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The Life and Experiences of Francis Thompson as Reflected in His Poetry

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I.	Introduction	Pages
	An exposition of the problem	2 - 5

THE LIFE AND EXPERIENCES OF FRANCIS THOMPSON
AS REFLECTED IN HIS POETRY

Chapter II.	A Short Biography	6 - 15
	Childhood of 1832 by Wilfred Morgan	
	A brief account of subsequent years in the life of the poet	
	By	

Chapter III.	GRACE JESSEL	16 - 29
	Introduction of 1842	
	Issue of Romanticism	
	Development of human love	
	Teaching and towards children	
	An exposition of the poetry	

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the College
of Liberal Arts, Marquette University, in
Partial Fulfillment of the Require-
ments for the Degree of Bachelor
of Philosophy.

Chapter IV.	Through the Port of Imagery and	30 - 58
	Symbolism	
	Imagery and Symbolism	
	The Imagery of the Poet	
	The Imagery of the Poet	

MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

Chapter V.	May, 1932	59 - 62
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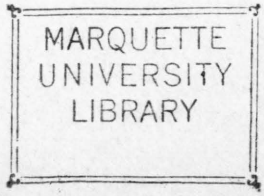


TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Pages
Chapter I. Introduction	
An exposition of the problem of the thesis	2 - 5
The inner experience of Francis Thompson	
The soul of the poet	
Chapter II. A Short Biography	6 -13
Discovery of poet by Wilfred Meynell	
A brief sketch of important episodes of the life of the poet	
Chapter III. Thompson's Aesthetic Idealization of Womanhood and Childhood	14 -29
Ideals of Womanhood	
Desensualization of human love	
Tenderness home towards children	
An exposition of the poetry bearing out these ideals	
Chapter IV. An Interpretation of "The Hound of Heaven"	30 -45
An exposition of the thought of the poem	
An analysis of the parallel between the poet's soul and the soul in the poem	
Chapter V. Thompson the Poet of Imagery and Mysticism	46 -58
Mystic tendencies	
Conception of Imagery as emanating from a devotion to the liturgical ritual of the Catholic Church	
Chapter VI. Conclusion	59- 62
Evaluation of poetic heritage	
Gift to the World	
Status as a poet	

J. Young, J. Stuart, "Francis Thompson", Catholic World, Vol. 125, p. 322, April 1907.

Chapter I.

Introduction

The analysis of the problem dealing with the "Life and Experiences of Francis Thompson as Reflected in his Poetry" has not previously been the subject of literary research. It will be the purpose of this thesis to analyze the poetry of Francis Thompson with the object of discovering in it a reflection of the life and experiences of the poet.

The data for the compilation of this thesis has been limited to books of biography, books containing the poetry of Francis Thompson, and periodicals containing articles on the life and poetry of the poet.

Francis Thompson has been acclaimed the poet of the return to God and the essential poet of essential christianity. It may truly be said that the spiritual element in human nature has never had a finer representative than this poet. He had been touched with the divine fire.

J. Stuart Young, relating of his personal experiences with the poet and of the source of his art, says, "He sang because he could not help singing --- and he craved no monetary reward. He accepted abnegation and sacrifice as the truest Christian Virtues." 1

1 Young, J. Stuart, "My Friend Francis Thompson", Catholic World, Vol. 125, p. 652, April 1927.

His verses embody an earnestness of purpose, a religious fervour, an overpowering inspiration, altogether different and unique in the realm of literature.

Thompson was truly Catholic in manner and in matter. His poetry taught that man's true food is immortal bread and wine and that in Christ centers and is solved the important problem of life, the marriage of the unit with the sum. His work is permeated with a peculiar and definite philosophy. He sings because he must express a spiritual union with his Creator. All through his works one gets the idea that he has suffered intensely. Pathos underlies each line of his poetry. In all the sad record of poet's lives he had the saddest life of all.

Loneliness stalked through his life and harassed him at every turn. Elizabeth Pullen, of this unfortunate experience writes, "Loneliness, the ghost that haunted his childish dreams, seems in very truth to have marked him for her own. Outcast from the tenderness of family affections, utterly homeless with neither health nor wealth to lighten the load of misery, yet he clung fast to his beliefs and kept in his inmost heart the unconquerable hope of immortality.

His experiences in life were not those of the ordinary man. Although he trod the earth in misery and want, weighed down by the oppressive cruelty of the World, Thompson died a little child - unspoiled,

uncontaminated, and eternally youthful. Of his like is the Kingdom of Heaven." 2

He writes always of his soul, of a spiritual union with his creator. He felt in every ripple of every stream, in every hue of the sky, in every call of the wind, the operation of a conscious, unseen power.

Thompson's mysticism was of the Franciscan descent, mysticism was to him morality carried to the nth degree. The facts of life for him were merely a flashing and shading of God's paradoxes. He is utterly a creature of dreams. He heard always above him a higher voice calling above the earth's discordant music to him ---

"From sky to sod

The World's unfolded bosom smells of God."

He was a poet of heights, he has never written a word to sully his fame, he has been acclaimed as the return in the twentieth century to Thomas a Kempis. He was always seeking eternal truth. He says, "The function of poetry is very clearly defined, --to see and restore the Divine idea of things free from the disfiguring accidents of their fall. To be the poet of the return to nature is somewhat, but I would be the poet of the return to God." 3

In an analysis of the poetry of this elusive,

2 Pullen, Elizabeth, "Francis Thompson", Catholic World, Vol. 127, p. 45, April 1928
3 Words of Francis Thompson

spiritual man, it must be kept in mind always that the beauty emanating from his verses is the hidden beauty

Chapter II.

A Short Biography

of the poet's own soul, the pulsating glory of that inner experience, radiating a spiritual union with the immortal creator of all poetry in the hearts of men, his Street, London, and saw standing before him an uncommonly God.

ragged wail of the underworld. He was clad in a beggar's coat but no shirt, broken shoes but no socks. Above the beggar's coat, there appeared the face of the man, not handsome, yet possessed of a certain brilliancy in his restless eyes. He was possessed of a peculiar pallor, due to his nocturnal life. The lips were tremulous and quivering as if arising from a depth of intensity of thought. His hands were noticeably artistic, white, long, slender, not designed for work. The slight hoodiness, which surrounded his face, vanished as if by magic when he talked. This pitiful remnant of three year's life in the streets of London, was Francis Thompson.

Francis Thompson, the son of Dr. Charles Thompson and Mary Norton Turner, whom his father hoped so ardently would bring success and honor to the name of Thompson was born at Number 7, Winkley Street, Preston, Lancashire, at Christmas-time in 1860. But what a disappointment that son turned out to be. He was sent to St. Cuthbert's College at Ushaw, a school for boys, near Durham, where he spent seven years, and became thoroughly familiar with the Greek and Latin classics.

Chapter II.

A Short Biography

In the spring of 1888, Mr. Wilfred Meynell, looked up from his desk in his editorial office in Essex Street, London, and saw standing before him an uncommonly ragged waif of the underworld. He was clad in a beggar's coat but no shirt, broken shoes but no socks. Above the beggar's coat, there appeared the face of the man, not handsome, yet possessed of a certain brilliancy in his restless eyes. He was possessed of a peculiar pallor, due to his ascetic life. The lips were tremulous and quivering as if arising from a depth of intensity of thought. His hands were noticeably artistic, white, long, slender, not designed for work. The slight moodiness, which shrouded his face, vanished as if by magic when he talked. This pitiful remnant of three year's life in the streets of London, was Francis Thompson.

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as well as with English literature. The word 'reserve' is written across the history of the schoolboy and the man. He was happiest alone at Ushaw, for the boys made fun of his peculiarities, in particular his absent mindedness. At Ushaw he showed a great deal of ability in English and also in Latin.

From Ushaw he went to Owen's College in Manchester to study medicine, but much against his will. A career in medicine was almost impossible for him. The buildings oppressed him and he spent the hours he should have spent in class, wandering in the museums and thumbing books in the library. While he was at College studying medicine, his mother sent him a copy of De Quincey's "Confessions of an English Opium Eater." He was fascinated by the book and felt in his life a parallel with that of De Quincey's. He felt himself involuntarily drawn to follow his example. Through the example of De Quincey Thompson began to take laudanum. The drug was a blessing to him, because it staved off tuberculosis and gave him strength to make life just possible. He was always filled with remorse, however, because of his drug-taking habit and felt always that he had to hide from himself, but he refers to the drug as the cause of the saving of his life.

From Manchester Francis went to Glasgow University. He never studied the things prescribed by his tutor. When he was supposedly being tutored he

would spend the time at the home of some musician. He was passionately fond of music. He knew all the time that he was fitted for poetry and practised continually the metre of poetry, he never intimated this thought however.

Thompson failed miserably at Glasgow, where his father had hoped he could get a doctor's degree more easily. In desperation his father set him to work as an assistant to a surgical instrument maker, but it took him two months to read an encyclopaedia. His father, utterly disgusted with him, threatened him with the alternative that if he did not succeed finally at something he would have to enlist in the army. Obedient always Thompson enlisted as a soldier. But he failed at recruiting also. He could not stand the grind, although he learned to become upright in bearing.

