

**CATHOLIC IMAGERY IN THE POETRY  
OF FRANCIS THOMPSON**

**SISTER MARY EVELYN GORGES**

THE UNIVERSITY OF WICHITA

CATHOLIC IMAGERY IN THE POETRY  
OF FRANCIS THOMPSON

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BY  
SISTER MARY EVELYN GORGES

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To My Mother

"Whose spirit sure is lineal to that  
Which sang Magnificat."

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## PREFACE

One of the special glories of Francis Thompson is his "mixing heaven and earth" in his poetry, a poetry all compact with thought elaborated with exquisite subtlety, and an endless profusion and variety of metaphor and simile drawn from numerous sources, but most happily from his profound knowledge of the Old and New Testaments, and the philosophy, dogma, and liturgy of the Catholic Church. Born(1859) and reared a Catholic by parents who were converts to the Church, he was sent in 1870 to Ushaw College with the fond hope of his becoming a priest; but in 1877 a disastrous letter of the President to his father announced that Francis' "natural indolence" and absent-mindedness unfitted him for the priesthood. Upon his father's decision he entered Owens College as a medical student, but the dissecting room held no appeal for him. Giving up his professional studies he became a homeless wanderer in the London streets and finally, in 1888, after three years of poverty and suffering, he was discovered by the Meynells who continued their kindly ministrations until the day of his death (1907). After his deliverance from the London streets, he spent a year with the Premonstratarians at Storrington, Sussex, and from 1894-1896 he was in almost continual contact with the Capuchin Fathers in Pantasaph, Wales. These stray bits gathered from his biography coupled with the poet's native ingenuity are definitive of the reasons for the

wealth of Catholic imagery and allusion that saturates his poetry.

In this study an attempt will be made to explain allusions drawn from Catholic sources; to clarify the underlying thought implied in the imagery; furthermore, to illustrate the qualifying effect of this imagery upon Thompson's poetry; but above all to make it possible for those who do not possess a specialized knowledge of the Catholic content of his writings to understand, appreciate, and enjoy the combination of insensuous passion and spiritual fervor, courtly love and saintly reverence, ecclesiastical pageantry and liturgical splendor with which Francis Thompson invests his poetry.

The particular images selected for interpretation will be relegated to distinctive groups and a chapter devoted to the discussion of each. Citations from various poems will be noted to illustrate the figurative allusions; in each instance the source of the adaptation will be suggested and when necessary, an explanation of the meaning attached by the poet will be offered. A general resume at the close of each chapter will serve to clinch the points considered and to evaluate the effect of the imagery employed.

Should this study have the happy result of assisting the reader to understand and appreciate the beautiful sentiments expressed by Francis Thompson through the medium of Catholic imagery, the writer will feel that her efforts have been amply repaid.

Grateful acknowledgment is hereby made to Dr. Earle R. Davis, head of the Department of English, for his helpful

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## CHAPTER I

### THE HEART OF CHILDHOOD

"The heart of Childhood so divine for me."

"Know you what it is to be a child?" asks Francis Thompson in his essay on Shelly; and his answer tells us what it was to be the child "Francis":

It is to have a spirit yet streaming from the waters of baptism; it is to believe in love, to believe in loveliness, to believe in belief; it is to be so little that the elves can reach to whisper in your ear; it is to turn pumpkins into coaches, and mice into horses, lowness into loftiness, and nothing into everything, for each child has its fairy godmother in its own soul; it is to live in a nutshell and to count yourself the king of infinite space; it is

To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour;

it is to know not as yet that you are under sentence of life, nor petition that it be commuted into death. When we become conscious in dreaming that we dream, the dream is on the point of breaking; when we become conscious in living that we live, the ill dream is just beginning.<sup>1</sup>

It is one of the incredible and paradoxical things that a man like Thompson, with his temperament and his experience, should have had the impulse to write about children; and having followed this impulse, that he should have written so convincingly, so like a child, with something of the innocence of

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<sup>1</sup>Everard Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, fifth ed., p. 4.

a child.<sup>2</sup>

It would hardly be sufficiently inclusive to say merely that he loved children; he loved them with a reverential love.<sup>3</sup> In his attitude toward children he combines the sentiments of both Blake and Wordsworth. Blake is a child with children; hence his songs are characterized by utter simplicity and sincerity, whether he voices the child's joys or its sorrows. Wordsworth, with all the knowledge and understanding of Blake, sees in the child's simplicity and purity a reflex of the simplicity and purity of God; hence his attitude towards the child is marked by a profound reverence and wonder expressed in terms of measured restraint. In Thompson's poems we find expressed not only the tenderness and familiarity of Blake and the reverent wonder of Wordsworth,<sup>4</sup> but also an undeniable admission of the purifying influence of a child's love upon his own life. Solitary men like Thompson alone know the good they receive from the affectionate little beings who touch them by their innocent prattle and hold out their arms to them. It was our poet's salvation to be surrounded by the smiles of children. The caress of innocence seemed to him a guarantee of regener-

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<sup>2</sup>John A. Hutton, Guidance from Francis Thompson in Matters of Faith, pp. 18-19.

<sup>3</sup>T. J. Gerrard, "Francis Thompson, Poet," Catholic World, (Feb., 1908), p. 616.

<sup>4</sup>A Sister of Notre Dame, The Message of Francis Thompson, p. 78.

ation, almost a cleansing sacrament.<sup>5</sup> How beautifully the following lines express the lasting and purifying effect of his love for the child:<sup>6</sup>

But where I go, your face goes too,  
To watch lest I play false to you.

The Poppy, ll. 54-55

Although "Sister Songs" have been criticised as poems in which one must buffet with metaphors, breathless and protesting, as with a sea of billows, still it must be conceded that the prodigality of these expressions is but commensurate with the height and resplendence of the vision.<sup>7</sup> It is a pouring out of the treasures of love and adoration at the feet of childhood.<sup>8</sup> The songs are in reality a highly poetical development

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<sup>5</sup>Agnes de La Gorce, Francis Thompson, p.78.

Miss Katharine Douglas King, friend of Thompson, played with the Palace Court children and worked among the poor children of the East End. Francis one day visited her and her charges at the hospital in Leonard Square. In a subsequent letter to him, she says:

"I count you as an old friend, but I know now I did not really know you until Saturday. When you were by your little 'genius's'--Harry's--bed, and the baby boy Percy with the white shoes was at your knee, that was to me a revelation! I think of you now with that infant's serious, confiding face upturned to you. It was all so natural. To some people a child is a pretty ornamental addition. Your personality now seems incomplete without the child as the natural and exquisite finish to the whole man. Adieu, my dear friend."

Meynell, op. cit., pp. 191-192.

<sup>6</sup>Terence L. Connolly, S. J., Poems of Francis Thompson, p. 305.

<sup>7</sup>"Francis Thompson," Living Age, (July 26, 1913), p. 235.

<sup>8</sup>John Freeman, The Moderns, p. 313.

of the innocence of children and Thompson's spiritual reaction to their love, a love that purified his soul and excluded from his life all that was low and unworthy while it intensified his faith and hope.<sup>9</sup> Of this passage in The Proem,

Now therefore, thou who bring' st the year to birth,  
Who guid' st the bare and dabbled feet of May;  
Sweet stem to that rose Christ, who from the earth  
Suck' st our poor prayers, conveying them to Him;  
ll. 36-40

Dr. Hutton remarks that it is

an invocation, not to any pagan nine, but to Mary, the mother of Jesus! How well it would have been and would even now be for us all, were those who presume to deal with the souls of growing girls to submit what they propose to say, to the Virgin; and were they to commit to the flames everything from which she seems to avert her face!<sup>10</sup>

It was Thompson's prayer that the child's "white mind" was to remain pure and moist with God's grace "amid life's dusty drouth";

And thy white mind shall rest by my devising  
A Gideon-fleece amid life's dusty drouth.  
ll. 351-53, Part I

He sang in his poems the magic attraction of purity and wept over childhood that was early vitiated, and human lives sullied at their dawning.<sup>11</sup> How deeply this heartrending situation affected him can be gleaned from the following lines found among his notes:

Think of it. If Christ stood amidst your London slums, he could not say: 'Except you become as one of these

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<sup>9</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 315.

<sup>10</sup>Hutton, op. cit., pp. 37-38.

<sup>11</sup>La Gorce, op. cit., p. 103.

little children.' Far better your children were cast from the bridges of London, than they should become as one of these little ones.<sup>12</sup>

Solicitously he dedicates the children of whom he sings in the "Sister Songs" to our Blessed Lady,

Be aidant, tender Lady, to my lay!  
Of thy two maidens somewhat I must say,  
ll. 40-41

knowing, as St. Bernard devoutly exclaims, that

if you follow her guidance you will not go astray; if you ask her, you will not give up hope; if she upholds you, you will not stumble.<sup>13</sup>

It would be difficult indeed to find a more complete description of childish innocence than Thompson's in these lines of the "Daisy," in which he commemorates his meeting with a lovely village child whom he has immortalized.<sup>14</sup>

For standing artless as the air,  
And candid as the skies,  
She took the berries in her hand,  
And the love with her sweet eyes.  
ll. 33-36

It has been repeatedly urged that Francis Thompson was at heart a child,<sup>15</sup> and that the standpoint from which he first and foremost looked out upon life was that of a little child. From the childlike point of view he looked into this world and found its smallness; and he looked to the beyond and found the

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<sup>12</sup> Meynell, op. cit., p. 103.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Cardinal Gasparri, The Catholic Catechism, p. 91.

<sup>14</sup> Connolly, op. cit., p. 302.

<sup>15</sup> Alcysius J. Hogan, S. J., "The Master of Prose," Catholic World, (November, 1915), p. 188.

greatness of the beyond.<sup>16</sup> "Little Jesus" of which Thompson says that "nothing so tenderly devotional, and yet so daringly unconventional, has ever before been put into language of such simple power,"<sup>17</sup> presents the picture of a child thinking about the Infant Jesus. The thoughts are whimsical and simple. They presuppose the Child Jesus to have been as other children, a little shy and confused by the vastness of the world.<sup>18</sup> When one reflects that "It was on Christmas day, while meditating before the Christmas crib erected in Lady Chapel, Pantasaph,"<sup>19</sup> that Thompson was inspired to write this poem,<sup>20</sup> one need not marvel that the thought is so childlike and reflects "the daring and familiarity of the saints."<sup>21</sup> When Thompson remarked that a distinctive note of Crashaw's poems was "the human and loverlike tenderness" which pervades them and differentiates them "from the conventional style of English sacred poetry, with its solemn aloofness from sacred things,"<sup>22</sup> he possibly did not think that the remark applied equally to his own poetry, and in particular to "Little Jesus", which is indeed a triumph in its presentation of "a child's

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<sup>16</sup>Gerrard, op. cit., p. 616.

<sup>17</sup>John Thomson, Francis Thompson, the Preston-Born Poet, p. 41.

<sup>18</sup>Patrick Braybrooke, Some Victorian and Georgian Catholics, pp. 77-78.

<sup>19</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 313.

<sup>20</sup>Hutton, op. cit., p. 21.

<sup>21</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 313.

apprehension of the awful truth of those mysterious words,<sup>22</sup>  
'And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us'".(St. John,  
i,14)

Little Jesus, wast Thou shy  
Once, and just so small as I?  
And what did it feel like to be  
Out of Heaven, and just like me?

.....

Hadst Thou ever any toys,  
Like us little girls and boys?

.....

And did Thy Mother at the night  
Kiss Thee, and fold the clothes in  
right?  
And didst Thou feel quite good in  
bed,  
Kissed, and sweet, and Thy prayers  
said?

11. 1-4, 13-14, 31-34

Hutton naively remarks: "If you tell me what you think of children, I will tell you what kind of person you are." And so he conjectures that it may have been Thompson's function, in the great diplomacy of the Almighty, to restore the child; to take a child, as did his Master, and place him in the midst.<sup>23</sup> To Thompson, children were the gift of God. He would have us remember that we belong not to our fathers only, but to our children;<sup>24</sup> that "In the school-satchel lie the

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<sup>22</sup>Sister of Notre Dame, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>23</sup>Hutton, op. cit., pp. 20-21.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

keys of tomorrow."<sup>25</sup> We are facing the sad and pitiful reality that people are proposing to ease congestion by keeping out children. "But it might be a simpler way for such clever people to take themselves off in order to make room."<sup>26</sup>

Little Jesus bears a message to those who will find it. The London Tablet states that this poem deserves to be learned by heart, if only as a reminder to our grown-up pride of the great truth that "unless you become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."<sup>27</sup>

Thompson realized that children perceive with sharp definiteness and that they certainly see with exceptional intentness. Thus, when he has been disillusioned in his attempt of satisfying love from older folk, he seeks in the love of children understanding and surcease of his pain.<sup>28</sup>

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!  
The Hound of Heaven, ll. 52-56

Yes, it is the wondering inquiry and innocence in the child's eyes which fascinate and hold the attention of even those whose souls have long since drunk of the well of corruption:

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<sup>25</sup>Hogan, op. cit., p. 191.

<sup>26</sup>Hutton, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>27</sup>"Francis Thompson's Flaming Reinterpretation of Roman Catholicism," Current Opinion, (Feb. 1914), p. 131.

<sup>28</sup>Francis P. Lebuffe, S.J., Thompson's Hound of Heaven, p. 58.

I see and feel you--but to feel and see  
How two child-eyes have dulled a firma-  
ment for me.

To Stars, ll. 16-17

A child's eyes light up when something good and pleasing passes through its mind, for the eyes are the windows of the soul and the light of its joys and the shadows of its sorrows, but above all, its godlike innocence and simplicity, stream through these same windows. Castelli, in a delicate little poem, Vom Auge, voices what has been said:

Es sind zwei kleine Fensterlein  
In einem grossen Haus,  
Da schaut die ganze Welt hinein,  
Die ganze Welt heraus.

.....  
Auch was der Hausherr denkt und sieht  
Malt er ans Fenster an,  
Dass jeder, der vorueber geht,  
Es deutlich sehen kann.<sup>29</sup>

When looking upon the angelic loveliness of a little child, one is constrained to dwell, even nebulously, upon the thought that such beauty could only be made in heaven. Who but a heaven-inspired genius could have expressed such a thought so beautifully as has Francis Thompson in verse of such ineffable imagery.<sup>30</sup> To him, "children were the manufacture and gift of God Himself--a beautiful result of the joint services of God Himself, and of Jesus, and of the

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<sup>29</sup> LeBuffe, op. cit., pp. 59-60.

<sup>30</sup> J. Craig, "Francis Thompson and his Poetry," Catholic World, (August, 1922), p. 666.

angels."<sup>31</sup> This is the reason why the poet has succeeded, by a most beautiful conceit, in conveying to us an idea of the dignity, the grandeur, the pricelessness of the child's soul and body.<sup>32</sup> He makes God the principal character and the creation of Viola a Divine activity.<sup>33</sup> Thus the Father in Heaven calls upon the Blessed Virgin Mary to "spin a tress for Viola," and the angels reverently reiterate the injunction:

Spin, Queen Mary, a  
Brown tress for Viola!  
The Making of Viola, ll. 5-6

The angels are designated to "weave a woof" of "velvet flesh" to pall Viola, while Prince Jesus is entrusted with the creation of her eyes:

~~London, 1790~~  
Scoop, young Jesus, for her eyes,  
Wood-brown pools of Paradise--  
ll. 13-14

Now the body has been formed according to God's design; but it is totally lifeless, devoid of all sensation and animation. The life-giving principle, the soul, is now supplied through the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit:

Breathe, Lord Paraclete--  
Crystal soul for Viola!  
ll. 27-28

In this exquisite poem Thompson seems to show the influence of Crashaw. There is the same luxuriant imagery, the same

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<sup>31</sup>Hutton, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>32</sup>Sister of Notre Dame, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>33</sup>Braybrooke, op. cit., p. 75.

sweet tenderness transfigured by the same high faith.<sup>34</sup> But let us revert to Thompson's own statement for the ultimate explanation of his inspiration:

The spirit of such poems as The Making of Viola and The Judgement in Heaven is no mere medieval imitation, but the natural temper of my Catholic training in a simple provincial home.<sup>35</sup>

What critics thought of the beauty and artistic qualities of The Making of Viola may be seen from some of their comments. Mr. Garwin wrote to Wilfrid Meynell: "I cannot tell you what I think of the angelic ingenuousness of that poem; it exercised over me an instant fascination from which I shall never escape."<sup>36</sup> Professor Cook extols its sensuous but lovely imagery, its tenderness and perfect rhythm. The Nation of November 23, 1907, expresses its views as follows: "The words seem never to alight, they so bound and rebound, and are agile with life." "Never has there been such a dance of words," wrote Mrs. Meynell. "All other writers make their words dance on the ground with certain weight, but these go in the blue sky." Thompson himself had a deep love for this poem. In one of his penny notebooks was found the statement: "I would sooner lose all Sister Songs than my precious Making of Viola.<sup>37</sup>

There are some critics who seem to find a striking similarity between Thompson's Daisy and Wordsworth's poems in-

<sup>34</sup> Sister of Notre Dame, op. cit., pp. 37-38.

<sup>35</sup> Meynell, op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>37</sup> Connolly, op. cit., p. 309.

spired by childhood. It is true that the rhythm and form are <sup>as</sup> Wordsworthian, but the voice is the voice of another. It was the fathers of men that Wordsworth studied children. Thompson did not study them; he contemplated them. In his reverie they figure as beings of an order remote from ours. His poems are a revelation of the vanquished hopes and the hopeless bliss that the sight of childish innocence make a man dream of; for in the presence of children Thompson's own sense of isolation from human kind became doubly poignant.<sup>38</sup> Did he perhaps feel nearer heaven when <sup>he</sup> was in the company of children?

For if in Eden as on earth are we,  
I sure shall keep a younger company.  
To my Godchild, ll. 54-55

A wholly charming simplicity is manifested in Daisy. This simplicity, however, is not instinctive, but is cunningly achieved. It is not the simplicity of clear vision and plain narrative; it is but a mask of candor behind which a mood of lyrical exaltation only half hides its subtlety.<sup>39</sup> In this poem he celebrates his meeting with innocence in the person of a young girl on the Sussex hills near Storrington.<sup>40</sup>

The hills looks over konv theo South,  
And southward dreams the sea;  
And with the sea-breeze hand in hand  
Came innocence and she.  
ll. 5-8

In his essay, Finis Coronat Opus, Thompson writes:

<sup>38</sup> Charlton M. Lewis, "The Poetry of Francis Thompson," Yale Review, October, 1914, p. 113.

<sup>39</sup> Connolly, op. cit., pp. 301-302.

<sup>40</sup> Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties, p. 174.

I met a child today; a child with great candor of eyes. They who talk of children's instincts are at fault: she knew not that hell was in my soul, she knew only that softness was in my gaze. She had been gathering wild flowers, and offered them to me. To me, to me! I was inexpressibly touched and pleased. I spoke to her gently and with open confidence she began to talk. Heavens knows it was little enough she talked of! Commonest common things, pettiest childish things, fondest foolish things. Of her school, her toys, the strawberries in her garden, her little brothers and sisters--nothing, surely, to interest any man. Yet I listened enchanted. How simple it all was; how strange; how wonderful, how sweet! And she knew not that my eyes were anhungered of her, she knew not that my ears were gluttonous of her speech, she could not have understood it had I told her; none could, none...<sup>41</sup>

These words reveal more of Thompson's affection for childhood and the reaction the presence of children called forth in him than is at first apparent. They are almost a paraphrase of the poem:

Her beauty smoothed earth's furrowed face,  
She gave me tokens three:--  
A look, a word of her winsome mouth  
And a wild raspberry.

