, as it was the basis of his philosophy." That Davidson considered himself an absolute master of himself and of all around him is evidenced in a poem entitled "A Woman and Her Son," published in 1897. In this poem he presented a fearful account of a dying mother's fruitless struggle to soften her son. Remaining adamant against his mother's dying pleas to turn to God, the young man insists that he must

1 Jackson, p. 180.
"torture" his mother "with truth, even as your teachers for a thousand years pestered with falsehood souls of dying folk." As his mother writhes in protest, the young man continues to lecture her, attempting to force her to deny her God, trying to bring her to a belief in his own new-found faith in materialism and ruthless volition:

"Could I but touch your intellect," he cried, "Before you die! Mother the world is mad! This castle in the air, this Heaven of yours, is the lewd dream of morbid vanity For each of us death is the end of all; And when the sun goes out the race of men Shall cease forever. It is ours to make This force of fate a splendid tragedy: Since we must be the sport of circumstance, We should be sportsmen and produce a breed Of gallant creatures conscious of their doom, Marching with lofty brows, game to the last. Oh, good and evil, heaven and hell are lies! But strength is great; There is no other truth: This is the yea - and - nay that makes men hard. Mother be hard and happy in your death!

The mother begs her son to relent and with her dying words entreats him to repent, but "he set his teeth and saw his mother die. Outside a city reveller's tipsy tread severed the silence with jagged rent." Davidson could face with heroic courage and fortitude the necessity of stripping himself of all attachments to all the softer and gentler things of life, of placing "all ideas in the

1 Davidson, New Ballads, pp. 29-30.
2 Ibid., pp. 35-36.
3 Ibid., p. 37.
crucible...to fathom what is subconscious in ourselves and others." But he was baffled and broken by the inherent weaknesses he found in himself and those around him.

It is in the testaments that one bids farewell to Davidson, in these later works so bitter, so full of rebuke and cynicism, so baffling and unconvincing. Yet the incongruities and irregularities of this man's genius are but an expression and mark of the perversion, egoism and revolt of his time.
CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION:

Davidson's malaise and mental disquietude may be said to derive from two main sources: from a constant, persistent desire for knowledge of all mystery and control over all life, and from the circumstances that prevented his becoming a great poet or a profound thinker. By nature he was destined to be forever jousting with windmills, for he was one who dreamed that man could achieve perfection and a kind of divine beatitude in this life, that all things were possible to a man perfectly freed of moral restraint and the tradition of the past. Possessed of a fiery and passionate temperament, he was determined to impose upon mankind his peculiar notions of the world and life and actively revolted against all that he conceived as thwarting his dreams and plans.

Life did not favor his ambitions of a new society in which he would be recognized as a new Messiah bringing a new message of release for mankind. Born and reared in the meanness of poverty and rigid parental discipline, he learned early to resist the restraint and order imposed by another. Later, elated by momentary literary success in London, he became confident of making his mark on the world and was convinced that men desired to listen to him. A
man acutely sensitive to beauty of sight and sound and possessed of a marked poetic ability, he appeared, in the nineties, destined to become one of the most important poets of his time. Yet by the end of the century, discouraged by the loss of prestige, by the failure of social institutions to alleviate the lot of man and obsessed by a desire for power and knowledge absolute, except for an occasional lyric in praise of nature, he abandoned poetry altogether and exploited his poetic talents in a revolt against society and fate.

Oppressed by the dichotomy which he detected between his vision of man as he ought to be and his view of man as he actually existed, his idealism degenerated into an empty bitterness towards all life. Regarding the present order as responsible for crippling and emasculating man, he hurled himself upon the institutions of modern society. Failing to rouse ought but criticism and rebuke for his attempts at reform, he began to regard himself in the role of outcast and martyr.

Abandoning himself to a materialism coupled with the hard doctrines of Nietzsche, he stripped himself of all the softer, more human qualities that he needed to balance his ardent tendencies towards the excesses of masochism. Even after having sacrificed himself, his pride remained and he demanded recognition of the price he paid for knowledge and power. Having cleansed himself of all weakness by the fire
of self torture, he demanded that he be regarded as a god.

In his testaments one may detect a growing note of frenzy and despair, a temper which finds its culmination in *The Testament of John Davidson*. This work betrays a mind that has begun to lose control of its perceptions of reality discloses evidences of an ingrown egomania. It is the passionate, unrestrained outpouring of a man who deliberately defied his race, his world and his God, and who, in trying to cross over the chasm separating man from divinity found himself falling into the depths of the abyss, helpless and alone.

Filled with frustration and impotent rage he sought for an escape out of the maze of chaos and contradiction by confronting the world with frenzied assertions of divine powers and found that he was still but a terror-stricken and hopeless man. Realizing that he had "outlived his power" he gave himself, finally, in one last act of defiance and desperation to the Cornish Sea. A year before he had written what might have served for his epitaph:

None should outlive his power...who kills
Himself subdues the conqueror of kings;
Exempt from death is he who takes his life;
My time has come.¹

¹Davidson, *John Davidson*, p. 46.
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