At one time before he studied medicine, he had also studied for the priesthood, but his strong nervous timidity kept him from being a priest. His absentmindedness was too grave a disability. This was a bitter disappointment to Thompson because he really had yearned to dedicate his life to God. It was this discovery that God had intended him for another task that prompted him to dedicate his written words to the Word made Flesh. This promise he radiated forth to all men in his poetry, the beauty of which embodied the Tabernacles of the Sad God of Hosts.

shop. He Thompson finally sold his medical books at Manchester and fled, writing his father that he could no longer be a burden to him. It was in London, where he trod Oxford Street in despair, destitute and impoverished, that he began his first real writing, and that the first acceptance of his vocation began. This first despair he described in "In No Strange Land." Thompson came to London that he might exist, and no more. He found a job as a "collector" in the book trade, but he lost this job finally because he would undertake no more than he had to. In London he learned of the Workhouses, of the homes of refuge. Reduced to beggary so that he sold pencils in the streets, and held the heads of horses, he began to acquire a sort of lower worldliness. Finally there came a time when he had no lodging and slept in the streets. A touching incident occurred, of which he speaks later in his poetry. A young girl of the streets befriended him, loved him and nursed him back to health in her own tiny room. When he regained his health she fled, leaving behind her a little note, calling down God's blessing upon him, and wishing him success. Thompson never forgot her and in "Sister Songs" he alludes to her as a "flower, fallen from the budded coronal of Spring." Mr. Maynell traced him to a chemist's shop, where the When he had regained strength, John McMaster, a church warden of St. Martin in the Fields, finally talked him into accepting employment in his bootmaker's

shop. He was not a success there either and all he talked of was literature and medicine.

After three month's service in the shops he went home for Christmas in 1886. He was cloaked by a mantle of reserve. It was known that he had suffered but no questions were asked of him, nor did he volunteer any information. Finally he left home again, and returned to the London Streets where he could not be the object of his family's pity.

After he returned to Phantom Street, the place of Mc Master's shop, the drug habit continued. He sent more than one article to "Merrie England", but he never heard, because he never inquired at the office of the editor, being lost in the oblivion of laudanum between the intervals of waiting for replies.

Mr. Meynell, who had begun to wonder at the identity of the man who had written the Essay on "Old Paganism and New", and the beautiful poem "Dream Tryst", finally set out to find the man. Mr. Meynell, who had at first pigeon-holed the articles and had forgotten them for some time, finally came upon them and published them. It was when the author did not come to claim his recompense that he set out in search of him.

Mr. Meynell traced him to a chemist's shop, where the day before, Thompson in despair, seeing his verses in print and believing that he had been cheated of his due, decided to end it all, by taking an overdose

of laudanum. He retired to the Arches of Covent Garden and prepared to die. Thompson had already taken half the dose when he felt a hand plucking at his sleeve. He thought in his delirium that it was Thomas Chatterton at his side, but it was in reality Mr. Meynell who had traced him from the chemist's shop by his description. Thus it was that Thompson finally appeared at the office of Mr. Meynell, at his anxious request. Thompson had at last fallen into kind hands. Although Francis had been subject to the most abject misery in the London Streets, the talent that slumbered within him had not been stifled. As Everard Meynell says in a passage of his famous biography:

"The streets somehow had nurtured a poet and trained a journalist. He had gone down into poverty so absolute that he was often without pen and paper, and now emerged a pressman; not his happiness, nor his tenderness, nor his sensibility had been marred, like his constitution, by his experiences. To be the target of such pains as it is the habit of the world to deplore as the extreme disaster, and yet keep alive the young flame of his poetry; to be under compulsion to watch the ignominies of the town, and yet never to be, nor think himself ignominious, to establish the certitude of his virtue; to keep flourishing an infinite tenderness and capability for the delicacies and gentleness of love, these were the triumphs of his immunity; Thompson's muse rose from the penal waters fresh as Botticelli's Venus. It had not been more marvellous if Sandro's lady with dry curls had risen from a real unplumbed, salt, estranging sea, instead of from the silly ripples of Florentine Convention."

Mr. Meynell who realized that Thompson was in need of medical attention placed him with the Premonstratum Fathers at Stovington. Here between 1893-1897, Thompson wrote and published the whole of his poetical work. He lived later with the Franciscans at Crowley and elsewhere fighting bravely against consumption.

As he grew busier with journalism under the kind guidance of the Meynell's he grew gradually weaker and more peevish. A change to the country was advised, where he became the guest of Mr. Wilfrid Blunt at Pantasaph, not far from Stovington.

On November 2, 1907, he entered the hospital of St. John and St. Elizabeth, London, where he passed away quietly on November the thirteenth.

Fading from a garden to a grave

Passing without a tear into the Stars.

A friend has written "It was part of him to die in the month of the dead. His death was the last dissolving harmony in a life of clashing discords. There were elements in his character which were the air and fire and dew of songs. Yet no genius had so sad a life -- not Keats, not Chatterton, not Poe -- and we are tempted to echo his own words, written in retrospect, yet felt none the less keenly."

Ah! Mist --

Designer infinite!

Ah! Must thou char the wood ere thou canst
live with it!

His published work is comprised in three slender volumes entitled "Poems", "Sister Songs", and "New Poems". The songs written by Thompson sprung from Thompson's idealistic attitude towards womanhood and childhood. The poems show a deep respect for Catholicism. All the titles of his poetry concerning the ideal of woman give us an intimate picture of his love for the greatest woman of all, Our Lady. Such poems as the "Assumpta Maria", "The Mistress of Vision", "The After Woman" and "Grace of the Way" are especially dedicated to the Blessed Mother. She it was, no doubt, who gave him inspiration to sing of such lofty subjects and to rise above the praising of carnal man. Never has the sublimated enthusiasm for the bodily and spiritual beauty of womanhood found such an expression between the eyes of the Stuarts and our own. "Without love", wrote Tagore, "no poetry can be beautiful, for all beautiful poetry comes from the heart", and again "the most beautiful thing in love poetry is love." The moral greatness of a nation depends on its attitude towards women. This same test may be applied to a love poet. The woman of Thompson's ideal is the one of whom he says

This could I paint my inward sight
 This were Our Lady of the night
 She leans on her front's lucency
 The starlight of her purity
 For as the white rays of that star
 The union of all clande are

Chapter III.

Thompson's Aesthetic Idealization
of Womanhood and Childhood

Thompson's idealistic attitude towards women shows a deeprooted Catholicism. All the titles of his poetry concerning the ideal of woman give us an intimate picture of his love for the greatest woman of all, Our Lady. Such poems as the "Assumpta Maria", "The Mistress of Vision", "The After Woman" and "Grace of the Way" are especially dedicated to the Blessed Mother. She it was, no doubt, who gave him inspiration to sing of such lofty subjects and to rise above the praising of carnal man. Never has the sublimated enthusiasm for the bodily and spiritual beauty of womanhood found such an expression between the age of the Stuarts and our own. "Without love", wrote Thompson, "no poetry can be beautiful, for all beautiful poetry comes from the heart", and again "the most beautiful thing in love poetry is love." The moral greatness of a nation depends on its attitude towards women. This same test may be applied to a love poet. The woman of Thompson's ideal is the one of whom he says

This could I paint my inmost sight
This were Our Lady of the night
She bears on her front's luceny
The Starlight of her purity
For as the white rays of that star
The union of all clouds are

She sums all virtues that may be
In her sweet light of purity.

This Greenaugh White, writing of Thompson's view of the feminine ideal, says that "As he contemplates the feminine ideal the poet is rapt out of himself; his love transpires in adoration; he apotheosizes woman until she attains cosmic proportions; by the woman comes salvation. Thus he ranges himself amid the new school of so-called "feminist writers", and illustrates, besides, devotion to the Blessed Virgin."

The poem "Before her Portrait in Youth" is especially dedicated to Alice Meynell, whom Francis admired as his especial friend and rescuer. In this poem all the wages and abstinencies of a dispossessed life unite in a passionate claim upon the past.

"So I, in very lowlihead of love,
Too slowly reverencing,
To let one thought's light foot full smooth
Tread near the living consecrated thing -
Treasure me thy cast youth
This outworn vesture, tenant less of thee,
Hath yet my knee,
For that, with show and semblance fair
Of the past Her
Who once the beautiful, discarded raiment bare,
It cheateth me.
As gale to gale drifts breath

1 White, Greenaugh, A Poetical Problem, Sewanee Review, Vol. 6, p.45, April, 1898.

self-Of blossom's death,

So, dropping down the years from hour to hour,

This dead youth's scent is wafted to me to-day

I sit, and from the fragrance dream the flower."

It is hard to find anywhere in poetry anything more delicate and beautiful of its kind than the

"Dream Tryst", "Her Portrait", "Manus Animam Pinxit".

This is not the usual sort of amatory verse. These poems see in the body but a veil and vesture of the spirit within, their predominant cry is --

"O be true

To your Soul, dearest, as my life to you!"

Francis Thompson in these poems has taken all true womanhood into his debt. A certain passionate pain vibrates through these love poems. The joy and pain of love pass hand in hand through the lyrics and he reaches a final outburst in the lines

"Now in these last spent drops, slow, slower shed,
Love dies, love dies, love dies -- oh, love is dead."