A berry red, a guileless look,  
A still word,--strings of sand!  
And yet they made my wild, wild heart  
Fly down to her little hand.

ll. 25-32

This is one of Thompson's few poems in which there is no gleam of hope, no spiritual consolation to strengthen one in the sadness that his lines produce.<sup>42</sup> Even Daisy, rather than easing the poet's grief, accentuates it.

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

<sup>41</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p.300.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 302.

She went her unremembering way,  
She went and left in me  
The pang of all the partings gone,  
And partings yet to be.  
ll. 41-48

Thompson's vocation as a poet was regarded by him as a sacred calling, a sort of anointed priesthood working for the honor and glory of God.<sup>43</sup> He felt it his mission to throb the spirits of men into the realization of the meaning of life: to make them feel whence they came, why here, and whither they tend.<sup>44</sup> When he was asked by the Meynells to act as godfather at the baptism of their last-born, he was so delighted that he later addressed a poem to this same child.<sup>45</sup> It is a poet's earnest wish and sincere prayer for little Francis, whom he visualizes as a poet greater than he himself could ever hope to be.

My song I do but hold for you in trust,  
I ask you but to blossom from my dust.  
When you have compassed all weak I began,  
Diviner poet, and ah! diviner man;  
ll. 34-37

Thompson imagines himself in heaven, looking down upon the world which needed him so little. Having had a consecrated eye for childhood, he expects to spend his eternity with the objects of his tender affections and tells his protege that when he, "the child of deathless song," has died and searches

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<sup>43</sup>E. H. J. O'Brien, "The Life and Poetry of Francis Thompson," Catholic World, (August, 1914), p. 604.

<sup>44</sup>Hugh Anthony Allen, "The Poet of the Return to God," Catholic World, (June, 1918), p. 289.

<sup>45</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 310.

the ranks of Paradise for his friend's countenance, he should not seek him among the "bearded counsellors of God," the friendly Capuchins with whom he has spent so many peaceful days, but he gives him this final word, "Look for me in the nurseries of heaven."

What more appropriate company could he have chosen! Despite his forty-eight years, says Stuart-Young, "Francis Thompson died a little child--unspoiled, uncontaminated, and eternally youthful. Of his like is the Kingdom of Heaven!"<sup>46</sup>

In this brief survey an attempt has been made to develop Thompson's philosophy of childhood as it is evidenced in his poetry. The first note he sounds is an intense and reverent love for the "heart of childhood so sacred" to him. Like Blake, he is tender, familiar and understanding; like Wordsworth, he is profoundly reverential, seeing the purity and simplicity of God reflected in the child. The mere presence of children was to him an incentive to good, purifying and elevating his ideals. Although charmed by their artless innocence and especially attracted by the alluring wistfulness he perceived in their eyes, his poor self-tortured spirit found in their love a fresh source of pain. (See especially Daisy and The Poppy, also Sister Songs, Part the Second, ll. 746-58). Finally, he regards children as a divine gift from the hand of the Creator, and in order that they may receive

<sup>46</sup>J. M. Stuart-Young, "My Friend, Francis Thompson," Catholic World, (August, 1927), p. 652.

the protection they need to maintain their innocence, he commends them to the care of our Blessed Lady.

Thompson has dedicated eight distinctive poems to childhood, all of which were published in the early nineties with the exception of Olivia. These poems will be read with a more intense interest and understanding if one recalls that each of them is based upon some experience or circumstance of the poet's life. In one of his casual walks along the common in Storrington he met a winsome village child, and Daisy was the result. He occasionally went picnicking with the Meynell children to Friston, Suffolk. On one of these outings Monica Meynell gave him a red poppy, clasping the poet's hand with the flower between, and we now read The Poppy in his collected poems. A few years later this same child became seriously ill with pneumonia. Seeing the death notice of a certain Monica Mary in the papers, Thompson at first thought it was Monica Meynell, and remembering the deep emotion it produced, he wrote To Monica Thought Dying. The Making of Viola commemorates the birth of Viola, the fifth child of the Meynells. Feeling himself considerably honored when being chosen to act as godfather at the baptism of Francis Meynell, he expressed his appreciation in the poem To My Godchild. A quiet meditation before the Christmas crib in Pantasaph inspired Little Jesus. A very brief poem, To Olivia, was found after his death and was undoubtedly a tribute to Olivia Meynell. The longest of his childhood poems, Sister Songs, was handed to his friends as a Christmas offering and was inspired by

Sylvia (Madeline) and Monica Meynell.

From these poems we learn that Thompson frequently associated with children and enjoyed the interchange of confidence which resulted from this companionship. We perceive not only the loneliness and poignant sorrows of his life expressed in his poetry, but also his simplicity and ready appreciation for favors rendered him by his friends. Moreover, the impression that remains with us after reading his childhood poems is that of a man who had an extraordinary insight into ordinary things and who, in spirit, was akin to children. The poems of this group do not contain his most vivid imagery nor do they exemplify significantly his peculiarities of diction. However, had he not shown that he possessed "a consecrated eye for childhood," some of his most appealing characteristics would now be buried in oblivion.

## CHAPTER II

### SYMBOL OF THE DIVINE

"I... am a lover--spiritual as light, and un-earthly as the love of one's angelic dreams."

"Without love," wrote Francis Thompson, "no poetry can be beautiful, for beautiful poetry comes from the heart." And again, "the most beautiful thing in love-poetry is love." Of this love, Thompson conceived highly and nobly.<sup>1</sup> His habitual attitude of soul saw in all human love a symbol of the divine. In his eyes love was a piteous failure unless it was "an image of the Supreme Love which gave meaning and reality to its seeming insanity."<sup>2</sup> He knew that as the radii of a circle draw closer to each other the nearer they draw to their common centre, so human hearts are more intimately united the nearer they approach to their common centre, Christ.<sup>3</sup> Human love, the precursor of Divine Love,<sup>4</sup> reigns transfigured in the verse of Francis Thompson.<sup>5</sup>

In another passage Thompson says that the mind seems un-

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<sup>1</sup>Sister of Notre Dame, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>2</sup>Meynell, op. cit., p. 173.

<sup>3</sup>Sister of Notre Dame, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>4</sup>Sister M. Madeleva, "The Prose of Francis Thompson," Catholic World, (January, 1923), p.459.

<sup>5</sup>Father Cuthbert, O.S.F.C., "Francis Thompson," Catholic World, (January, 1908), p. 483.

able to appreciate the beautiful face of woman until it has learned to appreciate the more beautiful beauty of her soul.<sup>6</sup>

How should I gauge what beauty is her dole,  
Who cannot see her countenance for her soul,  
As birds see not the casement for the sky?  
And, as 'tis check they prove its presence by,  
I know not of her body till I find  
My flight debarred the heaven of her mind.

Her Portrait, ll. 137-42

In his mind he had formed his ideal of womanhood, and this ideal was none other than She whom Wordsworth acclaimed "Our tainted nature's solitary boast." Only in so far as women approximate this ideal, are they worthy of honor, reverence and love.<sup>7</sup> Among the women with whom he had any intercourse or relationship, Mrs. Alice Meynell, the friend who was mother and sister to him and who called him "child", was the only one who fulfilled this ideal. He gave expression to his thoughts by saying that "Through her was shown me the uttermost of what love could be--the possible divinities and celestial prophecies of it. None other could have taught them quite thus, for none other had in her the like unconscious latencies of utter spirituality."<sup>8</sup> He conceived an idealistic worship for her, who was the only woman he ever loved. Shy of his own ardent emotions toward her, he once gave vent to his sentiments in one of his letters addressed to her:

<sup>6</sup>"Francis Thompson," Living Age, (July 26, 1913), p. 236.

<sup>7</sup>Sister of Notre Dame, op. cit., pp. 27-28.

<sup>8</sup>H. M. Ridley, "Great Friendships," Canadian Magazine, (November, 1922), pp. 51-52.

I know how it must tax you to endure me; for you are a friend, a mother; while I, over and above these, am a lover--spiritual as light, and un-earthly as the love of one's angelic dreams, if you will--but yet a lover; and even a seraph enamoured must be a trying guardian angel to have to do with.<sup>9</sup>

Giving full sway to his emotions, he addressed to Mrs. Meynell poems that were replete with the most ethereal, paradisal passion,<sup>10</sup> poems in which one recognizes again and again an incorporeal love, a purely spiritual affection--poems which "St. John of the Cross might have addressed to St. Theresa." This sequence, Love in Dian's Lap, is a most lovely tribute to a living ideal. Thompson yields honor to the poet,

Whatever singing-robe thou wear  
Has the Paradisal air;  
And some gold feather it has kept  
Shows what Floor it lately swept!

To a Poet Breaking Silence, ll. 68-71

yet not for an instant does he forget the woman. He pays her the superb distinction of charging her spiritual integrity with the responsibility of his own soul, declaring howll

Like to wind-sown sapling grow I from  
The clift, Sweet, of your skyward-jetting soul,--  
Manus Animan Pinxit, ll. 10-11

The spirituality of his love is beautifully exemplified in a passage of the poem just quoted, in which he couples his devotion to Mrs. Meynell with that of our Blessed Lady, praising the purity of her

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<sup>9</sup>Kunitz and Haycroft, British Authors of the Nineteenth Century, p. 619.

<sup>10</sup>Viola Meynell, Alice Meynell, A Memoir, pp. 108-109.

<sup>11</sup>John Freeman, Moderns, p. 311.

Whose spirit to my touch thrills purer far  
Than is the tingling of a silver bell;  
ll. 47-48

and then, in his sublimated enthusiasm for the spiritual beauty<sup>12</sup> of the lady of his song, he exalts her and points out her relation to the Virgin Mother, lauding her

Whose spirit sure is lineal to that  
Which sang Magnificat:  
ll. 53-54

In Scala Jacobi Portaque Eburnea, which Megroz says "is lit by the eyes of William Morris' Beata mea Domina and the vision of Rossetti's Blessed Damosel",<sup>13</sup> Thompson draws a parity between Mrs. Meynell's soul and Jacob's ladder and shows how human love becomes a ladder leading up to mystic visions of Christ as the Lover, the Bridegroom of the soul.<sup>14</sup>

Her soul from earth to Heaven lies,  
Like the ladder of the vision,  
Whereon go  
To and fro  
In ascension and demission,  
Star-flecked feet of Paradise.  
ll. 1-6

This comparison is particularly appropriate in view of the mystical interpretations of St. John of the Cross who speaks of it as the ladder of contemplation, the science of love "which enlightens the soul and at the same time kindles within it the fire of love till it ascends upward step by step

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<sup>12</sup>H. D. Traill, "Mr. Thompson's Poems," Nineteenth Century, (February, 1894).

<sup>13</sup>Megroz, op. cit., pp. 57-58.

<sup>14</sup>Katherine Brey, The Poets Chantry, p. 110.

unto God its Creator."<sup>15</sup>

There are perhaps few poets who have more completely broken away from what has been aptly termed the "fleshy school of love-poetry" than has Francis Thompson. He is keenly sensitive to the charms of physical beauty, but he never forgets that the beautiful body is but the casket containing that priceless, immortal gem, the soul.<sup>16</sup> "Domus Tua, an adaptation of the Psalmist's words, "I have loved the beauty of thy house; and the place where thy glory dwelleth," (Psalm XXV, 8) is an amplification of Thompson's reverence for woman:

A Perfect woman-Thine be laud!  
Her body is a temple of God.  
At Doom-bar dare I make avows:  
I have loved the beauty of Thy House.

ll. 1-4

Referring to Love in Dian's Lap Canon Yates writes: "Was woman ever more exquisitely sung? I do not know in the whole realm of English poetry a more noble tribute to noble womanhood."<sup>17</sup> The love there reflected reminds one of other loves immortalized in literature, such as Petrarch's love for Laura and Dante's love for Beatrice. In life, too, we have examples of this sort of love in the friendships that existed between Saint Claire and Saint Francis, and between Saint Theresa and Saint John of the Cross,<sup>18</sup> a love that is of the soul, and

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<sup>15</sup>Connolly, op. cit., pp. 344-45.

<sup>16</sup>Sister of Notre Dame, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>17</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>18</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 339.

with the soul coeval. In a number of his poems Thompson shows how perfectly love of the Creator and of the creature are united in the heart of a true lover. One of the best examples of this is found in the one entitled My Lady, the Tyraness:<sup>19</sup>

..... I have my heaven,  
For which no arm of hers has striven;  
Which solitary I must choose,  
And solitary win or lose.  
Ah, but not heaven my own endures!  
I must perforce  
Taste you, my stream, in God your source,--  
So steep my heaven in yours.  
ll. 49-56

And what purer, surer love has ever existed than that expressed in these lines:

Naught, lady I love  
In you but more is loved above;  
What made me, makes Him, yours.  
ll. 70-73

Thompson expresses this succinctly in Paganism Old and New, pointing out as he does the culmination of true love:

Poor, indeed, if this were all the promise which love unfolded to us--the encountering light of two flames from within their close-shut lanterns. Therefore sings Dante, and sing all noble poets after him, that Love in this world is a pilgrim and a wanderer, journeying to the New Jerusalem; not here is the consummation of his yearnings, in that mere knocking at the gates of union which we christen marriage, but beyond the pillars of death and the corridors of the grave, in the union of spirit to spirit within the containing spirit of God.<sup>20</sup>

And so Thompson, when he says that "with thee Love mingles

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<sup>19</sup>Sister of Notre Dame, op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>20</sup>Francis Thompson, Works, Prose, vol. III, p. 48.

aureoles", wishes to remind us that Christian love does not destroy natural love, but elevates it. Again, he extols virginal love as approaching nearer to the divine than any other human love. For in divine love, "the hold that falls not" when man beleaguers it, gives way before the assaults of God's love, for "its keys are at the cincture hung of God." Note how he illustrates this mystical marriage of the soul and God in the following lines:

Where, that the soul of either spouse  
Securelier clasp in either's house,  
They never breach at all  
Their walls corporeal.

Ad Castitatem, ll. 21-24

Attempting to give still greater weight to his exposition he "contrasts the pagan and Christian ideal of womanhood, showing that the loveliest traits of Christian womanhood are but a reflection of Mary."<sup>21</sup> The pagan regards Love as a transitory and perishable passion, born of the body and dying with the body, while the Christian recognizes Love as existing in the soul,<sup>22</sup> and finally culminating in the Beatific Vision:

When to love you is (O Christ's Spouse!)  
To love the beauty of His house;  
Then come the Isaian days; the old  
Shall dream; and our young men behold  
Vision--yea the vision of Thabor-mount,  
Which none to other shall recount,  
Because in all men's hearts shall be  
The seeing and the prophecy,

The After Woman, ll. 48-55

for then the "Mystery Play" (human love) is ended, and

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<sup>21</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 486.

<sup>22</sup>Thompson, op. cit., pp. 47-48.

"Christ is life" and "you (human love) the way."<sup>23</sup>

Coventry Patmore, a close acquaintance and friend of Thompson, labeled his poetry as 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..., he should not forget that a Titan may require and obtain renovation of his strength by occasional acquaintance with the earth.<sup>24</sup>

In several of his poems Thompson did meet this demand, apparently at least, if not in reality. Some of his own family seemed to find a "dangerous sensuality" in Dream-Tryst, possibly because it exhibits a Rossettian atmosphere. Katherine Tynan defends him:

Think of it! Was ever such profanation?  
Why, the poem might spring as a living  
fountain in the Courts of Paradise before  
the face of the most High.<sup>25</sup>

Thompson himself explained, when the poem was alluded to as erotic, that it was addressed to the memory of a girl whom he met when he was eleven years old. She was a school friend of his sister and had no knowledge of Francis' admiration.<sup>26</sup> The poem possesses a beautiful lyrical quality, and despite the apparent sensuousness against which his immediate family rebelled, it is imbued with that spiritual attitude so characteristic of Thompson. Witness these lines:

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<sup>23</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 488.

<sup>24</sup>Coventry Patmore, "Mr. Francis Thompson, A New Poet," Fortnightly Review, (January, 1894), p. 23.

<sup>25</sup>Major Poet Among Minors, Literary Digest, (August 3, 1918), p. 36.

<sup>26</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 394.

The chambers in the house of dreams  
Are fed with so divine an air,  
That Time's hoar wings grow young therein,  
And they who walk there are most fair.

ll. 17-20

Arab Love Song, as the title suggests, purports that the poet might be thinking with the heart of a Mohammedan and that the poem lacks all traces of spiritual elements.<sup>27</sup> But again, it is Christ Who speaks. He invites the maiden to leave the "black tents" of her tribe and possess the "red pavilion" of His heart--a further allusion to the mystical espousals between Christ and the soul.

Many of Thompson's readers must have been disillusioned when they reached the Epilogue of his dramatic sequence, A Narrow Vessel. Opening with a "rape of the lock," it promises to resemble the love poems of our modern poetry books. The girl alluded to was an actual girl named Maggie Bryan of a Welsh village. But suddenly the creature of muscle and bone slips from him, and in the last poem he confesses that the sequence is written solely in the interests of allegory, offering the following explanation:

Though God asks of the soul but to love him what it may, and is ready to give an increased love for a poor little, the soul feels that this infinite love demands naturally its whole self... it fears and recoils from the whole great surrender...it falls back with relieved contentment on some human love, a love on its own plane...<sup>28</sup>

and

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<sup>27</sup> Connolly, op. cit., p. 395.

<sup>28</sup> Meynell, op. cit., pp. 172-74.

Such a Soul, for saddest end,  
Finds Love the foe in Love the friend;  
And--ah, grief incredible!--  
Treads the way of Heaven, to Hell.  
Epilogue, ll. 17-20

William Rose Benet, in an article on Francis Thompson as "The Greatest Catholic Poet" says that his definite faith supplied his poetry with a strong underlying framework and that he found in the ritual of the Catholic Church infinite riches of imagery. Benet however did not distinctly apprehend Thompson's attitude toward human love, and by way of comment suggested "that both from his Catholic training and his own ingrained asceticism he looked upon the physical side of love as essentially sinful and unworthy."<sup>29</sup> In response to the article William Booth Papin addressed a letter to Benet which so completely satisfied his doubt that he had Papin's exposition printed:

You say in your article that Francis Thompson, "Both from his Catholic training and his own ingrained asceticism looked upon the physical side of love as essentially sinful and unworthy." I greatly doubt if even any ingrained asceticism in him made him draw any such conclusion, and he was too well informed (nay, 'learned') about Catholic dogma and doctrine to have believed, for an instant, in the essential sinfulness of the physical side of love. We Catholics are constantly coming upon in non-Catholic criticism and comment on Catholic teaching and belief, the literal nonsense that said teaching and belief holds to the essential sinfulness of the physical side of love. Catholic essential teaching and belief is quite to the contrary-- and my acquaintance with Thompson's poetry (and prose) gives me no inkling that he held to your

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<sup>29</sup>William R. Benet, "Greatest Catholic Poet," Saturday Review of Literature, (April 30, 1932), p. 701.

surmise, whether by natural temper or by Catholic training.

The Catholic teaching is emphatic in its protests and condemnations of the illicit use and enjoyment of that side of love. But in itself this thing (and use) the Catholic teaching holds to be good--as all things God made are in themselves and in their licit use and enjoyment good. Any, even casual, familiarity, say with Patmore's prose and poetry, could set you right in this matter--even his guarded comment upon the much misunderstood and difficult doctrine of virginity...<sup>30</sup>

When Thompson says that Love is the "child of Beauty and Awe," he gives us a synthesis of his ideal of love. When there is a perfect balance of Beauty and Awe, the passion of love is the greatest of virtues; but when this perfect balance is destroyed, it degenerates into the most bestial of vices, lust, though we have attractive and high-sounding names for it now. The Aesthetes of the Eighteen-Nineties drew near the danger-line when they overemphasized what they called Beauty. Today the danger is in the destruction of Awe--respect for the person or thing loved.<sup>31</sup>

Well may poets of our day learn much from Thompson in the point of sincerity.<sup>32</sup> He himself belongs to that order of love-poets whom he lauds as having shown the world that "passion, in putting on chastity, put on also tenfold beauty. For purity is the sum of all loveliness, as whiteness is the

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<sup>30</sup>Wm. Booth Papin, "Letter on Thompson," Saturday Review of Literature, (May 21, 1932), p. 747.

<sup>31</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 463.

<sup>32</sup>Marsden Hartley, Adventures in the Arts, p. 218.

sum of all colors."<sup>33</sup>

Thompson idealizes human love and perceives in it a symbol of the divine. Imbued with a purely spiritual attitude toward love, he beholds in the beautiful face of woman the "countenance of her soul." In one of his poems Scala Jacobi Portaque Eburnea he intimates that human love is a ladder leading to God. He furthermore insists that Christian love does not destroy natural love, but elevates it. Moreover, he suggests definitely that love of Creator and creature can be perfectly united in the heart of a true lover. Womankind receives a beautiful tribute in his love poetry, but the woman he seeks to honor must bear a resemblance to the greatest of all women who ever lived--to her "~~who~~ sang Magnificat".

It has been said that the only woman Thompson ever really loved was Mrs. Alice Meynell, who with her husband was responsible for his rescue from the London streets and who was the inspiration of his poesy. To her he addressed the most charming and ethereal poetry in which he celebrates not merely her physical beauty but her qualities of heart and mind as well. The entire sequence Love in Dian's Lap, which consists of eleven distinct poems, was written while he paced the library floor at Palace Court, the home of the Meynell family, and is his most affectionate tribute to the lady he so sincerely admired. Orison Tryst and the sonnet sequence

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<sup>33</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 49.

Ad Amicam were likewise inspired by Mrs. Meynell.

Thompson's abiding love for Mrs. Meynell had its origin in her genuine personality. The outstanding characteristic of this extraordinary woman was not her unceasing industry; it was not her motherliness in devotion to her eight children; neither was it her unusual and gifted intellect; but it was her deep spirituality. George Meredith, an intimate friend, said that she presented to him the image of one "accustomed to walk in holy places."<sup>34</sup> Mr. Le Galliene, a contemporary, gives this impression:

The touch of asceticism about her seemed but to accent the sensitive sympathy of her manner, the manner of one quite simply and humanly of this world, with all its varied interests, yet not of it. There was the charm of a beautiful abbess about her, with the added esprit of intellectual sophistication.<sup>35</sup>

It was in the home of this admirable woman that Francis Thompson "became the utterly dependent friend--the gentle, late, voluble, flushed, dozing visitor",<sup>36</sup> relying on her kindness and personal interest and sporting with her children. A penetrating poet and critic, Mrs. Meynell passed judgment on Thompson's works, praised especially his imagery, and suggested changes in phraseology which would tend to improve his diction. The letters which passed between them were generally more technical than personal, points of etymology or metre being discussed between them with a special

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<sup>34</sup> Viola Meynell, op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>35</sup> Connolly, op. cit., p. 339.

<sup>36</sup> Viola Meynell, op. cit., p. 70.

respect for each other's views.

Alice Meynell's instinctive quality seemed to be that of attracting others unwittingly by her charm of person and manner. It is readily conceived then that Francis Thompson who seemed so alone should have cultivated a lasting regard for her who was mother and sister to him and who called him her child. Realizing that she was the wife of another, he "uprooted" his heart, as he said. His only real love was itself a thing most circumscribed; it existed only to be checked. His biographer records a letter which bespeaks plainly the effort and pain of his sacrifice:

I yielded to the insistent commands of my conscience and uprooted my heart--as I supposed. Later, the renewed presence of the beloved lady renewed the love I thought deracinated. For a while I swung vacillant. I thought I owed it to her whom I loved more than my love of her finally to unroot that love, to pluck away the last fibers of it, that I might be beyond treachery to my resolved duty. And at this second effort I finished what the first had left incomplete. The initial agony had really been decisive, and to complete the process needed only resolution. But it left that lady still the first, the one veritable, full-orbed, and apocalyptic love of my life. Through her was shewn me the uttermost of what love could be--the possible divinities and celestial prophecies of it. None other could have taught them quite thus, for none other had in her the like unconscious latencies of utter spirituality. Surely she will one day realize them, as by her sweet, humble, and stainless life she has deserved to do.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Meynell, op. cit., p. 228.

### CHAPTER III

#### CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

"Give God his rightful place in your life."

As a man of literature Francis Thompson belongs to the eighteen-nineties. History has definitely placed him there, for all of his greatest creative work was either accomplished in or published during this last decade of the century. Furthermore, he was a spiritual child of the period in that the two chief characteristics of the nineties converged in his experience. Despair, the knowledge of sin, repentance, all the solitary griefs, agonized hopes and ashen flowers, he knew on the one hand, and on the other the exultant surge of resurrection, not partial, not momentary, as was the case with so many, but a triumphant entering into the full spirit of Catholicism out of which arose his best poetry.<sup>1</sup> He gives his impressions of the nineteenth century in an essay entitled Moestitiae Encomium, impressions which surge continually through his poems:

Alas for the nineteenth century, with so much pleasure, and so little joy; so much learning, and so little fruition; so many philosophers, and such little philosophy; so many seers, and such little foresight; so many teachers, and such an infinite wild

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<sup>1</sup>Calvert Alexander, S. J., The Catholic Literary Revival, p. 150.

vortex of doubt!<sup>2</sup>

Thompson perhaps did not realize that he himself was a seer--that he discovered the secrets of God and proclaimed them to men; that his poetry contained a philosophy of life drawn from his own experiences and Catholic training--a philosophy so significant and in harmony with the spirit of Christ that it cannot be overlooked.

We are God's creatures, destined to serve and glorify Him. In the Apocalypse of St. John is expressed the truth that God is not only the beginning, but the end of all creatures. "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, saith the Lord God, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." (i, 8). There is a direct reference to this in the opening lines of Thompson's Ode to the Setting Sun:

Alpha and Omega,<sup>3</sup> sadness and mirth,  
The springing music, and its wasting breath--  
The fairest things in life are Death and Birth,  
And of these two the fairer thing is Death.

ll. 1-4

These lines contrast the two great mysteries of Birth and Death which bound every man's existence. From God all creatures come; to Him all creatures tend. Since God is the Author of their being, creatures should seek their ultimate

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<sup>2</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 111.

<sup>3</sup>"Alpha" and "Omega" stand for ΑΩ, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, used by St. John to designate the Eternal Father, as illustrated in the citation, and three times Christ. Used of Our Lord, it implies His Divinity. The letters are often found on early coins, rings, paintings in catacombs, in frescoes of ancient churches, and on corner-stones to designate Christ.  
New Catholic Dictionary, p. 1.

perfection in Him. Man knows that he can do wrong, but he knows also that he should do right. He sees in his duty the obligation of submitting to the will of his Creator. If he wishes, he can act as though created joys were the ultimate object of his life. He can choose between the creature and the Creator, but in all his experiences he will discover, sooner or later, that earthly joys, however noble, however spiritual, cannot satisfy the longing of his soul. God alone can satisfy man's infinite desires; in Him alone can his mind have complete repose.<sup>4</sup>

In none of his poems does Thompson interpret these tenets of Christian philosophy so lucidly as in his masterpiece The Hound of Heaven, which Davies has styled an "epic of love that will not let us go."<sup>5</sup> It is a mysterious hunting story, as Agnes de La Gorce suggests. "We can really hear in these unequal cadences the panting and frightened sobs of a tracked being on the one hand, and the awful approach of the pursuer on the other."<sup>6</sup> The symbolic title itself is most suggestive. Father Le Buffe, a scholarly Jesuit, opens his analysis of the poem with the following comment:

With felicitous grace and reverential delicacy Thompson gives Our Lord an unwonted daring title, and throughout the poem never once explicitly refers to the metaphor. A lesser writer would inevitably have rendered the comparison very repel-

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<sup>4</sup>George D. Smith, An Outline of Catholic Teaching, pp. 15-17.

<sup>5</sup>Trevor H. Davies, Spiritual Voices in Modern Literature, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup>La Gorce, op. cit., p. 118.

lent. Thompson of course, had spiritual warrant for using such type of comparisons from the animal world. No phrase of Holy Writ is more current than "the Lamb of God". Each Holy Week we hear Isaias' plaint: "He shall be led as a sheep to the slaughter and shall be dumb as a lamb before his shearer." (Isaias, liii, 7). Opening the Apocalypse, once more we find another metaphor: "And one of the Ancients said to me: 'Weep not; behold the lion of the tribe of Juda, the root of David, hath prevailed to open the book. (Apoc., v, 5).<sup>7</sup>

Wilkinson says that the title is a daring symbol, "and in the hands of a merely talented poet, it would become offensive." But Thompson was a genius, and by putting his emphasis only on the noblest abstract qualities inherent in the nature of his symbol--on strength, and speed and certainty of approach --he relieves it of all that might otherwise be distasteful and even lifts it, exalting the symbol by that which it symbolizes into a higher range of meanings and suggestions.<sup>8</sup>

Father Connolly says that in Celtic mythology "hound" is a title of honor. The name of the romantic Irish hero of the Red Branch Cycle is Cuchulain, which means "The Hound of Cullan". He is frequently called "The Hound of Ulster."<sup>9</sup> The same writer makes a further reference to Papini who indicates, in his Life of St. Augustine, that this symbol was not unknown in the early Church of Africa. He calls attention to the fact that the name of one of the faithful found in a Punic inscription is "Kelbilim" which means "hound of

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<sup>7</sup> Le Buffe, op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> Connolly, op. cit., pp. 349-50.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 350.

divinity".<sup>10</sup>

Again, in view of Thompson's fondness for Shelley reflected in his sympathetic essay on the poet written at almost the same time as The Hound of Heaven, it is possible that the title may have been suggested by the expression "Heaven's winged Hound" in the opening act of Prometheus Unbound.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, Paul More offers a suggestion unlike any of the preceding. He says that the idea

...is evidently conceived from a union of Aeschylus' "Erinnys", that like a hound follows its prey until he comes under the earth, where even dead he is not all free, with the language of the Psalmist: whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy face? If I ascend into heaven, thou art there; if I descend into hell, thou art present.<sup>12</sup>

It is possible that Thompson, when selecting the title for his dramatic lyric, had in mind the dominant idea of God's persistency in "hounding" the soul not to death but to life. Moreover, as Wilfrid Meynell points out, the poem is purely biographical--the story of a "spoilt priest", a student for the priesthood who has been rejected, disappointed at his failure, who, after striving to satisfy the cravings of his heart in creature-love is turned back to God by the irresistible power of His grace.<sup>13</sup>

The experience of Thompson, individual as it may be, has

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 350.

<sup>11</sup> Connolly, op. cit., p. 350.

<sup>12</sup> Paul E. More, Shelburne Essays, seventh series, p. 163.

<sup>13</sup> Connolly, op. cit., p. 353.

yet such universality that many have found in it the record of their own bootless flight from the "Voice" that cries, "Lo, all things fly thee, for thou fliest me." And so Thompson, fleeing "down the labyrinthine ways" in his endeavor to escape from "this tremendous Lover" seeks his happiness in creatures, but is sorely disappointed with "their traitorous trueness" and "their loyal deceit."

I tempted all His servitors, but to find  
My own betrayal in their constancy,  
In faith to Him their fickleness to me,  
Their traitorous trueness, and their loyal deceit.  
ll. 34-37

The antithetical verbal structure of these lines serves especially to signify that those who are faithful to the "tremendous Lover" must be traitorously true to the "outlaw", for it is at variance with Christ's teachings to serve two Masters.

Since the affections of his elders and equals are denied him, Thompson hopes to find alleviation elsewhere:

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!  
ll. 52-56

But what an agony of disillusionment awaits him! Innocent children are not to be an aid to the soul's thievery of itself from God. Hence, at the precise moment when their eyes give promise of relief, they are withdrawn, for

Their angel plucked them from me by the hair.  
l. 60

Although the Voice has been following him and insists

that "Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me," the "outlawed" soul wanders into the realm of external Nature and in her beauty intends to find contentment:

'Come then, ye other children, Nature's--share  
With me' (said I) 'your delicate fellowship;  
Let me greet you lip to lip.

ll. 61-63

But, as Thompson says, "Nature has no heart," the soul can secure no real sympathy from nature's children who know not suffering. The description he accords nature (ll. 61-110) is a poetic flight full of vast imagery. Nature, queen and mother, is seated upon her throne within her royal palace, the Earth, which is walled round with the winds and over-canopied with the azure sky. Within the palace are Nature's children--clouds, rain, trees, plants and flowers, all banqueting and drinking from chalices filled with the pure light spilled abroad by the sun at daybreak. It may be safely assumed that Thompson purposely painted so enchanting a picture of Nature to emphasize all the more vividly his intention of proving that there is absolutely nothing outside of God that can fully satisfy the heart of man, for

'Lo, naught contents thee, who content'st not Me.'  
l. 110

Here again Thompson expounds some sound Christian philosophy. When we content God and have our heart set on Him above all, then the little joys and pleasures of earth content us, because we seek to draw from creatures only the meed of happiness they are meant to give and we use them, aright, as "food for our journey and not as snares for our

tarrying."<sup>14</sup> This furthermore explains why some individuals are happy and contented in very prosaic surroundings whilst others, flitting from one amusement to another, ever experience a void within themselves which refuses to be satisfied.

The poet now pictures the soul's surrender, which after its "dark night" of suffering, is finally overcome by the persisting advances of the Divine Pursuer.

Naked I wait Thy love's uplifted stroke!  
My harness piece by piece Thou hast hewn from me,  
And smitten me to my knee:  
I am defenceless utterly.

ll. 111-14

The soul, stripped of pride, rebellion, servile fear, and inordinate love of creatures, can now turn to God and say confidently with the Royal Prophet: "A contrite and humbled heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise." (Psalmii, 19). But it realizes that love for God must stand alone in the soul and that it grows and flourishes therein only through suffering and self-abnegation:

Designer Infinite!--  
Ah! must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst limn  
with it?

ll. 134-35

When the soul has given up all vain and futile hopes, then only will it be rendered fertile to give God unstinted love:

Whether man's heart or life it be which yields  
Thee harvest, must Thy harvest-fields  
Be dunged with rotten death?

ll. 152-54

*Title* The poet now celebrates the complete victory of God's

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<sup>14</sup>Le Buffe, op. cit., p. 72.

love. He admits his nothingness and his unworthiness of God's favor:

How hast thou merited--  
Of all man's clotted clay the dingiest clot?  
Alack, thou knowest not  
How little worthy of love thou art!  
Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,  
Save Me, save only Me?

ll. 165-69

But all is forgotten; and as the prodigal son was welcomed by his expectant father, so the vagrant soul that has wasted its substance on the fruitless love of creatures is greeted by God with the loving invitation:

'Rise, clasp My hand and come!'

and the chase of The Hound of Heaven ends in the divine embrace.

This mystical vision which is concerned with "the flight of a soul from the threat of the Divine love which has marked it down and follows it across the world,"<sup>15</sup> is a philosophical interpretation of the words of St. Augustine who had himself wandered far from God: "O Lord, Thou hast made us for Thyself and our heart is restless till it rests in Thee."<sup>16</sup>

This everlasting, indefinable rest will not be attained until the soul is eternally united with God. But such a blissful union demands a price, and the price which Thompson as a follower of Christ was required to pay was that of renuncia-

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<sup>15</sup>"Tortured Life of a Great Poet," op. cit., p. 172.

<sup>16</sup>"Confessions of St. Augustine" in Harvard Classics, 7, p. 5.

tion and sacrifice. It is the common lot of all who wish to lead godly lives and insure for themselves eternal happiness. God does not force any individual; he has given each a free will, and each may choose his own course of action. However, everyone has a conscience which is defined as "the practical judgment of reason upon an individual act as good and to be performed, or as evil and to be avoided." It is also a judgment upon an individual act after it has been performed or omitted--a judgment of approval or disapproval.<sup>17</sup> This is why we are happy when we do what is right, and contrariwise unhappy when we consent to evil.

Conscience is sometimes referred to as the "worm". The lost souls are confined in a place of torment "Where their worm dieth not." (Mark ix, 43). This "worm" of conscience is the greatest torture of the damned. Thompson, in his only explicit reference to conscience, is thinking of the bliss of heaven which will follow upon the sufferings and storms of this life:

When this morass of tears, then drained and firm,  
Shall be a land--  
Unshaken I affirm--  
Where seven-quired psalterings meet;  
And all the gods move with calm hand in hand,  
And eyes that know not trouble and the worm.  
By Reason of Thy Law, ll. 44-49

In his poetry Francis Thompson seemed compelled to expound himself, and as he sings out his spiritual progress and discovery it is evident that he takes the way of renuncia-

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<sup>17</sup>Paul J. Glenn, S. T. D., Ethics, pp. 84-86.

tion and self-denial.<sup>18</sup> The first commandment, the first law God ever gave, was one that demanded renunciation, and because Adam and Eve did not deny themselves they brought disorder into the whole of creation.<sup>19</sup> In poem after poem Thompson stresses the necessity of denying one's gratifications. Any Saint, which is the poet's presentation of the paradox of man's greatness and littleness, contains one of the most striking illustrations of this principle:

Compost of Heaven and mire,  
Slow foot and swift desire!

Lo,  
To have Yes, choose No;  
Gird, and thou shalt unbind;  
Seek not, and thou shalt find;  
To eat,  
Deny thy meat;

ll. 129-36

Someone has said that the fundamental cause of our most serious problems may be found in the fact that "We are forgetting to say No." If we were endowed with a natural leaning toward goodness, yes would be the word contradictiong evil influences; but as things are, no becomes the big, important word, the corner stone of right living.<sup>20</sup>

Thompson immediately shows that self-control brings its own reward:

And thou shalt be fulfilled

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<sup>18</sup>D. Figgis, "Francis Thompson," Living Age, (November 8, 1913), p. 359.

<sup>19</sup>Clarence Tschippert, O.M. Cap., "Self-Denial in Economic Life," The Homiletic and Pastoral Review, (January, 1935), p. 433.

<sup>20</sup>Rosa Zagnoni Marinoni, Can You Say No? p. 15.