"Love in Dian's Lap," says a writer in Harpers, "stands out as the purest expression of Platonic love in modern poetry. Sublimated in thought, solemn, and majestic in diction, these poems were more fit to chant organ tones under the high vaults of a Gothic Cathedral than to be sung to the lyre in a lady's boudoir. They are as hyper-spiritual as Shelley's "Epipsychidion", but there is never a renunciation of Shelley's sensuous

self-surrender." P 2 "Exit", he says

Thompson had completely broken away from the so-called "fleshly School" of love poetry. Of Thompson's aesthetic view of woman's physical beauty, a Sister of Notre Dame says, "He is keenly sensitive to the charms of physical beauty, but he never forgets that the beautiful body is but the casket containing the priceless gem of the soul". 3 His ideal of feminine beauty is of the delicate, sad, aesthetic Pre-Raphaelite type. The feature that interested him most in woman, was her eyes. He laments the fact that so few ancient singers have noticed the eyes of woman. He pays a special and beautiful tribute to the eyes in the little poem, "The Making of Viola", he says -

"Scoop, young Jesus for her eyes
Which Wood-browned pools of Paradise
Cast a star therein to drown
Like a torch in cavern brown,
Sink a burning star to drown
Whelmed in eyes of Viola."

Of a perfect woman he says in a tiny poem "Domus Tua,"

"A perfect Woman - thine be loved
Her body is a temple of God.
At Doom-bar dare I make avow
I have loved the beauty of thy house."

2 Harper's Weekly, Vol. 51, Pt.2, p. 1868, Dec. 12, 1907
3 A Sister of Notre Dame, The Message of Francis Thompson, p. 28.

In "Manus Animam Pinxit", he says - his spiritual
 sensibilities lifts the earth heavenwards
 "O therefore, you who are ion something of
 an eternal aspiration. In the one case
 What words, being to such mysteries
 As raiment to the body is e of the spirit
 of faith. Thompson preserved a certain
 Should rather hide than tell regard to the
 intensity of love. He bows down in awe
 Chaste and intelligential love each indivi-
 dual soul and recognizes in that mystery
 Whose form is as a grave. He admits
 of no earthly love but only of the Divine
 Hushed with the cooing of an unseen dove;
 Whose spirit to my touch thrills purer far,
 Than is the tingling of a silver bell;
 Whose body other ladies well might bear
 As soul - yea, which it profanation were
 For all but you to take as fleshly woof
 Being spirit truest proof;
 Whose spirit sure is lineal to that
 Which sang Magnificat."

Thompson in transfiguring the passion of
 human love with the purity of the Catholic ideal,
 followed in the footsteps of Dante. As Father Cuthbert
 says in an article on Francis Thompson in the Catholic
 World for March 1908:

"Not since Dante has poet so transfigured
 the passion of human love with the
 purity of Catholic thought, and at the
 same time left it so convincingly human.
 Beatrice might accept the homage of
 "Love in Dian's Lap", and yet remain
 the inviolate mistress of spiritualized
 passion. Thompson's treatment of
 human love as contrasted with the
 Elizabethan ideal is interesting. The
 Elizabethan poets would at best draw
 Heaven down to earth, whereas on the

Father Cuthbert, "Francis Thompson", Cath. World, Vol. 36,
 p. 431, 432, Mar., 1908

other hand, Thompson with his spiritual sensitiveness lifts the earth heavenwards and catches in the emotion something of an eternal aspiration. In the one case the spirit of man is made to subserve passion, on the other earthly passion is made to subserve the life of the spirit of faith. Thompson preserved a certain reverential aloofness with regard to the intimacy of love. He bows down in awe before the mystery hidden in each individual soul and recognizes in that mystery the higher claim to God. He admits of no earthly love but only of the Divine Creator. He did not dare touch that inner sanctuary for fear the judgment of Ozias might befall him." 4

Just as Thompson was attracted to the purity of woman, he was also attracted by the innocence of children. He does not, however, like Stevenson stoop to their level except in the beautiful poem "Little Jesus". He loved them with a reverential love, feared them with a reverential fear. From the childhood point of view he looked into the world and found its smallness; then he looked beyond this world and found its greatness.

In "The Making of Viola" he describes the creating of a little child in heaven. By a most beautiful conceit he conveys to an idea of the dignity, the grandeur, the pricelessness of the child's soul and body.

The tenderness of Blake and the reverent wonder of Wordsworth are exquisitely combined in Thompson's poetry on Childhood, a Sister of Notre Dame says,

5 A Sister "In Thompson's poetry on childhood" Francis Thompson, p. 40.

4 Father Cuthbert, "Francis Thompson", Cath. World, Vol. 86, p. 481, Oct. Mar., 1908

we have the tenderness and familiarity of Blake and the reverent wonder of Wordsworth, but we have more. The love of a child, which to many world-worn souls brings balm and healing and comfort, was to the poor self-tortured spirit of Thompson a fresh source of pain. Their innocent prattle, their caprice, their waywardness, even their very love-tokens transform themselves into thorns which torment his sad heart. That he is strongly attracted to them is very evident." 5

He says -

"For if in Eden as on earth are we,

I sure shall keep a younger company."

Although Francis loved and was loved by children he was never quite one with them. In "The Poppy", he says

"A child and a man paired side by side

Treading the skirts of eventide

Between the clasp of his hand and hers

Lay, felt not, twenty withered years."

Of all Thompson's poems on children "The Poppy" is the finest. Of this masterpiece Gladys W.

Barnes writes:

"It is a beautiful melancholy poem, which tells of the poet's love for a little girl, and the pathos he feels in the difference between the child-love she gives to him, with the withering poppy, and the love she will later give to another. There is an intangible beauty in the sadness of the poem. It is one of Thompson's simplest, though there are some sixteen metaphors or similes in the first seven quatrains." 6

5 A Sister of Notre Dame, The Message of Francis Thompson, p. 40.
 6 Barnes, G. W., "Francis Thompson", Poet Lore, Vol. 19, p. 239, March, 1915.

These lines of "The Poppy" are especially sad.

"Love! I fall into the claws of Time
But lasts within a leaved rhyme
All that the world of me esteem,
My withered dreams, my withered dreams."

There is anguish in this cry. A. A. Cock in "A Poetical Kempis" says: "The Visions lost in the stupor of a drug, the dreams lying in aches of the past, the power suspended like heavy smoke have here the quintessential pathos." 7 The love of the child opens an uncured wound. The poet could not see what the child saw - a gay flower in a joyous earth. He might have shared her love and gladness, but the vision of his post wells up before him and the lines are foreshadowed with a subtle morbidity.

"The Daisy", best known because of its simplicity, tells of the meeting of a little girl on the Sussex Downs and how they strolled and talked of wise, idle, childish things.

"She looked a little wistfully
Then went her sunshiny way
The sea's eye had a mist on it
And the leaves fell from the day."

John Davidson has said of "The Daisy" "Here are dominion - domination over language, and a sincerity as of Robert Burns." In the closing lines of the poem we find a trace of moralizing that is almost unknown in Thompson. The lines

7 Cock, A. A., A Poetical Kempis, Dublin Review, Vol.149, p. 257, 1911.

read.

charges of Monica and Sylvia, the two young daughters of Alice and Wilfred

"Nothing begins and nothing ends but in their soul". There are wonderful things that is not paid with moan; rights of faith, of hope, and of love; but here, For we are born in other's pain from a vivid realization of the And perish in our own."

The poem "To Monica Thought Dying" is to listen to someone sobbing in the night, and to be inconsolable. The lines are positively haunting and we have in them the splendid image of Death holding state among the little broken play-things, thrice intolerable with

"This dreadful childish babble on his tongue."

The poem "To My God Child" is noted for its largeness of imagination.

"This laboring vast Tellurian galleon in welcoming Riding at anchor off the Orient Sun to joy. Had broken its cable, and stood out to pace Down some froze Arctic of the aerial Ways; And now, back warping from the inclement main Its voyagous shroudages drenched with icy rain, It swung into its azure roads again."

Thompson has here likened the earth to a ship at anchor in the sun in expressing the idea of a cold spring.

The series of poems entitled "Sister Songs" is the best known work of the poet next to his famous ode "The Hound of Heaven". Of the thoughts of faith, hope, and love in the series of poems entitled "Sister Songs" a Sister of Notre Dame writes:

8 A Sister of Notre Dame, The Message of Francis Thompson, p. 42
 9 Bronner "In 'Sister Songs' he celebrates the Independent, Vol. 64, p. 99, June 1908

charms of Monica and Sylvia, the two young daughters of Alice and Wilfred Meynell, whose "young sex is yet but in their soul". There are wonderful thoughts in these poems, thoughts of faith, of hope, and of love; but here, too, the inevitable sadness resulting from a vivid realization of the mutability of youth, as of all created things, is expressed in the unfading lines." 8

"Sister Songs" is a pean to spring. In an exquisite description of "Sister Songs" Milton Bronner says:

"It is drenched with the dews of it.
 It is perfumed with the smells of it.
 It shines with the tender greens of it. There is a morning light in the figures of speech, a thrilling music in the verses, a happy lighthearted ring that sets the work apart." 9

It tells of how spring in all nature helped him in welcoming little Sylvia. The season wakens him to joy.

"From its red leash my heart strains tamelessly
 For spring leaps in the womb of the young year!
 Nay! was it not brought forth before,
 And we waited, to behold it,
 Till the sun's hand should unfold it,
 What the year's young bosom bore?
 Even so, it came, nor knew we that it came
 In the sun's eclipse
 Yet the birds have plighted vows,
 And from the branches piped each other's name,
 Yet the season all the boughs,

8 A Sister of Notre Dame, The Message of Francis Thompson, p.42
 9 Bronner, Milton, "Francis Thompson", The Independent, Vol.64, p. 99, June 1908.