With all sweet things unwilling:  
ll. 137-38

The very essence of Christian renunciation prompted by love is expressed in apt figures in these lines:

Oh to me, give but to me  
That flower of felicity,  
Which on your topmost spirit ware  
The difficult and snowy air  
Of high refusal! and the heat  
Of central love which fed with sweet  
And holy fire i' the frozen sod  
Roots that had ta'en hold on God.  
To the English Martyrs, ll. 71-78

Readers of Francis Thompson cannot but be impressed by the undertone of plaintive sadness which characterizes so many of his poems. Renunciation carries pain in its wake. Sometimes the poet's pain is a gentle melancholy native to his sensitive temperament:

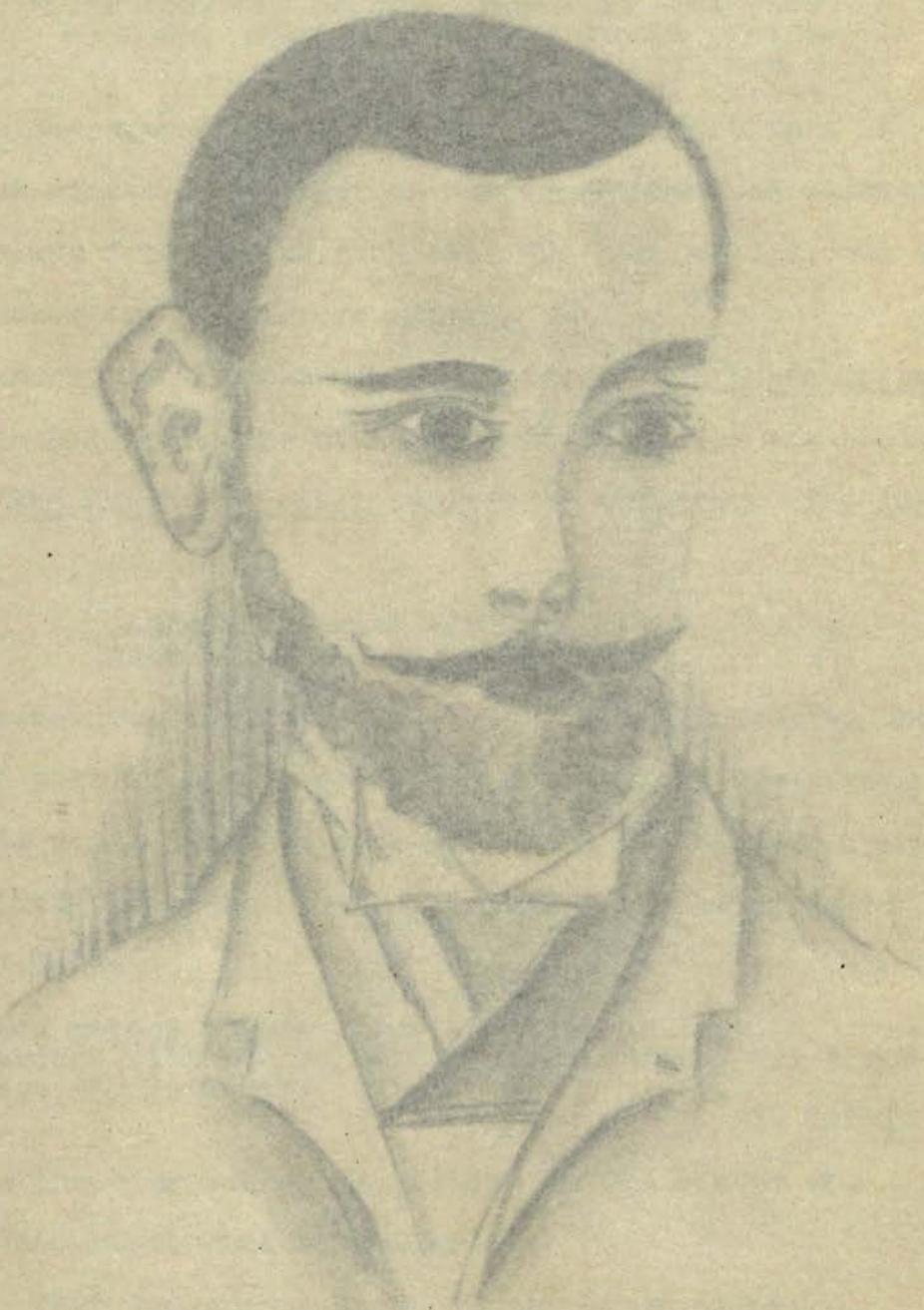
She left me marvelling why my soul  
Was sad that she was glad;  
At all sadness in the sweet,  
The sweetness in the sad.  
Daisy, ll. 49-52

Or it is a sadness produced by the pain of poetic travail, as in Urania, where he complains:

Lo, I, Song's most true lover, plain me sore  
That worse than other women she can deceive,  
For she being goddess, I have given her more  
Than mortal ladies from their loves receive.  
ll. 1-4

The pain that is caused by disappointments throughout the world can never be measured; such pain, however, can be sanctified by a patient forbearance which usually fills the heart with peace.

The pain of loneliness and the loneliness of pain-- the trials of every human being, but especially of those who



FRANCIS THOMPSON  
1859 - 1907

The poet in 1893 - From a traditional portrait.



are stamped with the hallmark of genius--are accented in the "After Strain" of The Ode to the Setting Sun:

Even so, O Cross! thine is the victory.  
Thy roots are fast within our fairest fields;  
Brightness may emanate in Heaven from thee,  
Here thy dread symbol only shadow yields.

ll. 5-8

Surely no one experienced so keenly the terrible pain of loneliness as did the Savior on the Cross when the pathetic cry was wrung from His divine lips: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me!" (Mark, xv, 34).

Thompson has written a poem entitled Laus Amara Doloris, a poem "In Bitter Praise of Pain". It is really the soul-story of The Hound of Heaven applied to the poet. The first lines,

Implacable sweet daemon, Poetry,  
What have I lost for thee!

sound the keynote of the whole poem. Poetry possesses and rules the poet as a very daemon--a daemon that proves itself inexorable until the poet surrenders all to it. Ere long he wanders into the realm of the spiritual, and he sings to "inevitable" Pain:

Thou pacest either frontier where our life  
Marches with God's; both birth and death are given  
Into thy lordship;

ll. 110-12

In a touching manner he alludes to the Savior who traveled the royal road of suffering:

That God-sprung Lover to thy front allows  
Fairest, the bloody honor of His brows,  
The great reversion of that diadem  
Which did his drenched locks hem.

ll. 152-55

The best exposition on his treatment of pain is his own commentary on St. Francis. It embodies the Christian's perception of pain and its utility:

Pain, which came to man as a penalty, remains with him as a consecration; his ignominy, by a divine ingenuity, he is enabled to make his exaltation. Man, shrinking from pain is like a child shuddering on the verge of cold water, and crying, "It is cold!" How many among us, after repeated lessonings of experience, are never able to comprehend that there is no special love without special pain! To such St. Francis reveals that the supreme Love is itself full of Supreme Pain. It is fire, it is torture....Pain is inevitable. Pain may be made the instrument of joy. It is the angel with the fiery sword guarding the gates of the lost Eden. The flaming sword which pricked man from Paradise must wave him back.<sup>21</sup>

When Thompson in an agony of grief cries out in The Hound of Heaven,

Ah! must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst  
limn with it?

he wishes us to understand that, like wood must be burned and charred before it can be used for sketching, so only from hearts that are bruised will the sweet odor of Christ come forth. Since the cross awaits us everywhere in life, the most salutary thing to do is to carry it manfully in accordance with the injunction of Christ: "If anyone will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."

Although his life was an almost continual chain of suffering and renunciation, Thompson was not a gloomy and despondent man. Peace of soul attends those who, heeding the dictates

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<sup>21</sup>Meynell, op. cit., p. 230.

of conscience and reason, carry out the manifest will of God. When Thompson exclaims,

Shall we not cry, on recognizing knees  
This is Thy peace?

Peace, ll. 30-31

he distinctly refers to the peace of Christ, which by a divine paradox, implies conflict. It was after the Redeemer had passed through His passion and death to the glory of His resurrection that He greeted His apostles with the salutation "Peace be to you." This serenity of soul is illustrated by a well-chosen figure in Contemplation:

His heart's a drop-well of tranquillity;  
His mind more still is than the limbs of fear.  
ll. 64-65

Not only peace, but joy and exultation is the guerdon which succeeds combat. In a burst of lyrical emotion Thompson breaks out in a song of spiritual exultation:

But ah! withal,  
Some hold, some stay,  
O difficult Joy, I pray,  
Some arms of thine,  
Not only, only arms of mine!  
The Dread of Height, ll. 47-51

However, with a philosophical insight Thompson would caution us to seek for true bliss, and not rest content with its shadows, temporal happiness:

Happiness is the shadow of things past,  
Which fools still take for that which is to be!  
The Night of Forebeing, ll. 185-86

He also suggests that each man's future lies in his own hands. "Aliens" from heaven, those who expect to find all their happiness in creatures and earthly attainments, can hardly expect more than the reward which earth gives. Men like

"The Dead Cardinal of Westminster" are not to be classed with

Aliens from Heaven's worth,  
Fine beasts who nose i' the earth,  
Do there  
Reward prepare.

ll. 149-52

One reader may appreciate sooner than another that one of Thompson's favorite themes is Death. As he loved Pain, so he loved Death; he saw Life standing at the end of his days, awfully and solemnly clothed in the somber robes of her dark brother.<sup>22</sup> He was capable of experiencing the beauty of death because in contemplation he entered into that condition. In his majestic ode to the sun he speaks of the mystical twins, Death and Birth, and gives precedence in beauty to the younger:

The fairest things in life are Death and Birth,  
And of these two the fairer thing is Death.  
Mystical twins of Time inseparable,  
The younger hath the holier array,  
And hath the awfuller sway:

Ode to the Setting Sun, ll. 3-7

This poem has been called one of the lyrical master-pieces of the century. The opening lines illustrate the splendid figures which predominate, the "peculiar grandiloquence" of Thompson's imagery which is singularly appropriate to the theme. Gardner further suggests that in no other work is he more uniformly musical and strenuously sublime throughout.<sup>23</sup> As the poem begins, so it ends in a treatment

<sup>22</sup> Eleanor Roy, "Francis Thompson, the Greater Ikhānatōn," Catholic World, (June, 1927), p. 372.

<sup>23</sup> Connolly, op. cit., p. 373.

of death that faces the terror it evokes in the spirit of faith:

For there is nothing lives but something dies,  
And there is nothing dies but something lives.

Till skies be fugitives,  
Till Time, the hidden root of change, updries,  
Are Birth and Death inseparable on earth;  
For they are twain yet one, and Death is Birth.

11. 233-38

This wonderful discovery of beauty in the terror of mortality, the erection of sublime thought upon a heap of dusty death, "was never so finely effected until Francis Thompson met the silence of sepulchral time with his Christian attitude bright with pain."<sup>24</sup>

Yet there are some who fail to see the underlying thought in Thompson's interpretation of the mystery of Death. Charlton Lewis, in an article published in the Yale Review in 1914, criticised the poet's un-Christian treatment of death:

The assurances of Thompson's creed have but a very loose hold on his imagination, which goes a-straying in purely pagan ways. We find the thought of death more easily associated with cypress trees and the grave's quiet oblivion than with hallelu-  
iahs and palms.<sup>25</sup>

It is true that Thompson takes numerous images from mythology. These are not intended to convey the idea that he was influenced by paganistic views; they were rather offered in juxtaposition to his presentations so that by their very contrasts they would tend to strengthen the facts he proposed from a strictly Catholic viewpoint. Mr. Lewis possibly did

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<sup>24</sup> Megroz, op. cit., p. 164.

<sup>25</sup> Lewis, op cit., p. 110.

not catch the glimpse of faith hidden in these allusions and failed to recognize the beauty and spirituality of the many distinct Catholic and Christian principles which form their basis.

A similar charge, <sup>is</sup> launched against Thompson by Holbrook Jackson, who speaks of his "kinship with Shelley in a common Pantheism", and then remarks:

Such earth-love is pagan rather than Christian, yet it was not foreign to the Christianity of Francis Thompson, whose orthodoxy did not curtail his worship of Life in many of its manifestations--in the stars and the winds, in the flowers and children and pure womanhood.<sup>26</sup>

Father Connolly explains that Thompson did not worship Life, but the Author of Life in all these things. He loved and admired them in their proper relation to God, and his orthodoxy as a Catholic was a help rather than a hindrance to such worship. If he had worshipped these as a Pantheist, The Hound of Heaven, and Orient Ode and numberless other poems of his must be the unessential result of pose.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Thompson's own criticism of Shelley's Pantheism shows how far he was from sharing it and the hopelessness to which it led:

One thing prevents Adonais from being ideally perfect: its lack of Christian hope. Yet we remember well the writer of popular memoir on Keats proposing as "the best consolation for the mind pained by this sad record" Shelley's inexpressibly sad exposition of Pantheistic immortality:

He is a portion of loveliness  
Which once he made more lovely, etc.

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26Jackson, op. cit., pp. 212-13.

27Connolly, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

What utter desolation can it be that discerns comfort in this hope, whose wan countenance is as the countenance of a despair? Nay, was not indeed wan-hope the Saxon for despair? What deepest depth of agony is it that finds consolation in this immortality which thrusts you into death, the maw of Nature, that your dissolved elements may circulate through her veins? Yet such, the poet tells me, is my sole balm for the hurts of life.<sup>28</sup>

While Thompson was attending college at Ushaw, it happened that an old yew tree in the playing field fell to the ground. The incident furnished the subject of a poem, A Fallen Yew, in which the vividness of the imagery makes one feel and realize more deeply the great fundamental truths it treats. The appropriateness of the fallen yew as a symbol of man's bodily life and death is commented upon by Mr. Hutton in these words:

The planting of it, away back in the mists of time!  
The love with which at the beginning it was committed to the soil and given its chance to live!  
The showers which nourished its life! The sun which invited its leaves! The daylight which through those leaves it drunk in, thrilling its sap to the very roots! And not the daylight only, but by night the light of the moon and the light of the stars! Its joyousness in spring! Its patience and hardihood in winter! The long tests of years and generations! All these things! And now it lies all log of dull wood! Is that the end of the yew tree?  
Never!<sup>29</sup>

But now our yew is strook, is fallen--yea  
Hacked like dull wood of every day  
To this and that, men say.

11. 22-24

If death is the end of all, then everything that led up to such an end had already the quality of death. If such an end is held by us to be sad, then all the way that led to it must be held to be sad. "Spelt backward from its death" the life-story of everything that has lived and flourished

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<sup>28</sup>Thompson, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

<sup>29</sup>Hutton, op. cit., p. 101.

is finally a chilling, saddening story.<sup>30</sup>

This is what Thompson wishes to express in the following utterance:

Reverberations of mortality:  
Spelt backward from its death, to me  
Its life reads saddenedly.

ll. 31-33

Wholly unathletic, Thompson loved watching cricket games and felt a poetical enthusiasm for the Lancashire Eleven. Their Red Roses were as famous on the English cricket grounds as the White Sox on the baseball diamonds of America. The Red Roses made a mystical appeal to the Poet who wrote some sublime lines describing the cricket giants of the past whom he recalled when he visited the deserted scenes of some famous match in after years.<sup>31</sup> The cricket verses are all lamentations for the dead. One such is the poignant little poem, At Lord's:

It is little I repair to the matches of the  
Southron folk,  
Though the red roses crest the caps, I  
know.  
For the field is full of shades as I near  
the shadowy coast,  
And a ghostly batsman plays to the bowling  
of a ghost,  
And I look through my tears on a soundless-  
clapping host  
As the run-stealers flicker to and fro,  
To and fro:--  
O my Hornby and my Barlow long ago!

ll. 3-10

Mr. Hutton's interpretation is in accord with the sen-

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<sup>30</sup>Hutton, op. cit., p. 105.

<sup>31</sup>Shane Leslie, Francis Thompson, p. 3.

timents Thompson expresses:

It would not be the actual players I should see.  
What I should be seeing would be ghosts! I should  
see a ghost wielding a bat, standing up to the  
bowling of another ghost: and the thing would take  
on for ever a sad significance. I should begin to  
see it all as a sombre transcript of this life of  
ours! For what is a life but an issue between a  
bowler (called death) and a batsman?<sup>32</sup>

It may be interesting to consider briefly several stray allusions to Death that occur in various poems. In his ode To the Dead Cardinal of Westminster he asks that the sandy glass (hour glass), antique reminder of death, be borne hence, for his veins, the beating of his heart, remind him of the passing of time. The metaphors employed in the Song of the Hours to express transience and death are very effective:

We are columns in Time's Hall, mortals,  
Where through Life hurrieth;  
You pass in at birth's wide portals,  
And out at the postern of death.

.....  
God breathes you forth as a bubble  
And shall suck you back into His mouth!  
ll. 127-30, 137-38

As Thompson, when he falls "into the claws of Time" and is cut down by Time, "the reaper", humbly believes that his "withered dreams" will be immortalized in his poetry, so our memory will live on in the good or evil we have performed during our mortal existence.

The poet uses a very unusual image in An Anthem of Earth. It is more accurately a magnificent pun:

Pontifical Death, that doth the crevasse bridge  
To the steep and trifid God;  
ll. 348-49

<sup>32</sup>Hutton, op. cit., pp. 140-41.

G. K. Chesterton argues that this image is too small for comprehension:

In one of his poems he says that the abyss between the known and unknown is bridged by "Pontifical death". There are about ten historical and theological puns in that one word. That a priest means a pontiff, that a pontiff means a bridge-maker, that death is certainly a bridge, that death may turn out after all to be a reconciling priest, that at least priest and bridges both attest to the fact that one thing can get separated from another thing--these ideas, and twenty more, are all tacitly concentrated in the word "Pontifical". In Francis Thompson's poetry, as in the poetry of the universe, you can work infinitely out and out, but yet infinitely in and in. These two infinities are the mark of greatness; and he was a great poet.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, Thompson would remind us that we are travelers through life, that we have not here a lasting abode. In Sister Songs he refers to the "Siste Viator" ("Stop, traveler!") a common inscription on tombstones, and we may assume that he is exhorting us to attain the Kingdom where

The King himself shall sit  
Therein, with them that are His following,  
Of Nature: Laud and Plaint, ll. 135-36

and enjoy a felicity described by St. Paul in the raptures of ecstasy: "...eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God hath prepared for them that love him." (Cor.,ii, 9).

The Christian philosophy of Francis Thompson as emphasized in his poetry and interpreted in accordance with his principles of right living, is adapted to every age and state

33G. K. Chesterton, in "The Illustrated London News", Selected Poems, p. 141.

of life regardless of the religious beliefs one may profess.

The very first lines of his superb Ode to the Setting Sun announce that we come from God and return to Him. To Thompson the splendors of the setting sun told, in the language of mystic symbolism, the story of man whose death appears to be the end of all, though in reality it is the prelude of the eternal. "And the fairer of the two (Death and Birth) is Death." The general reader may become confused by the profusion of mythological allusions and the references to paganism in this ode. In making use of a literary tradition saturated with pantheism, Thompson stresses how distinct God is from us and how great is the distance that separates us from Him.<sup>34</sup>

Since God is our beginning and our end, we must seek our ultimate happiness in Him. The Hound of Heaven narrates the experiences of a soul that has "fled Him" and finds no peace until it is again clasped in the divine embrace.