Has kindled to the finger tips --
 Mark yonder, how the long laburnum drips
 Its jocund spilth of fire, its honey of wild flame!
 Yea, and myself put on swift quickening
 And answer to the presence of a sudden spring.
 From cloud-zoned pinnacles of the secret spirit
 Song folk precipitant in dizzying streams."

Spring's little children then join him in singing to Sylvia;

"The leaves dance in the breath of Spring
 I bid them dance
 I bid them sing
 For the limpid glance
 Of my lady ling."

Music breaks upon his ear and he sees the elves
 of earth filling the air with their languorous forms. The
 fairy elves, having assembled to this music, gather round
 spring.

"Where its umbrage was enrooted
 Sat, white - suikd
 Sat, green - amiced and bare - footed
 Spring amid her minstrelsy."

In the midst of all the lovely children of Spring
 is Sylvia. Sylvia, who scaled the castle of his heart with
 a kiss. Of the dedication of the poem to Sylvia and Monica
 and the particular part each child played in the poet's
 life, A. A. Cock says in Dublin Review of October, 1911

"In gratitude to the child, therefore, who

10 Cock, A. A., "Francis Thompson", Dublin Review, Vol. 149, p. 248, October 1911.

has restored to him his vanished hopes
and near forgotten bliss, he beseeches
of spring a blessing for Sylvia. Spring
shall take her forever into her retinue
and the soul of the poet shall follow
her until she search

'With auspice large and tutelary gleams,
Appointed solemn courts, and covenanted streams.'

The second part of 'Sister Songs' is
dedicated to Monica, who rescues the poet
from yet another care. She taught him an
invisible, intangible and inapprehensible
beauty. No poet has beaten so painfully
against the cage-bars of the flesh, no
poet has been so humbled before the incarnate
Göd." 10

Monica came as a rescue to his unaccompanied day.

Thompson becomes humbled at the thought of the soul within
her, at the Reality and beauty of which she was but a
poetical expression. He likens his state to one in a
mirage. He says,

"As an Arab journeyeth
Through a sand of Ayaman,
Lean Thirst, lolling its cracked tongue,
Lagging by his side along;
And a rusty - winged Death
Grating its low flight before,
Casting ribbed shadows o'er
The blank desert, blank and tan;
He lifts by hap toward where the morning's roots wed
His weary stare --
Sees, although they plushless mutes are,
Set in a silver air
Fountains of gelid shoots are

10 Cock, A. A., "Francis Thompson", Dublin Review, Vol.
149, p. 268, October 1911.

Making the daylight fairest fair,
 Sees the palm and tamarind-flower,
 Tangle the tresses of a phantom wind;
 A sight like innocence when one has sinned!
 A green and mardin freshness smiling there
 While with unblinking glare
 The tawny-hided desert crouches watching her.
 Tis a vision swift and trackless fugitive
 Yet the greeneries Elysian
 He has known in tracts afar;
 Thus the enamoring fountains flow
 There the very palms grow
 By rare-gummed Sava or Herbalimar
 Such a watered dream has tarried
 Trembling on my desert arid."

The second part of this poem is very complicated and obscure and is an exception to the simplicity of most of Thompson's poems on children. The first part of "Sister Songs" is a charming medley of ideas wrapped about and entangled in fancy but through it all Thompson is unnatural, the thought of the poem is too slim for the beauty of diction Thompson employs and the result is disappointing, one gets the feeling that the poem is top-heavy. Lines of particular beauty are these which suggest the ministering touch laid upon his heart by the little street-child in the early days of misery in the London Streets.

"I waited the inevitable last imagination of

Then there came past
 A child, like thee, a spring-flower, but a flower
 Fallen from the budded coronal of Spring
 And through the city streets blown withering
 She passed - O brave, sad, lovingest, tender thing!

And of her own scant pittance did she give
 That I might eat and live
 Then fled, a swift and trackless fugitive
 Therefore I kissed in thee
 The beauty of childhood, so divine for me."

He climaxes the poem with the thought that the
 child-girl before him is a child woman in which young sex
 lies brooding. This mystery of hidden sex is a kingly
 minor, a ruler taking rule of the ruled. This hidden sex
 is analogous only to the Incarnation.

"The heavens decree
 All power fulfil itself as soul in thee
 For supreme spirit was to clay

And Law from its own servants learned a law
 And Light besought a lamp unto its way
 And Awe was ruined in awe

At one small house of Nazareth
 And Golgatha
 Saw Breath to breathlessness resign its breath

And Life do homage for its crown to death -
 So is all power, as soul in thee, increased!
 Of the imagery and delicate imagination of

H. Gardner, Edward G., "Francis Thompson", The Month, Vol. 91, p. 135, July 1898.

"Sister Songs" Edmund Gardner writes, "'Sister Songs' is full of rich imagery, of delicate imagination and of a peculiarly subtle musical charm, it is perhaps the most ethereal and intangible love poem written since the 'Vita Nirova' of Dante." 11

Milton Bronner, one of the enthusiastic admirers of "Sister Songs", says "Sister Songs" contains an intense worship of the soul of womanhood. The first part is not only one of the most beautiful things Thompson ever wrote, but one of the most exquisite compositions of the later nineteenth century era."

Of child-hood Thompson was a master poet. He never forgot that he was no longer a child, so although children were very close to his heart, he sang of them, but not as one of them, since he could never forget that he was no longer a child. Neither could he forget that in his religion the child of the world's desire is inseparably associated with the Maid of Bethlehem.

Many of his poems on childhood are charged with a fatal self conscious sadness and pessimism, which makes their beauty death-hued.

Father Cuthbert, of the freedom with which Francis Thompson wrote on the subject of childhood, and the relief they exerted on his most serious moods writes

"The simple gaiety breaking easily through the subdued pain of his life, like a child's laughter through its tears, the somewhat wayward fun which would come

12 Fr. Cuthbert, "An Appreciation of Francis Thompson", p. 487, Mar-Oct 1903.

13 Barnes, "An Appreciation of Francis Thompson", 11 Gardner, Edmund G., "Francis Thompson", The Month, Vol 91, p. 135, July 1898.

as a sigh of relief into his most serious moods, and the moan which would come in spite of himself at the end of an hour's quiet merriment -- All this is reflected in his poems when he wandered into "the nurseries of heaven " It was with a sense of native freedom that he came into the city of the child and felt the cool breath of childhood upon his brow." 12

His spirit was wreathed into smiles when he wrote "The Making of Viola", and "The Daisy", and this quaint relaxation accounts for the lilt in the verse of "Ex Ore Infantium". Always at the end of each poem on childhood a note, a moan of sadness is felt. Thompson realized that he could not play at the make-believe of childhood, life was not after all a makebelieve, thus he woke from his dream of childhood sorrowing.

"The charm of the child-poetry", says Gladys W. Barnes, "lies chiefly in the instant appeal it makes to our love and reverence for childhood. His child poems are among his most easily read and most widely known poems." 13

"I sought no more, that, after which I strayed
 In fancy of man or maid
 But still within the little children's eyes
 Seem'd something, something that rejoiced
 They at least are for us, surely for all
 I turned me to them wistfully
 But just as their young eyes grew wiser fair
 With knowing answers there

12 Fr. Cuthbert, "Francis Thompson", Catholic World, Vol.86, p. 487, Mar-Oct 1908.

13 Barnes, Gladys W., "An Appreciation of Francis Thompson", Poet Lore, Vol. 26, p. 241, March 1915.

Chapter IV.

An Interpretation of "The Hound of Heaven"

Coventry Patmore in extolling the virtues of

Thompson's great master piece says:

" 'The Hound of Heaven', in which God's long pursuit and final conquest of the resisting soul is described, is a torrent of as humanly impressive verse as was ever inspired by a natural affection. Mr. Thompson places himself by this poem in the front rank of the pioneers of the movement which, if it be not checked before, by premature formulation and by popular and profane perversion, must end in creating "a new heaven and a new earth". Poetry of the very highest and most austere order is almost the only form in which the carollaring of the doctrine Incarnation, to which the deepest minds are now awakening, can be safely approached. " 1

"The Hound of Heaven" is the poet's "Credo".

It is a spiritual autobiography. Through disappointment and denial he learns to accept his solitary lot.

"I sought no more, that, after which I strayed
 In face of man or maid
 But still within the little children's eyes
 Seems something, something that replies,
 They at least are for me, surely for me!
 I turned me to them wistfully
 But just as their young eyes grew sudden fair
 With dawning answers there
 Their angel plucked them from me by the hair."