Right living entails sacrifice, renunciation and pain. This theme occurs in poem after poem and is treated with elaborate imagery. However, Thompson is not morbid and pessimistic. Patient submission to the vicissitudes of life result in the inestimable treasures of interior peace and spiritual delight of which he sings so jubilantly in The Dread of Height.

As we are but "columns in Time's hall" through which "Life hurrieth", Thompson urges us to pause and consider--

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<sup>34</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 372.

"Siste Viator"--for Death, which is the gateway to Life, will sooner or later claim its toll.

The figurative language of the poems considered in this study, although elaborate, does not habitually interfere with correct interpretation as intended by the poet. Treating of fundamentals that are familiar to the generality of men, he attempts to emphasize vigorously the principles that underlie and motivate the Christian's attitude toward life, and seemingly employs a diction that will not frustrate his design. His poetry was intended to uplift and elevate. Any student of Francis Thompson must admit that the poet considered his vocation as a sacred calling, assort of anointed priesthood working for the honor and glory of God. "To be the poet of the return to nature is somewhat, but I would be the poet of the return to God."

## CHAPTER IV

### LANGUAGE OF THE LITURGY

"Ritual is poetry addressed to the eye."

Francis Thompson was first and foremost a religious poet endowed with a genius and power of imagination akin to the true mystical visions of the saints. It was his mission to bring home to our earthly and finite minds supernatural and infinite truths, to translate for us the things of the spirit by the things of the sense. To clarify his representations he gave the supernatural as many points of contact as possible with the natural and enabled us to apprehend by means of material symbols those spiritual realities which transcend human experience.<sup>1</sup>

A poet's interpretation of life depends not only on his natural temperament and mentality, but also on his training and environment; hence, if we would grasp the full significance of Francis Thompson's work, we must acquaint ourselves with those facts of his life which account for the Catholic tone of his poetry.

Thompson's father was a zealous convert and his mother was in some degree a Confessor of the Faith, for when she became a Catholic against the wishes of her family, she had

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<sup>1</sup>Sister of Notre Dame, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

subsequently to take a position as governess. The deep Catholic influence of Thompson's parents was supplemented in an indirect way, at least, by two paternal uncles, ardent converts like his father, and two paternal aunts who were nuns.<sup>2</sup> His sister Mary became a Presentation nun in Manchester, England, and is now known as Sister Austin. In a recent personal letter she states that probably the chief reason why Francis wrote with so many Catholic allusions is

...the entirely Catholic home life he had; we led a very quiet life, not mixing in any society except that of priests. We were "Catholics", and in those days this was sufficient to isolate us from any communication with the non-Catholic inhabitants of the town... Then, when he was ten years of age he was sent to Ushaw College to study for the priesthood; after eight years thereit was decided he had no vocation. As you are already aware, after Mr. Meynell discovered him, my brother was for some time in a Premonstratensian Priory, (not as a Religious) and later was about four years under the care of the good Capuchin Fathers in Pantasaph, N. Wales, from whom he learned much Theology, especially from Father Anselm Kenealy, who became later Arch\_bishop of Simla...<sup>3</sup>

The eight years spent by Thompson at Ushaw stamped his after-life deeply with its religious atmosphere. "He was orthodox through and through, from within, from beneath, outward to his acts, upward to his poetry."<sup>4</sup> The mysteries of the Catholic religion are the inexhaustible source from which he drew his most fiery inspiration,<sup>5</sup> and the liturgy of the

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<sup>2</sup>Connolly, op. cit., xvii.

<sup>3</sup>Sister Austin, Personal Letter, April 8, 1937.

<sup>4</sup>Le Buffe, op. cit., xiv.

<sup>5</sup>Thomson, op. cit., p. 26.

Church is the store-house from which he obtained many of his most telling figures.<sup>6</sup>

And what is the liturgy? Contrary to the general opinion held by many, the liturgy is not the rubrics, which are merely directive rules by which the Church insures the simple, beautiful, and pious rendition of her acts of worship. Nor is it a dry collection of prayers and ceremonies. The liturgy is "...the ensemble or the aggregate of everything used in public worship which the Church has officially adopted as her own." When we speak of the liturgy, we refer not only to the Mass but also to the sacraments, and to all of the official prayers, ceremonies, chants, rites, and sacramentals used in their administration. The Mass is the very heart and soul of the liturgy. The Holy Eucharist, the most excellent of all the sacraments, cannot be separated from the Mass, because without the Mass there would be no Holy Communion. All the other sacraments seem to point to the Holy Eucharist by preserving and safeguarding the graces which it confers. The field of liturgy is, therefore, a wide one, and its laws affect the entire system of Catholic public and corporate worship.<sup>7</sup>

The holy sacrifice of the Mass, the sun and center of our religion, is the unbloody sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ.<sup>8</sup> It is the same sacrifice as that of the cross

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<sup>6</sup>O'Brien, op. cit., p. 606.

<sup>7</sup>Butler-Clendenin, Praying the Mass, pp. 10-11.

<sup>8</sup>D. I. Lanslots, O.S.B., Catholic Theology, p. 395.

because the Offering and the Priest are the same--Christ our Blessed Lord; and the ends for which the sacrifices of the Mass is offered are the same as were those of the cross,<sup>9</sup> but the manner in which the sacrifice is offered is different. On the cross Christ really shed His blood and gave His life that we might live; in the Mass there is no real shedding of blood nor real death, because Christ can die no more; but the sacrifice of the Mass, through the separate consecration of the bread and the wine, represents His death on the cross.<sup>10</sup>

"All Nature sacerdotal seems," says Thompson in A Corumbus for Autumn. Apropos to this line Gardner remarks: "Nature and the Catholic Church are one in their ritual: the former, in her changes and pageantry, merely offers on a large scale the same homage to God as the Church in her solemn offices."<sup>11</sup> This is the reason why Thompson himself has defined ritual as "poetry addressed to the eye".<sup>12</sup> It was for this Catholic poet to show that the ceremony of the day is a perfect symbol of the ceremony of the Mass. As "the Earth, a joyous David," dances before the sun "from the dawn to dark," so is the holy sacrifice of the Mass offered without cessation as we read in the prophecies of Malachias: "For from the rising of the sun even to the going down, my name is great among the Gentiles, and in every place there is a sacrifice,

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<sup>9</sup>Abbe Luche, The Catechism of Rodez, p. 428.

<sup>10</sup>Lanslots, op. cit., p. 401.

<sup>11</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 452.

<sup>12</sup>Meynell, op. cit., p. 161.

and there is offered to my name a clean oblation." (Malachias, i, 11).

Thompson expresses the thought of the prophet very beautifully in the Orient Ode:

Thou, for the life of all that live  
The victim daily born and sacrificed.  
ll. 191-92

In singing the praises of the Divine Sun, Thompson realizes that his frailties hinder him from offering adequate worship; therefore he prays:

Lo, my suit pleads  
That thou, Isaian coal of fire,  
Touch from yon altar my poor mouth's desire,  
And the reluctant song take for thy sacred meeds.  
ll. 152-55

This passage is founded upon the vision narrated by the prophet Isaias, in which his lips were cleansed:

And one of the seraphim flew to me, and in his hand was a live coal which he had taken with the tongs off the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said: Behold this hath touched thy lips, and thy iniquities shall be taken away, and thy sin shall be cleansed. (Isaias, vi, 6-7).

The Church dearly loves the Word of God. In every holy Mass the Gospel is read. "To say or hear the gospel aright, one must be all the deeper in humility, all the stronger in faith, all the more earnest in seeking forgiveness."<sup>13</sup> Thompson's prayer, derived from the Scripture text, is an adaptation of the prayer the priest at Mass just before he reads the Gospel. For a moment he pauses before the tabernacle, bows profoundly and says: "Cleanse my heart and my

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph A. Dunney, The Mass, p. 69.

lips, O Almighty God, who didst cleanse the lips of the prophet Isaias with a burning coal; and vouchsafe, through Thy gracious mercy, so to purify me, that I may worthily proclaim Thy holy Gospel. Through Christ Our Lord, Amen.<sup>14</sup>

As the light of the sun is the great vivifying factor in Nature, so Christ is the light which strengthens and urges us on. The allusion of Thompson,

Light out of Light!  
Resplendent and prevailing Word  
Of the Unheard!

is a reference to the phrase "lumen de lumine" (light out of light) in the Nicene Creed recited at Mass. The Gospel gives us a glimmering perception of Christ: the Creed cries out our recognition of Him. It is a summary of the chief truths which Christ taught. It is called the Nicene Creed because it was composed at the Council of Nicea in 325, and was introduced into the Eastern Liturgy at an early date to counteract the ravages of the Arian heresy which arose in the first half of the fourteenth century. In it the things Christ revealed stand forth like a great cathedral, every part of which is divine truth firmly knit together and built up into a spiritual edifice of faith.<sup>15</sup>

In Assumpta Maria Thompson refers to the Offertory of the Mass. His lines by themselves, however, give almost no hint of their full meaning except to one thoroughly familiar

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<sup>14</sup>Cuthbert Goeb, O. S. B., Offeramus, pp. 38-39.

<sup>15</sup>Dunney, op. cit., p. 81.

with the theological background and conventional figures which he uses. For instance, in the single line, "Blood and Water, Moon and Sun", there is hidden a meaning difficult of interpretation. Father Connolly explains it thus:

Blood and Sun are symbols of Christ's divinity:  
Water and Moon are symbols of Christ's humanity.  
The same symbolic meaning of wine and water is found in the sacrifice of the Mass, when, just before the Oblation, a few drops of water are added to the wine in the chalice.<sup>16</sup>

Gihr says that this "rite is calculated to symbolize...that mystery by which the divine and human natures are united together in one person, namely, the Incarnation of the Divine Word."<sup>17</sup>

Another allusion in this same poem, when standing alone, is obscure enough to<sup>be</sup> enigmatic.

Lo, a wonder and a terror--  
The Sun hath blushed the Sea to Wine!  
ll. 93-94

God (the Sun) has espoused Mary's nature (the Sea) and by so doing He has in Christ's twofold nature raised human nature (the Sea) up to the divine (the Wine).<sup>18</sup>

A study of the context of the quoted verses will show that they contain the ideas which are so much more clearly stated in the prayer said at the mingling of the water and wine:

O God, who in a marvelous manner didst create and

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<sup>16</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 479.

<sup>17</sup>Nicholas Gihr, The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, p. 512.

<sup>18</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 479.

ennoble human nature, and still more marvelously hast renewed it, grant that by the mystical union of this water and wine we may be made partakers of His divinity who vouchsafed to become partaker of our humanity....<sup>19</sup>

The Church finds in the simple mixing of water and wine a figure of the great truth of the Incarnation. Though the same figures, wine for divinity and water for humanity, are used, the pure mystical poetry of Thompson offers undoubted difficulty to the reader. The liturgical text preserves the quality of poetry by its abundant allusiveness, yet precludes fewer from its complete understanding.<sup>20</sup>

The Consecration is the great central act of the Mass, the holiest, the most divine moment, when, at the words of the priest, the bread and wine are changed into Our Lord's body and blood.<sup>21</sup> This change is called "transubstantiation", a term which signifies the change of one substance into another.

Laus Amara Doloris contains a reference to this sublime mystery:

.....love's holy bread,  
Consecrated.

ll. 107-108

This then, is the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, the most excellent of all sacraments. It is the most excellent because it contains Christ Himself, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity--His body and blood, His soul and divinity. When we

<sup>19</sup>Wm. H. Puettet, S.J., Community Mass, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup>Kenneth Ryan, "Mystical and Liturgical Poetry," Commonweal, (December 28, 1932), p. 240.

<sup>21</sup>Dunney, op. cit., p. 187.

receive Holy Communion we take as nourishment or food for our souls not only Christ's body and blood, but also His soul and divinity.<sup>22</sup>

Very beautifully does Thompson illustrate his appreciation and reverence for the gift of Jesus Himself:

Art thou not life of them that live?  
Yea, in glad twinkling advent, thou dost dwell  
Within our body as a tabernacle.

Orient Ode, ll. 167-69

He also intimates that the soul which receives her God should be pure--free at least from all grievous sins:

The heavens renew their innocence  
And morning state  
But by thy sacrament communicate.  
ll. 178-80

Since the Holy Eucharist is the greatest and most excellent of all the sacraments, the Church has instituted many devotions by which the faithful may fittingly honor and worship their hidden God. One of these is the Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament.

In the opening lines of the Orient Ode Thompson shows himself the supreme poet of the Catholic liturgy. He likens the sun to the Blessed Sacrament in the Benediction service. In this service the priest, vested in cope, surplice and stole, (liturgical vestments), and accompanied by acolytes, enters the sanctuary, kneels for a moment, and then ascends the steps that lead up to the altar. There he opens the tabernacle, removes the Sacred Host and places it in a golden monstrance

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<sup>22</sup>McNeill-Aaron, The Means of Grace, pp. 145-46.

for the veneration of the faithful, for, as Catholics believe, beneath the consecrated appearances of a little round wafer of unleavened bread there is present the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup> The Blessed Sacrament is incensed and Latin hymns are sung, varying in different localities, but always including the "Tantum Ergo". Then follows a brief prayer chanted by the priest, after which he again ascends the altar steps, takes the monstrance in his hands, and facing the people bestows upon them the blessing of Jesus Christ Himself.<sup>24</sup> At times during the year, especially on the feast of Corpus Christi, the priest carries the Blessed Sacrament in solemn procession through the church, and in Catholic communities, through some parts of the locality, and then returns to the sanctuary for Benediction.

The liturgical concept of this devotion to the Holy Eucharist is noteworthy in the lines that follow:

Lo, in the sanctuaried East,  
Day, a dedicated priest  
In all his robes pontifical exprest,  
Lifteth slowly, lifteth sweetly,  
From out its Orient tabernacle drawn,  
Yon orbed sacrament confest  
Which sprinkles benediction through the dawn;  
And when the grave procession's ceased,  
The earth with due illustrious rite  
Blessed,--ere the frail fingers featly  
Of twilight, violet-cassocked acolyte,  
His sacerdotal stoles unvest--  
Sets, for high close of the mysterious feast,  
The sun in august exposition meetly  
Within the flaming monstrance of the West.

11. 1-15

<sup>23</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 452.

<sup>24</sup>John F. Sullivan, D.D., The Visible Church, p. 198.

Although at first it may appear that the language of the liturgy is being used to glorify the sun, yet the reverse of this is true. It is the sun which is being used to help us understand the liturgy. The chief idea developed is that of Christ's likeness to the sun in that He gives life, not only as Creator, the natural life, but as Redeemer, that "incredible" super-life of grace by which men<sup>are</sup> made the sons of God and participants in the divine life.<sup>25</sup>

The various elements drawn in the lines quoted are sustained with rare success. The East is the sanctuary; Day is the vested priest; the Sun is the Sacred Host; the progress of the sun across the heavens is the Eucharistic procession; the West is the monstrance, and Twilight is the acolyte who assists Day, the priest, in unvesting.<sup>26</sup> Beautiful indeed is this imagery and magnificently conceived.

Continuing with the ode, Thompson makes a direct reference to an Eucharistic hymn which is ordinarily the first of the two hymns which form part of the Benediction service:

O salutaris hostia,  
Quae coeli pandis ostium!  
ll. 16-17

A translation of the two stanzas that are usually sung follows:

O Saving Victim! opening wide  
The gate of Heaven to man below!  
Our foes press on from every side;  
Thine aid supply, Thy strength bestow.

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<sup>25</sup>Alexander, op. cit., p. 170.

<sup>26</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 452.

Flowers. To Thy gret <sup>a</sup> name be endless praise, clouds in A  
Immortal Godhead! One in Three  
Columbus O grant us endless length of days ~~in the clouds~~  
In our true native land ~~of~~ <sup>with</sup> Thee!

The externals of the Mass, such as the vestments, incense, candles, linens, chants, etc., add to the dignity and solemnity of the ceremonies while at the same time they elevate the mind and the heart. Thompson incorporates several of the externals of the Mass in his poems, selecting those which will best convey his thought.

When the priest offers the Holy Sacrifice, he wears vestments, an official dress, signifying his office and priestly duties. The vestments used at Mass have an historical, devotional, and doctrinal significance. Only those will be considered to which reference is made in Thompson's poetry.

It is thus that he describes spring in Sister Songs:

Where its umbrage was enrooted,  
Sat, white-suited,  
Sat, green-amiced and barefooted,  
Spring, amid her minstrelsy.

ll. 214-17

The amice (amictus--a covering) is a one-piece rectangular cloth of white linen with strings attached, which is laid upon the shoulders and which serves as a covering for the neck. It symbolizes a helmet, protecting the priest against the assaults of Satan.<sup>27</sup> When Thompson says that spring "sat green-amiced" he evidently wishes us to picture to ourselves Nature as she appears in the spring, decked with grass and

<sup>27</sup>Sullivan, op. cit., pp. 132-33.

flowers. And when he speaks of "blanch-amiced clouds" in A Corymbus for Autumn he tells figuratively that the clouds are white and shaped like an amice.

In the Ode to the Setting Sun Thompson attaches a mystical meaning to maniple. Speaking of Death, he says:

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

ll. 10-12

The maniple is the colored vestment worn on the left forearm of the priest. Its ends are usually widened and ornamented with crosses.<sup>28</sup> Thompson uses the word as a verb with a causal significance. The line in which it occurs is a manifestation of Thompson's power of observation. When a rainbow is seen from an elevation that overlooks a great sweep of country, not infrequently a great shower in the distance will seem to hang from it like a maniple from the arm of a priest. The real meaning of this line, however, is not to be found in external appearances, but in its mystical significance interpreted in the spirit of the liturgy of the Church. That spirit may best be gathered from the prayer said by the priest as he places this vestment on his arm: "May I be worthy to bear the maniple of weeping and sorrow, that with exaltation I may receive the reward of labor."<sup>29</sup> One of the foremost authorities in matters such as this says:

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<sup>28</sup>McNeill-Aaron, op. cit., p. 195.

<sup>29</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 376.

The symbolic meaning of the maniple is probably based on the circumstances that originally it served the celebrant to wipe off tears and perspiration during the celebration of the Mass, but sprang principally from a passage in the Psalms, in which the word manipulus is mentioned in the sense of a sheaf of wheat: "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. Going they went and wept, casting their seed; but coming they shall come with joyfulness, carrying their sheaves(manipulos suos)."<sup>30</sup> Consequently, the maniple symbolizes, on the one hand, penitential tears and grief, the toil and hardships of sowing, the suffering and the combating, the work and labour of this perishable life; on the other, the fruit of good works and sheaves full of merit, as well as the abundant harvest of happiness and joy, of peace and rest reaped in eternity.

From the context it is clear that Thompson uses the maniple as a symbol of the joys of harvest and the exultation of reward, rather than of the tears and sorrows of sowing. His meaning is: "Rainbows, themselves symbols of hope, make of the passing shower a maniple, symbol of joy."

Another ecclesiastical vestment considered figuratively appears in A Judgement in Heaven. The stole, which is an emblem of immortality, is a long narrow band of material, usually silk fabric, which is worn about the neck and crossed over the chest. The ends are usually ornamented with crosses and they may be edged with fringe. The stole is the vestment of honor and a badge of power. It is worn not only when the priest says Mass, but also when he preaches, administers the sacraments, and performs other priestly functions.

We read of the Poet standing before God, his Judge:

The Poet bowed his brow majestic, searching that  
patchwork through and through,

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<sup>30</sup>Gehr, op. cit., p. 285.

Feeling God's lucent gazes traverse his singing-stoling and spirit too.

ll. 37-38

The Poet, as singer, was surrounded by an aureole of light as with a stole because his work was acceptable.

Finally, when Thompson sings so beautifully of The Making of Viola, he is thinking of the pall, a small square of stiffened white linen with which the chalice is covered during the celebration of Mass so that nothing may fall into this sacred vessel:

Weave, hands angelical,  
Weave a woof of flesh to pall--  
Weave, hands angelical--  
Flesh to pall our Viola.

ll. 7-10

The "woof of flesh to pall" suggests a protection for the innocence of Viola. The expression is also an evidence of the reverence the poet had for children and his concern for their spiritual well-being.

Lighted candles lend beauty and inspiration to the services of the Church. It is their symbolism, however, which is of special significance.

Blessed candles are an important sacramental of the Church, for they are used in the services of the liturgy and on many other occasions. According to the decree of the Church wax candles must burn on the altar during Mass. The wax should be pure, unadulterated and, as a general rule, white. Only in certain designated cases are candles of unblessed or yellow wax permitted.

Among Christians, candles were first employed probably

to dispel darkness when the faithful met before dawn, as was the custom, or in the gloom of the catacombs; but their beautiful symbolism was soon recognized by the writers of the Church. The light of the candle is a symbol of God, the All-pure, existing everywhere, giving life and enlightenment. It also represents our Blessed Savior and His mission, for He is "the Light of the World", to enlighten "them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death". In the candle, the wax, the product of the virginal bee, represents Christ's spotless Body; the wick enclosed in the wax is an image of His Soul; and the candleflame typifies the Divine Nature united to the human in one Divine Person.<sup>31</sup> The candle itself is an emblem of Christ. Before it is lighted, it is a symbol of His body as it lay in the tomb; when it is lighted, it represents His body as it rose gloriously from the dead.<sup>32</sup>

It is with the varied use of metaphors that Thompson enriches his poetry when drawing from the ceremonies of the Church and her use of the candle. His superb description of nature in The Hound of Heaven is enhanced by lines such as these:

I was heavy with the even,  
When she lit her glimmering tapers  
Round the day's dead sanctities.  
ll. 84-86

This is an effective image of the stars as glimmering tapers

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<sup>31</sup>Sullivan, op. cit., p. 159.

<sup>32</sup>McNeill-Aaron, op. cit., p. 241.

placed round the day that is dead and which by its brightness and glory was like to the holiness of grace. Hutton says that evening "is likened to a servitor in some dark cathedral going about the building in the deepening dusk, lighting taper after taper."<sup>33</sup>

In The Fallen Yew this same metaphor is used conversely;

When doom puffed out the stars, we might have said,  
It would decline its heavy head,  
And see the world to bed.

ll. 13-15

Doom is likened to a servitor in a great cathedral, "going about the darkened world on the last day--when man's brief hour of service is done, 'puffing out', blowing out with his breath, one star after another until the whole heaven is dark and still and cold."<sup>34</sup>

Again he has in mind the dying day, and the stars, as they continue to appear in the deepening darkness, present to his thoughts a catafalque surrounded with burning tapers:

Round the earth still and stark  
Heaven's death-lights kindle, yellow spark by spark,  
Beneath the dread catafalque of the dark.

A Corymbus for Autumn, ll. 102-104

Thompson's fondness for the imagery of the censer and incense is reflected in various passages of his poems. The symbolism of incense lent itself to his mystical mind as a means towards the enrichment of his poetry.

We know that incense is granulated aromatic resin, obtained from the terebinth and other trees in eastern and trop-

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<sup>33</sup>Hutton, op. cit., p. 102.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

ical countries. When sprinkled upon glowing coals in the censer, it burns freely and emits fragrant smoke. The censer is a covered metal vessel suspended from chains so that it may be swung to and fro.<sup>35</sup>

The ascending clouds of fragrant incense clothe the celebration of divine worship with additional majesty, pomp and solemnity. Therefore the Church has honored and distinguished many of her liturgical functions by the use of incense, especially the solemn celebration of the Mass. It is also used at other public services--in processions, blessings, funerals, and the Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament. Blessed incense is a symbolic sacramental. By its burning it signifies zeal; by its fragrance, virtue; and by its rising smoke, prayer going up before the throne of God.

A passage in A Corymbus for Autumn rich in metaphors shows that Thompson found his inspiration in the sacred liturgy:

All Nature sacerdotal seems, and thou.  
The calm hour strikes on yon golden gong,  
    In tones of floating and mellow light  
A spreading summons to even-song:  
    See how there  
        The cowled Night  
Kneels on the Eastern sanctuary-stair.  
What is this feel of incense everywhere?  
    Clings it round folds of the blanch-amiced clouds,  
Upwafted by the solemn thurifer  
        The mighty Spirit unknown,  
That swingeth the slow earth before the embannered  
        Throne?

11. 80-91

Nature is the priest come to chant Vespers within the great

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<sup>35</sup>Sullivan, op. cit., pp. 171-72.

sanctuary of the western sky, summoned thither by the "tones of....mellow light" struck from the golden gong of an autumnal sun at sunset. Night, a cowled monk, kneels upon the sanctuary stairs and over all the earth there is a "feel of incense everywhere". It may be that some holy spirit swings the earth as a censer, incense-laden, before the throne of God.<sup>36</sup>

In the Song of the Hours it is the sun which "swings" the earth as a censer:

We, while the sun with his hid chain swings  
Like a censer around him the blossom-sweet earth,  
ll. 49-50

Still another adaptation is to be noted in the The Sere of the Leaf where Thompson's mind dwells on one of his favorite subjects--pain:

The heart, a censered fire whence fuming chants aspire,  
Is fed with oozed gum of precious pain;  
And unrest swings denser, denser, the fragrance from  
the censer  
With the heart-strings for its quivering chain.  
ll. 111-14

A last illustration may be drawn from Sister Songs, where Thompson once again refers to declining day:

The day is lingered out:  
In slow wreaths folden  
Around yon censer, sphered, golden,  
Vague Vesper's fumes aspire;  
Part the Second, ll. 739-43

The effect of Thompson's liturgical poetry is heightened by his knowledge of the sacraments and the important part they play in the life of a baptized Catholic. It may be well

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<sup>36</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 387.

at the outset to give a general idea of what we mean when we speak of the sacraments.

In the opening chapter of his splendid treatise, "The Wonderful Sacraments", Father Doyle says:

Every sacrament is a hand of Christ stretched out either to vivify us or to help us walk securely over the raging waters of life. The sacraments are unifying bonds between Christ and ourselves...with Christ we are strong enough for any wave, and tempest, and with Him we can bring the ship safely to the shore.<sup>37</sup>

The seven sacraments are "Channels of Grace" through which Christ permits innumerable benefits to flow to us. They have been instituted by Christ, and each has an outward sign that is apparent to the senses of the body which at the same time conveys grace to the soul.<sup>38</sup>

The first and most necessary of all sacraments is Baptism which cleanses the soul from every stain of sin--original and actual--and makes the recipient a child of God and an heir of heaven. Thompson alludes to the cleansing waters of this sacrament:

All things plead, 'We are fair!' To me  
Thy world's a morning haunt,  
A Bride whose zone no man hath slipt  
But I, with baptism still bedript  
Of the prime water's font.  
Carmen Genesis, ll. 97-102

Tears of sorrow that purify the soul are, in a metaphorical sense, "baptismal tears":

What wild divinity makes my heart thus  
A fount of most baptismal tears?  
Prelude, Ode to Setting Sun, ll. 23-24

<sup>37</sup>Francis X. Doyle, S. J. The Wonderful Sacraments, p. 25.

<sup>38</sup>McNeill-Aaron, op. cit., pp. 27-28.

But man is weak; he sometimes yields to temptations and commits sins. In order that we may regain the friendship of God, Christ instituted the Sacrament of Penance in which the baptized sinner may have his offenses forgiven. The Sacra-  
ment of Penance remits sin<sup>and</sup> restores God's favor to our souls by means of the absolution of the priest. However, it is in-  
cumbent upon the penitent to confess his sins sincerely and contritely. Thompson very clearly expresses the effects of this wonderful sacrament:

And with confession never done  
Admit the sacerdotal sun,  
Absolved eternally  
By his asperging eye.  
Ad Castitatem, ll. 9-12

The Holy Eucharist has been discussed in connection with the sacrifice of the Mass. Not all of the sacraments have been treated poetically by Thompson, but some figurative element pertaining to the different sacraments is present in his poems. For instance, there is no direct reference to the Sacrament of Holy Orders, but "Day, a dedicated priest," and "All Nature sacerdotal seems" are images drawn from the ministrations of the priesthood. Again, when he says in Field Flower,

That chrism he laid upon his eyes  
And lips, and heart, for euphrasies,  
That he might see, feel, sing, perdie,  
ll. 25-27

he undoubtedly intimates the anointing of the five senses of a person dangerously ill as is done in the Sacrament of Extreme Unction; however, chrism, a mixture of olive oil and balsam,

is used in the administration of the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, whereas a specially consecrated oil, the "oil of the infirm", is applied in the "last anointing". In several passages the Holy Spirit is mentioned; the word confirmation also occurs, but the connotation is not sufficiently explicit to justify one's interpretation of it as referring distinctly to the Sacrament of Confirmation.

There remains then, the Sacrament of Matrimony. It is interesting to note how he very effectively shows the close alliance between Life and Death by a comparision with the marriage nuptials:

Since the hunt o' the world began,  
With love that trembleth, fear that loveth,  
Thou join'st the woman to the man;  
And Life and Death  
In obscure nuptials moveth,  
Commingling alien yet affined breath.

Orient Ode, ll. 72-77

The three days during which Our Lord's body reated in the tomb remind Thompson of the "thrice-promulgated bans"; the significance, however, is mystical:

Earth waits, and patient heaven,  
Self-bonded doth God wait  
Thrice-promulgated bans  
Of His fair nuptial date.

From the Night of Forebeing, ll. 309-12

The Divinity, still present in the body of Christ after His human soul had left it, remained self-bonded in the tomb for three days. The poet conceives those days as days of the promulgation of Christ's nuptial-date, analagous to the three public announcements of the intention of persons to marry, which are customary in the Catholic Church. The fair nuptial

date of Christ is the day of resurrection when His human soul was again united to His Divinity. In the language of the mystics, the day of the spiritual marriage of the human soul (God's spouse) and God (the soul's Lover) is the day the soul enters into eternal bliss.<sup>39</sup>

The liturgy of the Church inclines toward a dramatic representation of all the events in the history of salvation; but it is during Holy Week, the week preceding Easter, that its dramatic power is more profound and more vivid than at any time during the entire ecclesiastical year. The entire week is devoted to the remembrance of the sufferings of our Redeemer. All liturgical prayers, chants, and readings are dominated by this mystery.<sup>40</sup> The climax of penance and sadness is reached in the liturgy of the last three days of Holy Week which has preserved the earliest and simplest form of the Divine Office, and also, in part, of the Mass.<sup>41</sup>

In imagery profuse and profound, Thompson commemorates the sufferings of the Redeemer. These will be considered in a subsequent chapter on the Life of Christ. However, some of the figures point to the ceremonies of Good Friday and Holy Saturday and will accordingly be interpreted from that standpoint.

The first six stanzas of Assumpta Maria have as their

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<sup>39</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 467.

<sup>40</sup>Dom Otto Haering, O.S.B., Living With the Church, p. 45.

<sup>41</sup>Stapper-Baier, Catholic Liturgies, p. 108.

concluding lines the three Greek words, Ischyros (The Strong One); Agios (The Holy One), and Athanatos (The Immortal One). These words occur in the ritual for the morning service of Good Friday and are found in alternate verses sung by the choir during the solemn veneration of the cross. The hymn is too long to be inserted here, but the opening lines will convey some idea of its poignant strain: "My people, what have I done to thee? or in what have I grieved thee? Answer me."<sup>42</sup> In the poem cited, the Blessed Virgin Mary is glorifying God for all the special privileges He has bestowed upon her, praising again and again "The Strong One," "The Holy One," "The Immortal One."

The Orient Ode may justly be called the great liturgical poem of Francis Thompson. In a letter to Coventry Patmore he says: "As a matter of fact, it was written soon after Easter, and was suggested by passages in the liturgy of Holy Saturday."<sup>43</sup> But he was rather "eclectic" as Megroz says, ignoring "all the jeremiads and anathemas," and more alert to those passages which attribute life and death, joy and sorrow, to the real Sun, Christ, and looking upon both in the light that emanates from Him.<sup>44</sup>

The blessing of the new fire forms the introduction to the ceremonies of Holy Saturday. Fire is struck from a flint

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<sup>42</sup>Don Gaspar Lefebvre, O.S.B., Daily Missal, p. 819.

<sup>43</sup>Meynell, op. cit., p. 143.

<sup>44</sup>Megroz, op. cit., p. 450.

outside the church, the coals are kindled, and the priest, accompanied by his attendants, proceeds to the church door and blesses the new fire. The verses of Thompson,

The terror, and the loveliness, and purging,  
The deathfulness and lifefulness of fire!

ll. 84-85

may have been suggested by this liturgical lighting and blessing of the new fire, which is used in relighting the lamps extinguished on Holy Thursday.

A procession brings the newly-kindled fire into the church and a triple candle is lighted from it, one candle at a time, the deacon chanting three times in ascending tones, "Lumen Christi" (the Light of the World). Thompson chants:

Light out of Light!  
Resplendent and prevailing Word  
Of the Unheard!

ll. 127-29

The same reference to Christ as Light is found frequently in the liturgy of Holy Saturday.

After the blessing of the Easter candle the officiating priest stands on the Epistle side of the altar and reads twelve prophecies, the first of which records the story of the creation of light. There is a reflection of this in the following lines:

Thou art the incarnated Light  
Whose Sire is aboriginal, and beyond  
Death and resurgence of our day and night.  
ll. 78-80

After the reading of the Prophecies the celebrant with his attendants passes to the baptismal font where he blesses baptismal water. One single phrase, "fruitful water", may

have been suggested by this ceremony. During the blessing of the baptismal font the priest prays God "to fertilize this water prepared for the regeneration of mankind; that, conceived in sanctification, born again a new creation, there may come forth from the spotless womb of this Divine fountain an offspring of Heaven..."

Upon the sad and sorrowful events commemorated during Holy Week follows the most glorious and joyous of all feasts, the "feast of feasts," the climax of all feasts of the Church year--Easter. "This is the day the Lord hath made; let us be glad and rejoice therein." (Psalm cxvii, 24). Thompson manifests the joy of the Psalmist when he sings in Field Flower:

'I'll tell the whole world one day!'  
There was never blossom half so glad,  
Since sun of Christ's first Sunday.  
11. 18-20

The Scripture text, "For an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and coming, rolled back the stone," probably gave rise to the following citation from An Ode After Easter:

In this delightful season, flaming  
For thy resurrection-feast,  
Ah, more I think the long ensepulture cold,  
Than stony winter rolled  
From the unsealed mouth of the holy East;  
11. 298-302

Our Lord had promised His apostles that after He ascended into heaven He would send them the Holy Ghost. This promise was fulfilled on the tenth day after His Ascension, when the Holy Spirit descended upon them in the form of fiery tongues. The feast commemorating this event is known as Pentecost, from the Greek pentekostes, fiftieth. Thompson makes

allusions to the incidents of the first Pentecost:

In how different accents hear the throng  
His great Pentecostal tongue;  
The Poppy, ll. 42-43

"...the multitude came together, and were confounded in mind, because that every man heard them speak in his own tongue." (Acts, ii, 6). When Thompson wishes to express how utterly incomprehensible are all the glories and mysteries of Nature, he borrows from the astounding "Pentecostal miracle":

O Nature, never-done  
Ungaped-at Pentecostal miracle,  
We hear thee, each man in his proper tongue.  
From the Night of Forebeing, ll. 31-33

And in a poem which he styles a phantasy, Thompson sings joyously:

'I'll tell the whole world one day!'  
There was no poet half so glad,  
Since man grew God that Sunday.  
Field Flower, ll. 38-40

On Pentecost, "man grew God" through the coming of the Holy Ghost and the action of divine grace in his soul.

We must agree with Weygandt that

There is a definite experience under all his poems. At times Francis Thompson makes himself the mouth-piece of the Church, but when he does it is because he has personal experience of what his Church teaches.....there is always in his verse the suggestion of ceremonial; and his overemphasis of detail is of the very essence of Gothic beauty.<sup>45</sup>

The liturgy, the public worship of the Church, was the source from which Francis Thompson drew much of his inspira-

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<sup>45</sup>Cornelius A. Weygandt, Tuesdays at Ten, p. 208.

tion and many of his most sublime figures. In the chief of his liturgical poems, the Orient Ode, he refers to the "very heart and soul" of the liturgy, the Mass, and with exalted and brilliant imagery suggests some of the principal parts of the Mass--the Consecration, the Communion, and other minor parts, such as the prayer preceding the Gospel and the Nicene Creed. With the intuition and genius of a mystical poet he adapts the symbolism of the externals of the Mass, such as vestments, candles, church linens, and incense, to his poetry, and thereby heightens its distinctive appeal. He has a special fondness for the imagery of the censer and incense in his interpretation of Nature, particularly when he thinks of the earth giving glory to the sun, or the sun "swinging the earth" as a censer in its daily rotation. Of course, there is meaning involved in these figures. Thompson attempts to express how we honor the Most Holy Eucharist by the use of incense; but his most beautiful expression is found in the first lines of his magnificent Orient Ode where he illustrates how the course of the sun brings to his mind the beautiful and edifying service of the Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament. The figure is one of the grandest ever conceived by any poet, and its execution is one of the finest pieces of Thompson's work.<sup>46</sup>

Then, he refers directly to some of the sacraments--Baptism, Penance, the Holy Eucharist, and Matrimony--and more

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<sup>46</sup> O'Brien, op. cit., p. 607.

or less indirectly to the remaining three: Confirmation, Extreme Unction, and Holy Orders. He recognizes with poetic reverence the purposes for which these "Channels of Grace" have been instituted.

Passing on to the Ecclesiastical Year, he shows in the main the ceremonies connected with the celebration of Good Friday and Holy Saturday, and by direct reference suggests the great feasts of Easter and Pentecost. The other feasts of the Liturgical Year which are so closely allied to the Life of Jesus and His Blessed Mother will be discussed in their respective places in subsequent chapters.

It must be admitted that in his liturgical poetry Thompson shows to the utmost the quality of his figurative verse. He gives evidence of a domination over language and a sincerity that is as reverent as it is passionate. However, there will be many who, like the Morning Post reviewer, will be unable to read intelligently this type of poetry since "the incomprehensible sentiments and unknown words" derived from the liturgy are foreign to their understanding and they are lost in the "foam and roar of his phraseology." The fault lies not with the poetic allusions, but with the inexperience of the reader. It is obvious that only those who have had definite associations with the Catholic Church and her liturgy and those who, although not possessing this specialized knowledge, are nevertheless willing to make an attempt to understand, will be able to appreciate and comprehend the liturgical representations which he has clothed with such glorious and indefinable imagery.