1 Patmore, Coventry, "Francis Thompson", Fortnightly Review, Vol. 61, p. 22, March 1908.

The allegory in "The Hound of Heaven" is likened to Tennyson's "Holy Grail" by an anonymous writer in London Quarterly Review. The quotation reads:

"It is the same experience of defeat and disillusion which meets us as in one of the most subtle and suggestive religious allegories of our own or any age, Tennyson's 'Holy Grail'. There, too, one has heard the voice that no true heart once hearing can deny or mistake, shrinks from the absolute self-surrender that Eternal love demands and builds himself refuge after refuge in wealth, in honour, in domestic love, only to find there the bitter experience renewed." 2

It is Thompson's penitential psalm which opened up in him the flood gates of song that had been lying mute within him, it is his utterance from out of the depths which brought him salvation. Thompson went back to the seventeenth century for the spirituality of the verse in "The Hound of Heaven." P. A. Silliard writes:

"Filled with high thought and conscious of his strength he harked back to the spirituality of the seventeenth century, for the full strong sail of enraptured verse was necessary for one who would, like Milton, pierce the heavens and open to the soul the celestial harmonies." 3

The title "The Hound of Heaven" is strange, it startles at first because it is so bold and fearless. Yet the title is well chosen since it emphasizes the truth that no malevolence can approach in persistence the Eternal Benevolence in its pursuit of the human soul. Of

2 "Francis Thompson", Anon., London Quarterly Review, Vol. 83, p. 35, Jan. 1908.

3 Silliard, P. A., "A Great Catholic Poet", Westminster Review, Vol. 171, p. 425, April 1909.

the two-fold human desire to escape from God and to find satisfaction elsewhere T. E. Wright says in the following quotation: "The human desire here depicted is two-fold. The unnatural attempt to escape from God in His own universe and the complementary and equally vain desire to find life's delight and satisfaction elsewhere". 4

"The Hound of Heaven" points to the way of the Cross", says a sister of Notre Dame in her book on "The Message of Francis Thompson."

" 'The Hound of Heaven' points to the way of the cross, the path of complete renunciation whereon walk the heroes of the spiritual life with face steadfastly towards Jerusalem. It is the triumphant cry of a soul tried and purified in the fire of tribulation. A cry which goes straight to the hearts of many who find in it the expression of certain moods of their own soul, certain phases of their own spiritual life. A cry which reaches all." 5

In the first stanza of the poem is contained a summary of the whole story. It portrays the soul lured on by false premises, climbing up deceptive hills of earthly glory, each time to be hurled into a canyon of disappointment and sorrow. As the soul is groveling in the pit of gloom, God, in the form of a Divine Comforter, comes to its aid. The keynote of the tragedy lies in the words "I fled Him". An examination of these additional lines, "I fled Him down the nights and down the days" have a geographical significance, just as all directions leading

4 Wright, T. E., "Francis Thompson", p. 43
 5 A Sister of Notre Dame "The Message of Francis Thompson", p. 76-77.

away from the North Pole are south, so all directions leading away from God are dawn. The soul by the cleansing waters of baptism basks in the light of God's smile and pays homage to Him unconsciously, but the minute the soul turns its attention from God it goes down from the sunny peaceful heights, wanders into a strange land and immediately begins to waste its substance. The soul all unconscious, however, wanders on, there is no half-line, no regrets, no looking or turning backwards. The soul sees the years stretching out before it, enticing it. Thompson goes on to say

"I fled Him down the labyrinthian ways
Of my own mind,"

He finds himself hopelessly entangled in a labyrinth of philosophy. He tries to persuade himself that he can hide from God. He expects to hide himself under the guise of "running laughter", amid the joys of life; he thought he would not need God's help.

In interpreting the lines "Up Vistaed hopes I sped", Sister Mary de Lourdes Macklin says:

"Hope is a strong beautiful barque which speeds lightly before the wind, weathers the fiercest gale, and rides fiercely through the rocks and shoals when the anchor is to be cast, only in the bright harbor of Eternity. But when the soul had the perishable things of earth for the goal of his hopes he found himself--
'Precipitated adown titanic glooms
of chasid fears.' " 6

Courage, spurred on by hope, however, dies,

darkness hides the gleaming star of hope from view and despair and despondency take the place of hope. Even in spite of utter despair the soul in the depths of the chasm feels that he can escape "from those strong feet that followed, followed after," but while it is struggling in the abyss the dauntless Lover finally overtakes him. The Pursuer finds it bruised and bleeding. Broken and helpless the soul has to listen to the unwelcome words

"All things betray thee who betrayest Me."

In the following two quotations T. E. Wright expresses the hesitancy of the soul to give up life's interest to follow the pursuing Lover. The refrain of the poem is the deep truth that flight from the Holy Compassion is a betrayal of man's purpose in life. The quotation hinges on the lines

"All things betray thee who betrayest Me."

"We have here the first instance of a series of somewhat futile attempts to find self realization and self completion away from companionship with Divine Love. The soul understands here that it was love that followed, but he was loath to give up life's interest. He heard those 'Strong feet that followed', feet of holy urgency, combined with calm, patient, 'reposeful dignity'." 7

"The ever-recurring refrain of the poem expresses the deep truth that flight from the Holy Compassion is a betrayal of the purpose which entrusted us with the choice of our way and that eternally seeks our good." 8

7 Wright, T. E., "Francis Thompson", p. 44
8 Ibid., P. 45.

boundless Love in "The Hound of Heaven" is inordinate, it sways man's soul, but it is not a sordid love. The soul always has lofty ideals but in spite of its noble aspiration it misses in its blindness the highest and best -- the love of God. Man-soul lavishes fellow-men and hopes for love in return so he knocks for admission at their hearts. He stands knocking at

Louder "A hearted casement, curtained red;

Trellised with intertwining charities."

He begs "out-law wise" for human sympathy and human affection, although it knows the "love of Him who follows" and why does he still flee? The answer is because

"I was sore adread,

Lest having Him, I should have naught beside

But if one little casement parted wide

The gust of His approach would clash it to

Fear wist not to evade, as Love wist to pursue."

Of the lines "I was sore adread

Lest having Him, I should have naught beside"

T. E. Wright says:

"This apparent harshness and violence represents the natural working of life to a fugitive from God. One who will not have Him, Who is the heart of all kinship and friendship, shuts that door of life in his own face." 9

"Little Casement" is very expressive since it emphasizes the contrast between human and divine love. Human love so narrow and little and Divine love which is

boundless in its limits. The unloving world rejects him; now he is at a loss where to turn. He lifts his eyes to heaven, but instead of thinking of the "Heaven of Heaven" he is fascinated and enthralled by the beauty of the night sky. The brilliance of the night sky held the soul entranced, and he sought to flee the Pursuer in the contemplation of its beauty. A quotation from Sister Mary de Lourdes Macklin reads:

"The soft beauty of the moon and the splendor of the thousands of stars charm his heart, hold him entranced. As the brilliant orbs smile tenderly upon him a great love of beauty takes possession of him. So with hopes revived this eager soul flies." 10

"Across the margent of the world
 He storms
 The gold gateways of the stars
 Smiting for shelter on their clang'd bars."

With some subtle persistence he frets his way into

"The pale ports o' the moon."

He finds no shelter here either, one responds with the jangle of closed bars, the other

"With dulcet jars and silvern chatter."

He calls to the morning and the evening to help him hide from the eyes of the tremendous Lover, but to no avail. The fact that soul calls to the morning and the evening to help him hide from the eyes of Lover, T. E. Wright considers a daring conception, he says in the

10 Sister Mary de Lourdes Macklin, "An Interpretation of the Hound of Heaven", p. 98.

following quotation:

"The psychic element in this daring conception is the human attempt to escape from the thought of God and of the disappointing human sympathies in boundless imaginations, as far removed as possible from these bounded ways of human litigations. We can understand that Thompson knew the impulse to forget his own failure in revels of pure fancy." 11

Hungry for love the soul demands admittance into the heart of beauty, in fact, it tries to obtain it by force. Again it is outlawed, for the starry spheres are always faithful to their Maker, forever singing as they shine. It grows tired of pleading with the stars, then it tries the wiles of Dawn, hoping that she will welcome it with open arms and will banquet it

"In her wind-walled palace

Underneath her azured dais."

Aurora rejects him also for she is a faithful subject of the King and pleases only those who serve her master. More and more he begins to realize that it is impossible to try to evade Him who is pursuing. The winds, like escaped wild horses with whistling manes, take him across.

"The long Savannahs of the blue

They clanged his chariot 'thwart a heaven

Plasly with flying lightnings round the

spurn o' their feet"

But to no avail, still with never-ending patience and passion

"Come on the following Feet
And a Voice above their beat -
Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me."

Then he turns his attention to little children,
but disillusionment again awaits him

"I sought no more that after which I strayed
In face of man or maid
But still within the little children's eyes
Seems something, something that replies
They at least are for me, surely for me!
I turned me to them very wistfully
But just as their young eyes grew sudden fair
With dawning answers there
Their angel plucked them from me by the hair."

The significance of the plucking by the hair
expresses extreme peril. The angel cannot trust his
charges to one who turns his back on God. Thompson's great
love for children is expressed also in "The Hound of
Heaven". Of this particular incident in this poem as
correlated with the other poems on children T. E. Wright
says:

"This little incident concerning the
love of little children is the idea
expressed in "Sister Songs". Thompson
relates of the debt he owes to children
at a crisis in his life. His poems
"Daisy", and "The Poppy", both end on
a wonderful note with a feeling of
inevitable difference between himself
and them. Thompson, being what he was,
very lovable of nature, yet with an
inward unnaturalness, would feel a
check to the outgoing of the child-

instinct toward him, as if a mysterious hand were laid upon it. Human children are cut off from his deeper life, and he turns to the children of nature and seeks intimacy and comfort there." 12

The human ambition and the realization of it are described in one of the most delicate and searching expressions in literature, of what fellowship with nature can be. That is why the disappointment of the man-soul is so great when he finds out that intimacy with Mother nature and her children is not for him either.

"Let me greet you lip to lip
Let me twine with your caresses
Wantoning
With our Lady - Mother's vagrant tresses
Banqueting
With her in her wind-walled palace
Underneath her azured dais.
Quaffing, as your taintless way is
From a chalice
Lucent - Weeping out of the dayspring."

Thompson's "Wantoning
With Our Lady-Mother's Vagrant tresses,"

is a suggestion of his longing for fellowship; the bond of fellowship expressed to him the most reverent of intimate relations.

"So it was done
I, in their delicate fellowship was one
Drew the bolt of Nature's secrecies."

12 Wright, T. E., "Francis Thompson", p. 50.

It is interesting to note here the emphasis upon I - "I", he says, "I, the one, who fled from God was admitted to his wondrous privilege". He glories here at the gift of insight with which he was endowed, even when he was least worthy. Of the soul finding satisfaction only in a personality rather, than an impersonal God T. E. Wright says: "Nature, without God is impersonal, and he, a person can find satisfying fellowship only with personality." 13

The fugitive finally comes to the end of his resources and he hears behind him the solemn, urgent tread of the following feet and the Voice surpassing them in swiftness

"So! Naught content's thee, who conten'st not Me!"

The end of man is to glorify his Maker, and the man who refuses to give his life back to God in thankfulness is an enemy of Nature. The fugitive finally realizes that his hopes have been illusory and begins to ponder upon the desolation which has come upon him. The soul of the poet cries out,

"Naked I wait thy love's uplifted Stroke!
 My harness piece by piece Thou has hewn from me,
 And smitten me to my knee;
 I am defenceless utterly
 I slept, methinks, and woe,
 And, slowly gazing, find me stripped in sleep.

13 Wright, T. E., "Francis Thompson", p. 55.

There is a real tragedy in the sense of emptiness of life in which he has put his trust. The note here is decidedly autobiographical.

"I, the rash lustihead of my young powers,
 I shook the pillaring hours
 And pulled my life upon me; grimed with smears,
 I stand amid the dust o' the mounded years --
 My mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap."

These lines frankly show the poet's mental desolation over his own broken life.

"My freshness spent its wavering shower i' the dust
 And now my heart is as a broken fount
 Wherein tear-drippings stagnate, spilt down ever
 From the dank thoughts that shiver
 Upon the sighful branches of my mind."

From retrospect then the poet turns to anticipation of what is to be expected of the future. The lines are an indication of Thompson's infinite faith in eternity. He says --

"I dimly guess what Time in mists confounds;
 Yet ever and anon a trumpet sounds
 From the hid battlements of Eternity:
 Those shaken mists a space, unsettle, then
 Round the half-glimpsed turrets slowly and again;
 But not ere him who summoneth
 I first have seen, enwound
 With glooming robes purpureal, cypress crowned;
 His name I know, and what his trumpet saith."

Humbly and repentant then the soul yields himself
to his faithful lover

"That Voice is round me like a bursting sea."

His soul listens eagerly to the Voice which says

"And is thy earth so marred
Shattered in shard on shard."

T. E. Wright says of Thompson's renunciation of
the things of life for the sake of a greater joy in the
things of Christ:

"Thompson has been criticized as the advocate
of that spirit which gives up all life's
gladness for the sake of holier joys in
Christ. But none of these natural delights
of life, every satisfaction of our nature --
human sympathy, ardent imagination, the
love of little children, the choicest
intimacy with Nature -- all are found in
Him who is the life and ground of our
entire being, and in Whose will is our
tranquillity." 14

The poem ends with the beautiful but simple
lines which hold the secret of all religion.

"Rise, clasp My hand, and come!"

The following quotation from T. E. Wright expresses
the idea of the necessary relation between God and man;
this thought being derived from the lines "Rise, clasp My
hand and come!"

"God and man are necessary to each
other. God has made us for Himself,
and we cannot rest, and He cannot
rest, until we rest in Him." 15

In a further analysis of these lines Sister
Mary de Lourdes Macklin says:

"Rise, clasp my hand and come!" -- "is

14 Wright, T. E., "Francis Thompson", p. 60
15 Ibid., p. 61.

only an invitation, there is no coercion. God does not lift him up and lead him away. He leaves him free as He has always done. But can he refuse? Rise from the depths of misery into which you have been plunged; from the slough of despondency and despair, to the sun kissed heights with their life-giving air, where you walked with Me in your innocent childhood. Clasp My hand that you may walk securely, that you may not fall into the snares and pitfalls on the way, or be drawn aside by the siren voices that lead you to destruction. Come! Whither! Wherever My grace leads you." 16

All the essence of Thompson's faith in the God he loved is contained in these lines.

The poem is an interesting contrast between the soul of Francis and man's soul in general. Francis and "The Soul" in the poem delighted in the same things, but to Francis material things were meaningless until he saw in them the work of the Divine Author. The soul in the poem longed for affection from fellow-beings - Francis never sought the friendship of his fellow-beings, rather they sought him. All human love was to him a symbol of divine love. The lines

"To all swift things for swiftness did I sue
Clung to the whistling mane of every wind."

have been proved by some authors to portray the soul making a mad rush after this world's pleasures. Charles L. O'Donnell, in particular, makes biographical interpretation of Thompson, saying that "During those few

16 Sister Mary de Lourdes Macklin, "An Interpretation of the Hound of Heaven", p. 33.

terrible years he let himself go with the winds of fancy and threw himself on the swelling waves of every passion, desiring only to live to the full." This interpretation, however, is very incorrect, for Alice Meynell, who knew him better than most men, says that he "was one of the most innocent of men". George Schuster says of him "Of all the poets of later years he is the one who guarded best the citadel of his soul."

Of the truth that Francis never fled God consciously in his life, Sister Mary de Lourdes Macklin says:

"We have abundant proof that Francis never fled God in his love, that is consciously, deliberately and continually. His whole life belies such an accusation. His innocent childhood and youth; his aspiration to the priesthood, the blamelessness of his conduct during the years of want and misery in the London Streets, the love and admiration of the friend who rescued him and found his character pure gold, made all the brighter by the fires of tribulation through which he had passed. Above all his intense love of God, his reverence for all things holy is manifested in his works." 17

"The Hound of Heaven" is the most synthetically representative of the movements of English and, perhaps, European thought in the nineteenth century that we have. Synthetically representative and typical because a careful examination of the poem will show that in his own individual experiences there recorded Thompson speculated, suffered and solved with his times.

17 Sister Mary de Lourdes Macklin, "An Interpretation of the Hound of Heaven", p. 501

In "The Hound of Heaven" Thompson almost assumes the aspect of a prophet for the age. Of this great Ode, Gladys Barnes writes:

" 'The Hound of Heaven' is a great poem because it reveals a splendid faith in a personal God, a rare thing in modern poetry, so rare yet here stated with such assurance that Thompson almost assumes the aspect of a prophet for the age. The poem may be read as a profoundly significant reversal of the long attempt to bring a transcendent God down into His creation, a reversal which, finding first God, finds his Creator in Him, or it may appear to be no more (or no less) than the old" 18

'Seek Ye first the Kingdom of Heaven, of Christianity.'

Of the magnificent qualities of the poem Hugh A.

Allen says:

"It is a wonderful sermon in verse - this poem, a striking development of the stupendous truth that the love of God surpasseth all things and that His mercy and charity ruleth over all. The poem presents bewitching powers of presentation - the glory of its art, like love, fear and majesty of night can only be felt and never forgotten. It has a chaste and elegant beauty, pulsing with the deep surge of human emotions, a divine orchestration destined to endure and reveal in Francis Thompson a poet of unique and intimate charm, a resonant column in the House of Song." 19

18 Barnes, G. W., "Francis Thompson", Poet Lore, Vol. 26, p. 250, March 1915.

19 Allen, Hugh A., "Poet of the Return to God", Catholic World, Vol 107, p. 302-3, June 1918.

Chapter V.

Thompson, the Poet of Imagery and Mysticism

Thompson is especially noted for the beautiful imagery of his poetry. His imagery, his description of nature has that sensuous quality which we find in most of the poetry of the poets of nature. But more than that Thompson sees in animate nature, through the veil of old world mysticism and describes it in the imagery of religious ritual.

In his poetry all the phenomena of the universe take on human or animal forms, his writings are peopled with creatures of mythology. The winds have whistling manes and sweep like wild horses. The sun is bidden "to fling from (his) ear the burning curls". He speaks of "the long savannahs of the blue". He cannot touch color without intensifying it till it seems to quiver and burn. His silvers are clarified, his vermillions repured, his crimson is "illustrious sanguine, like a grape of blood. He is like his own Eastern Wizard, round whom in his baschish swoon

"All the rained gems of the old Tartarian's line
Shower in lustrous throbbings of tinged flame,"¹

through the quoted lines of poetry, says Martin Armstrong in an analysis of Thompson's use of imagery.

Thompson is a mystic and a symbolist because he sought and found union with the absolute symbolist, because all things become symbols of the things he saw in God; the

¹ Armstrong, Martin, "Francis Thompson", The Forum, Vol 50, p. 733, November, 1913.

Creator; for instance he likens the sun to

"A silver thurible

Fuming clouds of golden fire for a cloud of incense
smoke."