## CHAPTER V

### ONE OF THE MARIANS

"....Mary of Nazareth, the prototype of humanity, nature, and body."

One of the most beautiful, appealing and substantial devotions of the Catholic Church is the devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Our love for her, our confidence in her maternal solicitude for us, and our realization of her most benign influence with God are part and parcel of Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Our Blessed Mother has been called "God's masterpiece", the most perfect being His almighty power has created.<sup>2</sup> The Fathers of the Church have spoken of her glories in glowing terms, but not one of them has attempted to draw a pen-picture of her upon whom God poured forth the plenitude of His Grace; nor has any Christian writer down to our time thought himself equal to the task of portraying Our Lady's physical beauty. However, saints and writers have become ecstatic in their admiration of the beauty of the Mother of God, albeit they cannot describe it in so many words. Wordsworth, contemplating her supernal fairness wrote the immortal lines:

Mother whose virgin bosom was not defiled  
With the least shade of thought to sin allied;

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<sup>1</sup>J. Kennedy, P. P., "Is Catholic Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Justifiable?" The Catholic Mind, (December 8, 1926), p. 441.

<sup>2</sup>Michael Watson, S. J., God's Masterpiece, p. 1.

Woman above all women glorified,  
Our tainted nature's solitary boast.<sup>3</sup>

Is it not obvious then, that Francis Thompson, "the essential poet of essential Christianity,"<sup>4</sup> who could claim a long allegiance to Heaven's Queen, should dedicate to her such tender offerings in prose and verse?<sup>5</sup> He glorifies her titles and extols her prerogatives in a wealth of imagery that bursts upon one with the mystical splendor of apocalyptic vision.<sup>6</sup> Like Wordsworth before him, he praises her immaculate purity and asserts his belief in the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. This dogma is misunderstood by many. Briefly, it means that Our Lady was conceived without original sin--that her soul did not bear, even for a single instant, any portion of the guilt of Adam's fall, but was full of grace and holiness from the first moment of her conception.<sup>7</sup> It was becoming that when Jesus Christ, the son of God, took human nature, He should have a Mother who was absolutely sinless and replenished with all grace and sanctity, that she should not have been touched even in the remotest way by the shadow of sin.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Sister M. Patricia, C. S. J., The Magnificat, the World's Greatest Lyric, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup>Bregy, op. cit., p. 610.

<sup>5</sup>E. Pullen, "Francis Thompson", Catholic World, (August, 1905), p. 39.

<sup>6</sup>Margaret Munsterberg, "Francis Thompson, a Poet's Poet", Catholic World, (September, 1919), p. 756.

<sup>7</sup>Watson, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>8</sup>"Mary Immaculate," The Catholic Mind, (December 8, 1929), p. 460.

That Francis Thompson loved and revered the Immaculate Virgin is established not only by the many tributes he pays her in his poems, but also by the devotion he manifested and the confidence he reposed in her. He was wont to wear round his neck a medal bearing her image. When he was being medically examined in his last illness, he raised his frail hand to prevent its temporary removal. The treasured medal was buried with him.<sup>9</sup> In "Orison Tryst" he substantiates what has been said regarding his devotion to his heavenly Mother:

Where, neighboured on my heart with those pure lines  
In amity of kindred pureness, lies  
Image of Her conceived Immaculate.

ll. 22-24

Thompson felt that the Blessed Virgin considered it an honor and an unmerited privilege to have been preserved from the stain of original sin; therefore she gratefully acknowledges Him

Who upraised me where my mother  
Fell, beneath the apple-tree.  
Assumpta Maria, ll. 59-60

A convincing proof that our Blessed Lady valued her virginity very highly is suggested in the Scriptures where we are told that she was "troubled" when the angel announced to her God's design. When the celestial messenger explained how the Almighty determined to work out the stupendous mystery, she bowed in submission, and the Incarnation took place.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 415.

<sup>10</sup>P. A. Sheehan, D. D., Mary, The Mother of God.

Which at thy first white Ave shall conceive!  
Orient Ode, l. 27

Thompson does not hesitate to resort to scientific allusions to strengthen his figures, although he was adverse to the use of scientific theories because they were a "baffling distortion of perspective". To Coventry Patmore he once wrote: "The bits of science that crop up in your essays remind me of little devils dancing among rose trees."<sup>11</sup>

She bears on her front's lucency  
The starlight of her purity:

For as the white rays of that star  
The union of all colours are,

She sums all virtues that may be  
In her sweet light of purity.  
Our Lady of the Night, ll. 3-8

May it not be conjectured that his "Queen Mary" was most influential in keeping "the white bird in his breast" unsullied?<sup>12</sup> He retained in the London gutters and in the most loathsome circumstances a singular purity of heart and an inherent gentleness of thought and speech.<sup>13</sup>

Thompson has selected figures from the Old Testament which point to Mary as the Mother of God. In Assumpta Maria the poet strengthens his presentation by having the Blessed Virgin herself speak:

'I, the Ark that for the graven  
Tables of the Law was made;  
Man's own hearth was one; one, Heaven;  
Both within my womb were laid.  
ll. 10-13

<sup>11</sup>Meynell, op. cit., p. 180.

<sup>12</sup>Thomson, op. cit., p. 180.

<sup>13</sup>Benjamin F. Musser, Franciscan Poets, p. 16.

The Ark refers to the Ark of the Covenant of the Old Law in which were placed the tables of stone graven with the Law received by Moses from the hands of God on Mt. Sinai. The Office of the Assumption explains more clearly what Thompson is trying to say: "...the holy and animated Ark of the Living God, which held within it its own Maker." (Fourth Lesson).

Referring to one of the miracles wrought in the desert to sustain life of the Israelites, Thompson has the Blessed Virgin to emphasize that she is the Mother of Him who gave His own flesh and blood as a "heavenly Manna" for the nourishment of our souls:

'I, the Heaven whence the Manna  
Weary Israel, slid on you!  
11. 23-24

The last line notably illustrates the comment of Benet: "I doubt whether for a century there will appear another poet who can use figurative language so brilliantly and yet so exactly as this master of compression in English."<sup>14</sup>

In the liturgy of the Church Mary is addressed as the "Mediatrix of all Graces". Pope Leo XIII describes the intercession of the Blessed Virgin as a "function divinely assigned to her, like a mother's duty towards her child". Since as Mother of the Savior she participated in His sufferings, she now shares in the distribution of the graces merited by her Divine Son.<sup>15</sup> In sympathy with this teaching of the

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<sup>14</sup>Benet, op. cit., p. 701.

<sup>15</sup>Joseph Hulsein, S.J., "All Grace Through Mary," The Catholic Mind, (February 22, 1926), p. 62.

Church, Thompson identifies Mary as the Mediatrix of all graces. It would be difficult to find a more beautiful symbol than that contained in the Proem to the Sister Poems:

Sweet stem to that rose Christ, who from the earth  
Suck'st our poor prayers, conveying them to him;  
ll. 38-39

Alluding to the Old Testament description of the Garden of Eden, "And a river went out of the place of pleasure to water paradise, which from thence is divided into four heads," Thompson represents the Blessed Virgin as the fountain from which issue streams of grace:

'I am the four Rivers' Fountain,  
Watering Paradise of old;  
Assumpta Maria, ll. 31-32

Father Talbot has said that "Poetry is divinest in prayer, and prayer is sublimest in poetry."<sup>16</sup> In the Orient Ode Thompson attributes his poetic inspiration to Mary. He invokes her, and she in turn "whispers" to him:

My fingers thou hast taught to con  
The flame-chorded psalterion,  
Till I can translate into mortal wire--  
Till I can translate passing well--  
The heavenly harping harmony,  
Melodious, sealed, inaudible,  
Which makes the dulcet psalter of the  
world's desire.  
Thou whisperest in the Moon's white ear,  
And she does whisper into mine,--  
By night together, I and she--  
With her virgin voice divine,  
The things I cannot half so sweetly tell  
As she can sweetly speak, I sweetly hear.  
ll. 112-24

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<sup>16</sup>Francis Talbot, S. J., "Poetry and Prayer," The Catholic Mind, (April 22, 1935), p. 160.

The artistic imagery in the foregoing lines is not indicative merely of beautiful effect, but suggestive as well of Catholic doctrine. "The flame-chorded psalterion" connotes the devotion of the Rosary which has been approved and adopted by the Church as one of the chief means of honoring the Mother of God and of obtaining her aid. The word "whisperings" between the poet and the Blessed Virgin is illustrative of the teaching of the Church that, by invoking the saints, they, by their intercession will obtain for us from God the graces of which we stand in need.

In all of Thompson's poetry on nature there is the underlying principle that the beauty of nature is but a reflection of Divine Beauty; but Mary also lends her charm to the enchantments of nature. "As money is stamped with an image, so is external nature stamped with the image of Mary's beauty and loveliness."<sup>17</sup>

Yea, holy one,  
Who coin'st thyself to beauty for the world.  
Sister Songs, Proem, ll. 51-52

In the same poem May is referred to as "Mary's spoilt nursing". This month is specially dedicated to the honor of the Mother of God and her children strive to give her suitable veneration as Queen of Heaven and Queen of May. Meynell relates how in Thompson's time the first of May and the subsequent days were celebrated at Ushaw:

No Ushaw man need be told how eagerly all, both young and old, hailed the coming of the 1st of May.

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<sup>17</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 321.

For that day, in the Seminary, was erected a colossal altar at the end of the ambulacrum nearest the belfry, fitted and adorned by loving zeal. Before this, after solemn procession from St. Aloysius', with lighted tapers, all assembled, Professors and students, and sang a Marian hymn. In the College no less solemnity was observed. At a quarter past nine the whole house, from President downwards, assembled in the ante-chapel before our favourite statue. A hymn selected and practiced with great care, was sung in alternate verses by the choir in harmony, and the whole house in unison....Singing Our Lady's Magnificat, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament followed. For thirty-one days, excepting Sundays and holy days, this inspiring ceremonial took place--its memory can never be effaced.<sup>18</sup>

The Assumpta Maria is one of the glories of our sacred poetry.<sup>19</sup> Father Connolly explains the title as meaning, "Mary, taken to God's own self, body and soul".<sup>20</sup> Tradition tells us that Mary died--when and where is not definitely known; that her tomb, when opened upon the request of the apostle Thomas, was found empty;<sup>21</sup> and that in the tomb "the Apostles found lilies and white, stainless roses." From this they concluded that the body was taken to heaven, for it was too pure to be submitted to the pollution of the grave.<sup>22</sup> Thompson admitted that Assumpta Maria was "vamped" from the office of the Assumption and part of it from the "Canticles of Canticles".<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Meynell, op. cit., pp. 23-24.

<sup>19</sup>Pullen, op. cit., p. 45.

<sup>20</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 476.

<sup>21</sup>Catholic Encyclopedia, 1, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup>Daniel A. Lord, S. J. The Months With Mary, pp. 29-30.

<sup>23</sup>Meynell, op. cit., p. 130.

The poem opens with an adaptation from the "Canticle of Canticles":

'Mortals, that behold a Woman  
Rising 'twixt the Moon and Sun;  
Who am I the heavens assume? an  
All am I, and I am one.

'Multitudinous ascend I,  
Dreadful as a battle arrayed.  
ll. 1-6

"Who is she that cometh forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army set in array?" (Canticle of Canticles, vi, 9). And again, "Thou art beautiful, O my love, sweet and comely as Jerusalem: terrible as an army set in array." (Ibid., 3).

"Transcendent thought, glowing pictures, striking flashes of imagination, spellbinding touches of loveliness" characterize this poem. With the insight of the seer and the enthusiasm of the mystic the author develops his idea, "roaming heaven and earth alike" for comparisons to illustrate his thought.<sup>24</sup>

In a poem dedicated to the sufferings of Mary a scene is described which implies the Assumption of Our Lady as well as the Ascension of the resurrected Body of her Divine Son:

And He thou barest in thy womb  
Caught thee at last into the day,  
Before the living throne of Whom  
The Lights of Heaven burning pray.  
The Passion of Mary, ll. 23-26

Thompson uses a variety of symbols in referring to the Blessed Virgin. He accosts her as the Moon, suggesting that as the moon reflects the light of the sun, so she reflects

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<sup>24</sup>Thomson, op. cit., p. 75.

the grandeur and dignity of the Divine Sun, Christ. He also calls her

The Woman I behold, whose vision seek  
All eyes and know not;  
The Night of Forebeing, ll. 337-38

She is "Christ's dear Dame" and "Princess Mary"; again, she is the "newer Eve". In "A Dead Astronomer" he commemorates the Rev. Stephen Perry, a noted astronomer, and concludes the poem by saying to him:

When thy hand its tube let fall,  
Thou found'st the fairest Star of all!  
ll. 12-13

Mary is sometimes alluded to as the "Morning Star", dispelling the darkness of sin by her virtue and heralding a safe and prosperous journey through life, which is chequered by the most contrasting fortunes.<sup>25</sup> Very frequently she is called "Star of the Sea". Father Hattler offers an explanation by analogy:

In the olden days when sailors traveled out upon the wide and open seas, and wished to know in what direction they should steer their ship in the darkness, they had to fix their eyes upon a certain star in the heavens called the pole-star, or the "Star of the Sea". The life of a Christian is like unto a voyage over an unsafe and stormy ocean. ...But Mary...with her example, and with her helpful intercession, is like a guiding star. The Christian should...try to imitate her, and pray for her help. Whoever does that can never be lost.<sup>26</sup>

The poem which led to Thompson's discovery and his sub-

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25 J. Vandel, M.S.C., "The Morning Star", The Catholic Mind, (December 8, 1927), p. 460.

26 F. X. Lasance, Thoughts on the Religious Life, pp. 790-91.

sequent "adoption" by the Meynells was The Passion of Mary. He had sent some manuscripts including this poem to the editor of Merry England (Wilfrid Meynell). The manuscripts, most uninviting in outward aspect, were at first pigeon-holed by the preoccupied editor. After several months they were released, read, and estimated at their worth. But Thompson had changed his abode and the editor's letter was returned. As a possible way of getting into communication with the author, Wilfrid Meynell decided to print The Passion of Mary in Merry England. Thompson saw his poem in print and wrote to Meynell, who immediately took steps to procure an interview with him.<sup>27</sup>

Father Connolly tells us that in 1885 Father Richardson delivered a sermon on "Our Lady of Sorrows" which was the inspiration of The Passion of Mary. Thompson made notes on the sermon after returning home, but did not develop them poetically until two years later. The subject of the poem and many details of its development are similar to the great Latin hymn of the Church, the Stabat Mater.<sup>28</sup>

In his verses Thompson compassionates the sorrowing Mother in her grief over the sufferings and death of her Divine Son, the cause of which is stated in simple but effective words by Father Lord: "And Mary watched her son die hooted and jeered by the multitude He had come to save, guiltless, and yet out of reach of anything she could give Him save

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<sup>27</sup>Meynell, op. cit., pp. 68-69.

<sup>28</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 398.

her enveloping pity and tenderness."<sup>29</sup> The poet speaks thus:

O Lady Mary, thy bright crown  
Is no mere crown of majesty;  
For with the reflex of His own  
Resplendent thorns Christ circled thee.

The red rose of this Passion-tide  
Doth take a deeper hue from thee,  
In the five wounds of Jesus dyed,  
And in thy bleeding thoughts, Mary!

ll. 1-8

Her dolors, however, extended beyond Christ's death. The aftermath of the Passion--the burial, the loneliness--renewed her anguish:<sup>30</sup>

Thy Son went up the angel's ways,  
His passion ended; but, ah me!  
Thou found'st the road of further days  
A longer way of Calvary.

ll. 13-16

But Mary's entire life was a martyrdom. As she advanced in years, the sorrows increased in number and intensity, each connected with some phase of our Lord's life and suffering.<sup>31</sup> In A Dead Astronomer there is a reference to her "seven woes". Briefly stated, these "seven woes" embrace the prophecy of Simeon in the temple, the flight into Egypt, the loss of the child Jesus in the temple, the meeting with Jesus on the way to Calvary, the Crucifixion, the removal of Christ's Body from the cross and His burial.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Lord, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>30</sup>Sisters of Notre Dame, Communion Devotions for Religious, p. 127.

<sup>31</sup>A Religious of the Sacred Heart, Our Lady's Feasts, p. 25.

<sup>32</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 420.

In another of his religious poems entitled Saint Monica Thompson again makes a passing reference to the sorrows of our Lady, joining with her Saint Monica who laments the waywardness of her son, Augustine:

At the cross thy station keeping  
With the mournful Mother weeping,  
Thou, unto the sinless Son,  
Weepest for thy sinful one.

ll. 1-4

That Thompson should have meditated on the indescribable sufferings of the Mother of God and evinced so sincere a compassion toward her is easily comprehended when one reflects that he had his dreariness, his miseries and his failures, and that he suffered more than ordinary men. Most of his work, including The Passion of Mary, was done in physical as well as intellectual misery.<sup>33</sup> However, his apprenticeship with sorrow did not produce morbidity of spirit, nor is he pessimistic when he treats of "inevadible" pain.

Thompson's poems reveal him as a quiet, humble, unassuming character imbued with the simplicity and lowliness of a child. He must have admired these same qualities in Mary, the most virtuous of God's creatures. It is her humility which makes her so lovable and of which Thompson sings in his poetry.

Ah, Love! somewhat let be--  
Lest my humility  
Grow weak  
When thou dost speak.  
Any Saint, ll. 25-29

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<sup>33</sup>Carl and Mark Van Doren, American and British Literature since 1890, p. 136.

And in Manus Animam Pinxit he refers to the "Magnificat",

Whose spirit sure is lineal to that  
Which sang Magnificat,  
ll. 53-54

the hymn which Mary sang when she visited her cousin, Saint Elizabeth. The "Magnificat"..."is one of the most unimpeachable of all prophecies, the most sublime of thanksgivings, and the most thrilling of all poems."<sup>34</sup> Mary acknowledges that she is only God's handmaiden, yet her humility does not prevent her from recognizing the special privileges God has conferred upon her.

My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior. Because he hath regarded the humility of his handmaid; for behold from henceforth all nations shall call me blessed. Because he that is mighty hath done great things to me; and holy is his name. (St. Luke, i, 46-47).

One of the longer and rather obscure poems of Thompson's is The Mistress of Vision. The author himself described it as a "phantasy with no more than an illusive tinge of psychic significance".<sup>35</sup> Undoubtedly the first stanzas (I-VIII) and the last(XXIII-XXVI) are in the nature of a mere phantasy, but the intervening lines present his gospel of Christian renunciation.

George William Russell has said that "The light seen behind or through a veil is always more suggestive than the unveiled light,"<sup>36</sup> and so Thompson presents to us a masque in

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340. R. Vassail-Phillips, C. SS. R., The Mother of God, p. 71.

35Meynell, op. cit., p. 179.

36Alice Brown, "The Mystical in Poetry," Commonweal, (November 4, 1913), p. 12.

the midst of which "he announces the truths of Christian asceticism--the necessity of sacrifice for the salvation of an individual soul as well as for the regeneration of the world and of poetry."<sup>37</sup>

The Mistress of Vision is Mary, Queen of the triple realm of Heaven, of Grace, and of Poetry. The entire poem which is dominated by this theme, may be divided into four parts. The first, (stanzas I-VIII), gives us a description of "The Lady of fair weeping" and the mystical Garden. This garden, or Mary's kingdom, is a realm of bewildering beauty::

It was a mazeful wonder;  
Thrice three times it was enwalled  
With an emerald--  
Sealed so asunder.