In praise of Thompson's handling of mystic poetry

R. F. Parsons says"

"He never forgot that mystic poetry was the child of theology, the flower in art and creed, he always strove for his ideal, and never failed. He manages to throw around his poems an atmosphere which makes us feel as if we, too, were present at his lonely vigils before the Blessed Sacrament, sometimes by means of direct religious thought, at other times by his use of sacred similes and metaphors, similes which carry with them a world of memories, metaphors of the mass of Benediction of the rites of his Church. On this account his poems will find a greater appreciation among Catholics than among Protestants. If Thompson, however, took up a purely religious thought or subject he did not breathe it in every day fashion, but breathed into it his own feelings of fear, of sadness, of love, of Hate." 2

The poems called "Sight and Insight" form a group of twelve poems in which Thompson writes particularly of his mysticism. These poems are without a doubt the most original in thought of all his work and are inseparably a part of Thompson's own personality. Their individuality, however, makes them very obscure since they are farthest removed from universal experience and sympathy. In an analysis of the point of view of the poems entitled "Sight and Insight" Gladys Barnes Writes:

"Their point of view is that of an

2 Parsons, R. F., "Francis Thompson", American Cath. Quarterly Review, Vol. 85, p. 747, November 1913.

introspective man, an ascetic aloof from the world, a seer of Visions, who pierces to the utmost heights of mysticism; there he is sometimes overtaken by human weakness and doubting, and falls back to the depths of grimmest melancholy, but rises again, the triumphant proclaimer of serene faith in the ultimate truth, beauty, love which transcends the realities of lesser-
visioned man." 3

Of this group "Sight and Insight" "The Orient Ode" shows the most beautiful imagery. Thompson likens, by means of exquisite figures, the passage of the sun across the sky to the elevation of the Host. In this poem is exemplified the poet's naive assumption of metaphorical relations.

"The Ode to the Setting Sun" is another poem filled with mysticism. Of "The Ode to the Setting Sun" T. E. Wright expresses the following analysis

"The 'Ode' opens with the strong contrasts of life, its springing music and its wasting breath, its alpha and omega, birth and death. Both the mysteries which stand at the boundaries of our existence are beautiful, but of these two the fairer thing is "Death". Of these mystic twins of Time, the younger, in accord with many analogies in Nature has the greater glory and power." 4

"It is the falling star that trails the light
It is the breaking wave that hath the might
The passing shower that rainbows maniple"

In this poem he also pays homage to the sun's glowing achievements. He says --

3 Barnes, Gladys W., "Francis Thompson," Poet Lore, Vol 26, p. 243, March 1915.

4 Wright, T. E., "Francis Thompson", p. 78.

"The earth was suckled at thy shining breast
 And in her veins is quick thy milky fire
 And all her births are propertied by thee

Her teeming centuries

Drew being from thine eyes

Thou fatts't the morrow of all quality

The glories of the garden he says are the handiwork of the sun.

"Thou sways't thy sceptred beam

O'er all delight and dream

Beauty is beautiful but in thy glance

And like a jocund maid

In garland-flowers arrayed

Before thy ark Earth keeps her sacred dance.

He ends the poem lamenting the sun's departing glory and blends again in the last line his own sadness. Deep gloom overtakes him as he realizes that all that man desires has death written upon its face

"Why have we longings of immortal pain

And all we long for mortal; Woe is me

And all our chants but chaplet sence decay

As mine this vanishing - nay, vanished Day."

Of the symbolism of the sun in "An Ode to the Setting Sun" T. E. Wright says:

"The blessed sun, whether it treads
 with exaltation the Eastern sea, or
 stings 'the West to angry red',
 is an image of Christ and a follower
 of Him who is the 'King-Maker of

Creation' and this affinity between Sun and Saviour assures him with that confidence with which the 'Ode' opens - that death surpasses in wonder the glory of birth." 5

Although there is a great deal of symbolism in "The Mistress of Vision" confusion does not result, rather there is a concentration on the light and colour in the garden. In the following quotation T. E. Wright says:

" 'The Mistress of Vision' is another example of Thompson's marvellous concentration on imagery. In this poem there is no confusion as a result of the profusion of symbols, but rather the focussing of manifold light and colour upon the garden which is more than any mundane personality. The secret of this dwelling-of the woman, the poet says, is beyond life and beyond death, though it is not true that, as some would interpret it, one must die before gaining entrance. The garden is a spiritual creation and transcends both earthly life and death. The concluding words leave no doubt that the mystic land is one to be gazed upon, not by mortal vision, but with the inward vision of spiritual imagination." 6

In the last line of the poem, as always, Thompson again expresses that in life and in poetry any power of discernment may be attained by means of the pain and sorrow of human experience

"From the fall precipitant
These dim snatches of her chant
Only have remained mine, --
That from spear and thorn alone
May be grown

5 Wright, T. E., "Francis Thompson", p. 81
6 Ibid., p. 89-90.

For the front of saint or singer any divinizing twine
Her song said that no springing

Paradise but evermore

Hangeth on a singing

That has chords of weeping

And that sings the after-sleeping

To souls which wake too sore.

Nothing can rival the imagery in "A Corymbus for Autumn". In this poem his muse rides forth, just as he describes the moon coming forth upon the trepidant air

"As if she had trodden the stars in press

Till the gold wine spurted over her dress

Till the gold wine gushed out round her feet

Spurted over her stained wear

And bubbled in golden froth at her feet

And hung like a whirlpool's mist round her."

He likens in the poem great things to small things. The melancholy of Autumn's decay and the coming of Winter weighed heavily upon him.

"The Dread of Height" is one of Thompson's most characteristic poems illustrating his trend towards the mystic and soulful. The poem is the cry of a soul that has stood high on a mountain peak and felt in the glory of fire and cloud eternal banishment from the small pleasurable things of mortality.

"Tis to have drunk too well. The drink that is divine

and is notable for its longevity. To Thompson the

Maketh the kind earth waste
 And breath intolerable.

He continues with the thought that no-one can know the depths of hell like him who has gazed down from heaven's viewpoint. With the cry of spiritual isolation is mingled the pleading voice of human impotence.

"Some hold, some stay,
 O difficult joy, I pray
 Some arms of thine
 Not only, only arm of mine
 Lest like a weary girl I fall
 From clasping love so high,
 And lacking thus thine arm, then may
 Most hapless I
 Turn utterly to love of basest role
 For low they fall whose fall is from the sky.

In the "Dread of Height" Thompson compares himself to the haggard (Wild Hawk) trained to keenest vision and pursuit by deprivation. He was afraid to sink low yet he sank, and again he feared to sink.

"For low they fall whose fall is from the sky".

Mysticism and allegory are combined in "A Fallen Yew" the life of a tree and the life of a man, with their dependence on the earth and on heaven for their sustenance, is a comparison on which Thompson draws in respect of their loneliness and their essential mystery. The Yew he drew as his example stood on the playground of Ushaw College and is notable for its longevity. To Thompson the Yew

seems an expression of immortal existence linking together the first of things and the last.

"It seemed arrival of the World's great prime
Made to un-edge the scythe of Time
And lost with stateliest rhyme."

The immortal strength of the tree was raised into being and kept in continual challenge to the elements.

"Upheaved its stubborn girth, and raised unriven
Against the whirl-blast and the leven
Defiant arms to Heaven.

In the splendid vigor and dauntlessness of the old Yew there is that vital element of indicative of the soul of Thompson - he says

"Stirred by the fall - predestined bark of Dis
Along my soul a bruit there is
Of echoing images
Reverberations of mortality
Spelt backwards from its death to me
Its life reads saddenedly."

Regarding the central idea of "A Fallen Yew" and the symbolism of the old tree T. E. Wright says:

"Thus we are led on to the central idea of the poem. This Yew with its unsearching heart of mystery is symbolic of an even more unsearchable secret that of the individual personality." 7

In another quotation concerning "An Anthem of Earth" the same writer says:

7 Wright, T. E., "Francis Thompson", p. 65.

8 Wright, T. E., "Francis Thompson", p. 132.

"There is self-analysis in the poem
 "An Anthem of Earth". The poem was
 written in 1892, four years after his
 rescue from the streets. The following
 verses show his hard fight with physical
 disabilities and mental uncertainties.
 Life to him was a coquetry with death,
 a rehearsal, for it was too much
 rehearsal for such a poor affair. The
 grave was in his blood. While the
 earth thrills with fair daffodils and
 the unborn wheat, his heart can only
 anticipate the abhorred spring of the
 underworld." 8

His only hope is that the saints in heaven will look with
 benediction upon a soul in hell and will plead with the
 angels for his hapless fate. He says he lives a life
 detached from human praise, from gold and from pleasure,
 only asking for love, for which he never grudges the price
 and his reward is to be

"Unowned by Love and Beauty".

He wonders what his destiny is to be, whether he
 must meet with the same fate as those alien to heaven and
 akin to the beasts? Or whether he must finally

"Tryst with the Sensualist".

The opening lines of the poem take up his relation-
 ship to the universe. "In Nescientness" man puts on the
 "fleshly lendings" of Mother Earth, unconscious of the
 stern obligations whereby he is invested

"Indeed this flesh, O Mother

A beggar's crown, a client's lodging

We find, which from thy hands we simply took

Naught dreaming of the after penury

In Nescientness.

There follows a period of joy in the boon of existence which has been granted him.

"In a little joy, in a little joy
We wear awhile, Thy sore insignia
Nor know the heel o' the neck."

Finally as he attains the full stature of man-hood he becomes conscious of the disabilities of mortality, its heritage of sin and woe - Nature no longer seems to him a kind of foster-mother, but a kind of beguiling inconstant siren. "Hope not of Nature; she nor gives nor teaches

She suffers thee to take
But what thy own hand reaches
And can itself make sovereign for thine ache

Man, the paragon of animals becomes as nothing to him.

"Ay, Mother, Mother
What is this man, thy darling kissed and cuffed.
Thou lustingly engenderest
To sweat and make his brag and rot
Crowned with all honor and shamefulnes?"

He passes from one mood of disillusionment to another until he finally penetrates with deep insight and with reconciling enthusiasm the earth's "Strange sanctities of pathos". The poem ends with a reverie on death, exposing the theory that death is not really the end of life but the opening gate to immortality. Death is magnificently conjured in a series of fantastic seventeenth century images ending with the magnificent concept.

Pontifical Death, that doth the crevasse bridge
 To the steep and trifold God.

Thompson's final outlook on life is truly supernatural, whereas in the beginning it was frankly Bacchic. The poem sings itself to a close.

"Now, mortal - sonlike
 I thou hast suckled, Mother, I at last
 Shall sustent be to thee. Here I untrammled
 Here I pluck loose the body's cerementing
 And break the tomb of life; here I shake off
 The bur o' the world, man's congregation shun,
 And to the antique order of the dead
 I take the tongueless vows: my cell is set
 Here in thy bosom; my trouble is ended
 In a little peace."

Imagination in Thompson far surpassed his emotional and thinking faculties. He has used images unequalled by Shakespeare. G. K. Chesterton has said that Thompson could produce such vast images that a smaller mind could not grasp him. In a poem called "Sunset" Thompson particularly has reached great width. The first picture he gives us is one a child could imagine. But soon he leads us through paths scarcely trod before by men. There is a scene a "mist in reefs of fire". From these

"A hundred sunbeams splinter in
 An azure atmosphere
 On cloudy archipelagos."

The second stanza opens with a vast sweeping ocean and as quickly changes

"As if some giant of the air and vapors drew
A sudden elemental sword.

"A cupola of gold" changes into a "bloody battle-field". There is no doubt that Thompson felt these intense emotions he expresses, surging in his soul, but he does not continually arouse these same emotions in the reader's soul, because he cannot comprehend him. Thompson's imagination was always stretching out to the stars, for he was ever searching for the infinite. His imagination really makes its appearance in two distinct manners -- his love for the stars and planets and his affection for children.

Thompson's imagination unbounded in its fecundity and controlled by reason has a broader and deeper insight into the totality of things and he is therefore better able to tune his song in harmony with cosmic perfection.

Thompson in his poems especially rich in imagery shows a kinship with the prophets and mystics of all races. An anonymous writer in *The Nation* for December 1917 writes:

"For Thompson our towers and gorgeous
palaces, our solemn temples and the
great globe itself have been the in-
substantial pageant, while the realities
have lain where foot of flesh shall never
tread and mortal eye shall never pierce.
In this he shows a kinship with the
prophets and mystics of all races, of
all climes and above all with those
Hebrew Seers, who beheld the holy city
of Jerusalem coming down from above,
the river of water of life, clear as
crystal and the Ancient of Days, with

58.

raiment white as snow and throne
of fiery flames. Thompson in his
ecstasy saw on Jacob's Ladder
To and fro
In ascension and demission
The star-flecked feet of Paradise." 9

Of the ethereal quality of his poetry A. F. Parsons
says:

"There is something ethereal about
his poetry because he personifies
the abstract and makes it act as
if it were the concrete. Yet in
his personification he is showing
again how paradoxical is his
imagination. Thompson sees no
difficulty in joining together both
the abstract and the concrete thereby
obtaining something elusive, yet
tangible." 10

Thompson finds nothing unusual in naming the
Milky way a beaten yolk of stars. He takes the setting
sun for a bee that stings the West to angry red. His use
of imagery may be likened to the ritual architecture of
the Church. Christ in his parable lent magic to small
unimportant things like a mustard seed. Thompson has
some of Christ's spirit since he fashioned for himself a
vision of heaven from the things about him. His most
important quality, however, was the seer's listening to
the heart-beats of truth. There is a flash of under-
standing between Francis Thompson's own world and that
other world of which he had a peculiar insight.

There is no poet whose flight makes so securely
for the sun and the stars as this poet. He is at home
among the stars, his soul keeping the loftiest company,
however ill his body fared on earth.

9 The Nation, "Francis Thompson", Vol 85, p. 535 July-Dec 1907
10 Parsons, R. F., "A Poetical Remnis", Am. Cath Quarterly
Review, Vol. 38, p. 747, October 1913.

Seventy Chapter VI. of his

Mr. Thompson Conclusion is spiritual

almost to a fault. He is always,

The message of Francis Thompson's poetry is not the story of his mystical contemplation but his translation of mere existence into spiritual rapture.

Catholicity was the foundation of Thompson's inspiration. Christ and His Blessed Mother were his most intimate friends. A Sister of Notre Dame writes:

"Thompson was a seer-missionary who discovered the secrets of God and proclaimed them to men. He was a religious poet and deliberately imposed upon himself limitations in his art. His readers may not agree with his principles and teachings, they may not be able to give him full sympathy of approbation, but if they are to give him strict justice as a poet, they must at least be able to extend to him a certain degree of sympathy of comprehension. Catholicity was the very foundation of his inspiration, Christ and His Blessed Mother were his intimate friends, his angel guardian was his dear familiar." 1

Thompson was not a religious poet in the strict sense that he sang only the praises of the saints. He seldom sang of Catholicism - he took a better way. Father Cuthbert says:

"He carried the spirit of Catholicism with him into the highways and byways of the world's life and whatever he found true and noble in his life the Catholic spirit within appropriated to itself, purifying earthly things of mere earthliness and investing them with a Catholic immortality." 2

1 A Sister of Notre Dame, "The Message of Francis Thompson," p. 21
 2 Father Cuthbert, "A Poetical Kempis", Catholic World, Vol 86, p. 480, Oct. - March 1908.

Coventry Patmore says of him:

"Mr. Thompson's poetry is spiritual almost to a fault. He is always, even in love, upon mountain heights of perception, where it is difficult for even disciplined mortality to breathe for long together. Mr. Thompson is a Titan among recent poets, but he should not forget that a Titan may require and obtain renovation of his strength by occasional acquaintance with the earth, without which the heavens themselves are weak and unstable. Since, however, Mr. Thompson's spirituality is a real ardour of life and not the mere negation of life, which passes, with most people, for spirituality, it seems somewhat ungracious to complain of its predominance. It is the greatest and noblest of defects and shines rather as an eminent virtue." 3

Thompson's song is a virginal song, pure and innocent of guile. The abandon, the swift tumultuousness of his verse is checked by a constant purity. His imagery may be wanton at times, but his thought is always chastened and controlled. His faith has done this thing for him and it is a supreme blessing. Happy should be the poet who leaves behind him only songs that man-kind may read without a blush. To have done otherwise would have been a supreme misfortune.

Alice Meynell writes of Thompson:

"History will certainly be busy with this remarkable man's life, as well as with his work; and this record will serve in the future, being at any rate strictly true. As to the fate of his poetry in the judgment

of his country, I have no misgivings. For no reactions of taste, no vicissitude of language, no change in the prevalent fashions of the arts, no altering sense of the music of verse can lessen the height or diminish the greatness of this poet's thought, or undo his experience, or unlive the life of this elect soul, or efface its passion. There is a call to our times from the noble seventeenth century, and this purely English poet cried "Adsum!" to the resounding summons." 4

"Come, and come strong
To the conspiracy of our spacious song!"

He will never become a "popular poet" because of the abstractness of his verse, and no-one is more conscious of this fact than Thompson himself, the lines of "The Cloud's Swan Song" allude to it with delicate pathos.

"Like grey clouds one by one my songs upsoar
Over my soul's cold peaks; and one by one
They loose their little rain, and are no more;
And whether well or ill, to tell me there is none."

"For 'tis an alien tongue, of alien things,
From all men's care, how miserably apart!
Even my friends say: 'Of what is this he sings?'
And barren is my song, and barren is my heart."

Thompson's gift to the world is not only in the beauty of his verses but in the seed it has sown in the hearts of other poets.

4 Meynell, Alice, "Francis Thompson", Vol 142, p. 172, Dublin Review, Jan. - April 1908.

In an appreciation of the poetry of Francis

Thompson E. J. O'Brien writes in *Poet Lore* for March 1908:

"To have felt and to have loved Francis Thompson's poetry is one of those spiritual gains in our lives, which, come what may, can never be lost entirely. He was rather a soul, a breath than a man. It is the mind of a woman in the heart of a child, so that we feel for him less of admiration than of tenderness and of gratitude and though his life was comparatively a dream, nevertheless it was, as Hazlitt has written, a dream of infinity and eternity, of death, the resurrection, and a judgment to come. Francis Thompson has done the world an inestimable good, if the world will but recognize it, for he has succeeded in cloaking all things vividly with the Divine Presence. Truly a miracle was performed by this poet inspired of God.

'And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.' " 5

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Date *May 2, 1932*