All its birds in middle air hung adream, their  
music thralled.

ll. 6-10

The "Lady of fair weeping" reigns "at the garden's core" and sings a song of the joys and sorrows and glories of Her Divine Son.

Sang a song of sweet and sore  
And the after-sleeping;

ll. 13-14

Thompson here makes reference to the joyful, the sorrowful and the glorious mysteries of the rosary, a prayer in which we commemorate the chief events in the life of our Lord and His Mother.

To enter into the real spirit of the poem one must note carefully the tone of pain and renunciation which is prevalent.

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37Connolly, op. cit., p. 429.

The Mistress sings a sweet song with the sweetness borne of suffering. The contemplation of Mary's sufferings is a safeguard to holy purity,

The lily kept its gleaming,  
In her tears (divine conservers!)  
ll. 21-22

and the powers of poetic achievement burst into blossom during the time of prayer to Mary:

And the flowers of dreaming  
Pales not their fervours,  
For her blood flowed through their  
nervures.

ll. 24-26

In the last stanza of the first division Thompson is filled with consternation and pity when he reflects upon the painful scenes which were the cause of so much sorrow to the Lady:

But woe's me, and woe's me,  
For the secrets of her eyes!  
In my visions fearfully  
They are ever shown to be  
As fringed pools.

ll. 44-48

In the next section, (stanzas IX-XVI) is presented the difficulty that is experienced in attempting to repeat the entire revelation contained in the Lady's song. The poet requests to borrow the terrors, the music, the voice divine of a sunrise in the fabled land beyond Cathay that he may tell the secrets of which our Lady sings. Ere long, his thoughts again wander into the realm of suffering. The scene on Calvary is visualized, and Thompson intimates that if we embrace life's griefs with love, the thorns will be transformed into joy.

The poet concludes by asking himself how he dares to sing of God's glory, for ere his song has begun it falls to earth singed by too near approach to divinity.

O dismay!

I, a wingless mortal, sporting  
With the tresses of the sun?

I, that dare my hand to lay  
On the thunder in its snorting?  
Ere begun,

Falls my singed song down the sky, even the old  
Icarian way.

ll. 100-106

In the following division the essential message of the Lady's song is given in the dim snatches that the poet still remembers. James Russell Lowell has said that earth gets its price for what it gives. The Mistress of the Vision speaks similarly. Poetic and spiritual insight can be purchased only at the cost of human pain and sorrow. (XVII-XVIII)

....from spear and thorn alone  
May be grown

For the front of saint or singer any divinizing  
twine.

ll. 110-112

'But woe the singer, woe!' she said; 'beyond the  
dead his singing-lore,  
All its art of sweet and sore,  
He learns,.....

ll. 118-20

A further message would have us understand that attainment to the art of the Lady's song supposes initiation into the gladness and pain of the Garden where she dwells. If it was Mary's portion in life to suffer, her children should not expect to fare differently.

Exult, for that thou dar'st not grieve;  
Plough thou the rock until it bear;  
Know, for thou else couldst not believe;

Lose, that the lost thou may'st receive;  
Die, for none other way canst live.

ll. 133-37

The necessity and utility of renunciation could hardly be expressed more emphatically than in the lines just quoted.

Finally, in the concluding stanzas the description of the Lady and the Garden is repeated in order to emphasize the mystical character of both. (XXII-XXIII) The Lady (Mary) is paid loving tribute as the inspiration of poesy, but again the element of pain and tribulation is hovering near. The poet terminates his reflections by saying that if he rejects Mary's inspiration or if she should withdraw it,<sup>38</sup>

Tears shall break from out me,  
That I cannot find  
Music in the holy poets to my wistful want, I  
doubt me!

ll. 185-87

Thus concludes the poem, the significance of which is that the mood in which he sings until he makes the mystical meaning explicit and interrupts the magic, is that of the dweller in paradise. The gorgeous imagery and chanting are called up out of this mood which the poet shares with us, so that his Eden becomes ours.<sup>39</sup>

Mary's nature was wholly and entirely human. Our Lady was born like the rest of mankind, and like them, was subject

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<sup>38</sup>For the interpretation of The Mistress of Vision Father Connolly's notes (pp. 429-43) furnished the most conclusive suggestions, with here and there a thought from the commentary on the poem by Father O'Connor included in the study of Megroz, pp. 265-74.

<sup>39</sup>Megroz, op. cit., p. 84.

to death. Now, the distinctions which do differentiate her from every other human being are the supernatural privileges which she enjoys and her unique personal holiness. These possessions so far outweigh anything which even the greatest saints can claim that the Catholic Church rightly pays her a more excellent honor than she gives to any saint in heaven.

It was with this understanding that Thompson venerated and honored the Blessed Virgin Mary. It was faith and not whimsical impulses that actuated him and inspired the poetry he dedicated to her.

His poetry, saturated as it is with spirituality and mystical elements, contains many passages and allusions pertaining to the Mother of God, the most significant of which may be summed up as follows:

1. Thompson extols the special privileges which God has bestowed upon the Blessed Virgin, referring especially to her Immaculate Conception, her divine maternity, and her Assumption into Heaven.

2. In many of his poems he addresses her with the titles commonly applied to her by the Church and the faithful; again he selects them according to choice. The most notable are: Mediatrix of Grace, Morning Star, Star of the Sea, Queen of Heaven, Queen of Calvary, Mother of the Savior, the newer Eve, Princess Mary, the Self-sufficing Woman, Christ's Dear Dame.

3. Beautiful passages point out two of the great hymns contained in the liturgy of the Church. The "Magnificat" was composed by the Blessed Virgin herself and sung on the

occasion of her visit to St. Elizabeth. It is the great classical example of humility. The other hymn, known as the "Stabat Mater", is dedicated to the Mother of Sorrows.

4. Since Mary is powerful in her intercession, Thompson invokes her as the inspiration of his poetry, and finds that she "whispers" to him in return for the prayers he has addressed to her.

5. Very frequently does he emphasize the fact the the beauty in nature is but a reflection of the beauty of God and of His Mother.

6. From his poetry we learn that Thompson is especially attracted by the purity and humility of the Blessed Virgin, by her patient endurance of sufferings, by her solicitude for mankind in her position as mediatrix, and finally, by her exalted dignity and heavenly beauty.

7. His life and writings reveal in what manner he showed his love and reverence toward Our Lady, and indirectly intimate that we might do likewise. We might honor her image, practice certain devotions as did Thompson in the recitation of the rosary and giving her special homage during the month of May, and be faithful to her Son. A self-sacrificing and patient spirit coupled with the practice of the virtues she exemplifies would be an acceptable oblation.

It must be conceded that Thompson possesses an almost unprecedented skill in the use of imagery. He employs some of the most gorgeous figures in his mystical and spiritual interpretations, adapting them not so much to the procuring

of beautiful effects, but that his ideas may be more convincingly and impressively conveyed to the reader. However, in his enthusiastic ardor he frequently uses figures that in themselves have a depth of meaning, but which require some specialized knowledge if the reader is to appreciate his poetry at its full worth. Assumpta Maria for instance, contains a number of allusions conceivable only to those who are familiar with the Liturgy of the Church. In The Dead Astronomer, which Thompson says he intended "merely for a pretty, gracefully turned fancy" there is a reference to the "seven woes" of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which, although presenting a general idea, is not sufficiently clear. It is obvious though, that all "imagists" have their own field of thought, and that an acquaintance with the sources of their imagery is necessary if their message is to be understood.

On the other hand, the figurative language of The Passion of Mary is at once comprehended by any Christian since it bears directly on the sufferings of Jesus and Mary as is related in the Scriptures. The L'Envoy of the same poem is an "open confession" of the gloom and misery which Thompson experienced during his outcast London days at the time he wrote The Passion of Mary.

Again, many of the images require but a slight insight and a little logical thinking, as in those passages where the poet represents Mary as our intercessor with God. Let it be said that without its profusion of meaningful imagery the poetry of Thompson would hardly be given the recognition it

now receives. "His imagery is so beautiful as almost to persuade us that imagery is the end and goal of poetry."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Viola Meynell, op. cit., pp. 69-70.

CHAPTER VI  
THE ETERNAL GALILEAN

"Art thou not life of them that live?"

Over nineteen hundred years ago there came into this world a Man whose life of thirty-three years is the chief event in the world's history, and--whether we think of it or not-- the chief event in the history here and hereafter of every individual.<sup>1</sup> It is of this "Eternal Galilean" that Francis Thompson has told a comparatively complete life story, the authenticity of which is derived from the Scriptures, a story told with the insight of a mystic, the reverence of a devout Catholic, and the genius of an accomplished artificer of imagery.

Jesus had a twofold origin, divine and human; out of time and out of eternity. Hence we are accustomed in the language of theology to speak of Christ as the Son of God and as the Son of Man. As the first He has a begotten origin from all eternity; as the second He was begotten in a divine way, born of a human Mother, and lived a span of life like other men.<sup>2</sup>

In the Orient Ode the "Word made flesh" is suggested by two brief lines:

Resplendent and prevailing Word  
Of the Unheard!

ll. 128-29

Another reference in the same poem is more definitely

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<sup>1</sup>Mother M. Loyola, Jesus of Nazareth, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Patrick J. Carroll, C. S. C., The Man-God, p. 22.

suggestive of the supernatural conception of Jesus Christ:

Behold her fair and greater daughter  
Offers to thee her fruitful water,  
Which at thy first white Ave shall conceive!

ll. 24-26

"And the angel being come in, said unto her: Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; ....The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the most High shall overshadow Thee." (Luke, i, 28,35).

But in the poem Ex Ore Infantum is illustrated most beautifully the fact that the God of Heaven came upon earth to live as a child among the children of men:

Little Jesus, wast Thou shy  
Once, and just as small as I?  
And what did it feel like to be  
Out of Heaven, and just like me?

ll. 1-4

Christ as man literally descended to man's level in numberless acts of mercy during His life on earth. At the same time, as God He elevated man to a higher level by His gifts of grace. This is beautifully expressed in Any Saint:

But He a little hath  
Declined His stately path  
And my  
Feet set more high.  
ll. 5-8

We read in the Bible story how the brilliance of an extraordinary star beckoned the Wise Men from the East and guided them to the Savior: "And entering into the house, they found the child with Mary his mother, and falling down they adored him: and opening their treasures they offered him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh." (Matthew, ii, 11).

When Thompson is addressing the Sun in the Orient Ode as its "Magian", he clothes his message with the Gospel narrative. Father Connolly comments that it "is a reverent parody on the coming of the Magi."<sup>3</sup>

Lo, of thy Magians I the least  
Haste with my gold, my incenses and myrrhs,  
To thy desired epiphany, from the spiced  
Regions and odorous of Song's traded East.

ll. 187-190

In Retrospect Thompson refers to Christ as "the true Orient", and his sublime liturgical poem Orient Ode is really addressed to the true Sun, Christ. In Holy Scripture Christ is called "the Orient", a literal translation of the Latin, Oriens, which might be freely translated, "the one rising in the East like the sun."<sup>4</sup> In the prophetic words of Zachary concerning John the Baptist we read: "And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways: To give knowledge of salvation to his people, unto the remission of their sins: Through the bowels of the mercy of our God, in which the Orient from on high hath visited us: To enlighten them that sit in darkness, and the shadow of death: to direct our feet into the way of peace." (Luke, i, 76-79). "The Orient" is one of the titles of the Messias, the true light of the world, and the sun of justice.

In an adaptation of "And the light shineth in darkness

<sup>3</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 458.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 449.

and the darkness did not comprehend it" (Luke i, 5), Thompson exposes man's lack of comprehension of spiritual values, representing God patiently awaiting the soul's compliance with grace:

The light is in the darkness, and  
The darkness doth not comprehend:  
God hath no haste; and God's sons stand  
Yet a day, tarrying for the end.  
Grace of the Way, ll. 33-36

When our Lord was thirty years old, He left his home in Nazareth and began His public life. Thompson refers to some of the outstanding events and to the teachings of Christ as they have been recorded by the Evangelists. We know that our Lord wrought His first public miracle in behalf of a newly-married couple. The simple, gentle remark of His Blessed Mother, "They have no wine," implied a petition to relieve the embarrassment of the hosts. In his tribute to the English martyrs Thompson thinks of the blood they shed for Christ as a precious wine. Note the very effective comparison:

Ah, blest! who bathed the parched Vine  
With richer than His Cana-wine,  
And heard, your most sharp supper past:  
'Ye kept the best wine to the last!!  
ll. 35-38

The imagery of the following passage is likewise borrowed from the Scripture narrative of the miracle at Cana. The poet is addressing Nature:

Lady divine!  
That giv'st to men good wine,  
And yet the best thou hast  
And nectarous, keepst to the last,  
And bring'st not forth before the Master's sign:-  
How few there be thereof that ever taste,  
Quaffing in brutish haste,

Without distinction of thy great repast!  
Of Nature: Laud and Plaint, ll. 139-146

Patmore uses similar imagery: "God turns the water of the natural senses into the wine of the spiritual and fills them (weak souls) with spiritual felicities and consolations which make their path through life more than easy."<sup>5</sup>

The first great sermon our Lord preached was the Sermon on the Mount. Up to this time He never had gathered about Him an audience having knowledge enough of heavenly things to enable them to understand Him; later on, being surrounded by spies, He had not the same liberty and was often forced to use mystical language and to speak in parables. But now he announces freely some of the great moral truths which are the completest expression of the doctrine of Christianity and a brief epitome of the Gospel.<sup>6</sup> Our Lord opened his sermon by enumerating the eight surest means of securing blessedness, the eight beatitudes, as they are commonly known. Thompson refers to the fourth beatitude, "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after justice, for they shall have their fill", when he says:

To eat  
Deny thy meat;  
And thou shalt be fulfilled  
With all sweet things unwilling;  
Any Saint, ll. 135-38

Jesus urged His listeners to put all their trust in the Providence of the Father: "Be not solicitous therefore, saying:

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<sup>5</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 537.

<sup>6</sup>Abbe Constant Fouard, The Christ, the Son of God, p. 89.

What shall we eat; or what shall we drink, or wherewith shall we be clothed? For after all these things do the heathen seek. For your Father knoweth that you have need of all these things: Seek ye therefore first the kingdom of God and his justice and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matthew, vi, 31-33). With great ingenuity does Thompson place the meaning of this text in one brief line:

Seek not, and thou shalt find;  
Any Saint, l. 134

From the context of a passage in Of Nature; Laud and Plaint, it is evident that in bidding us knock upon the door through which we must enter "To heart of Nature and of Woman too," Thompson would have us knock in the spirit of faith, the spirit of which Christ spoke in the Sermon on the Mount, "Knock and it shall be opened to you." (Matthew, vii, 7).

Knock, tarry thou, and knock,  
Although it seem but rock;  
Here is the door where thou must enter in  
To heart of Nature and of Woman too,  
And olden things made new.  
Stand at the door and knock;  
ll. 156-161

Our Lord, at certain opportune times, censured the narrow, self-righteous attitude of the Scribes and Pharisees. In one of His discourses when these hypocrites were disputing with Him, saying that "Abraham is our father", but at the same time would not "do the works of Abraham", Jesus said: "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you will do....When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own; for he is a liar, and the father thereof." (John, viii, 44). A reference to these words occurs in Ad Castitatem, where the

"false-fair gods of gold and ivory" to which he alludes are none other than the seducing, sinful pleasures of the flesh--pleasures "To whom the darkness is for diadem."

Their false-fair gods of gold and ivory,  
Which have a mouth, nor any speech thereby,  
Save such as soundeth from the throat of hell  
The aboriginal lie;

ll. 69-72

In another passage Thompson uses the same figure employed by Christ in His "excoriation" of the Pharisees, when He likened them to "whited sepulchres...full of dead men's bones and...hypocrisy and iniquity." (Matthew xxiii, 27-28).

...through tribes of moving dead--  
Whose life's a sepulchre  
Sealed with the dull stone of a heart  
No agnel can roll round.

Carmen Genesis, ll. 92-95

Once again Thompson employs as a text for one of his poems the words of our Lord addressed to the Pharisees. "If ye were blind, ye should have no sin; but now ye say: We see; Your sin remaineth." (John, ix, 41). An interesting sidelight upon the motto of this poem (The Dread of Height) is given in a protest of the poet "against the disabilities of clear understanding." He says: "If men understood clearly they would sin at every step, wherefore they understand grossly, that sin may not be imputed to them." And again: "Life is an Inkermann, fought in the mist. If men saw clearly, they would despair to fight. Wherefore the Almighty opens the eyes only to those whom He has led by special way of gradual inurement and preparation".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Meynell, op. cit., p. 167.

The title of the poem Grace of the Way was possibly suggested to Francis Thompson by the words of Christ to His apostles: "I am the way, and the truth, and the Life." (John, xiv, 6). The Way is Christ, "and the Grace or supernatural power that sustains man in the Way, is love of Christ."<sup>8</sup>

We have already alluded to the years Thompson spent as an outcast, and we know that through it all he preserved his virtue intact, for his inner vision saw more than bare externalities:

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,  
Cry,--clinging Heaven by the hems;  
And lo, Christ walking on the water  
Not of Gennesareth, but Thames!

The Kingdom of God, ll. 21-24

"And in the fourth watch of the night, he came to them walking upon the sea." (Matthew, xiv, 25).

Another reference to this miracle occurs in his hymn of creation, Carmen Genesis:

His locks He spreads upon the breeze,  
His feet He lifted on the seas,  
ll. 49-50

Reading aright the signs of the times, Thompson, in Lilium Regis, foresees the world-struggle, and encourages the Church, "When the nations lie in blood, and their kings a broken brood," to trust in Christ:

Lift up thy head and hark what sounds are in the dark,  
For His feet are coming to thee on the waters!  
ll. 15-16

When Christ founded His Church and appointed Peter as its

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<sup>8</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 488.

head, He included in the appointment a promise: "Thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew, xvi, 18). This text may have been the source of the figurative allusions in the following citation:

We pass, we pass, we pass; this does not pass away,  
But holds the furrowing earth still harnessed to its  
yoke.

From the Night of Forebeing,  
11. 350-51

Father Connolly suggests that "this does not pass away" can be interpreted to mean either the Church or the love of God for men, both of which are everlasting.<sup>9</sup>

The Evangelist St. Matthew pictures for us the transfiguration of Christ on Thabor in the presence of Peter, James, and John, who were privileged to behold the vision of His humanity transfigured by His divinity. Thompson is anticipating the day when

...the old  
Shall dream; and our young men behold  
Vision--yea, the vision of Thabor-mount,  
The After Woman, 11. 50-52

the result of true reformation of heart. The direct source of this reference is undoubtedly the prophecy of Joel: "And it shall come to pass after this, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy: your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions." (Joel, ii, 28).

In Any Saint Thompson repeats and intensifies the thought

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<sup>9</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 469.

expressed by St. Augustine centuries ago. "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee," and shows that the human soul surely finds rest in God through loving companionship with Jesus Christ:

Lo,  
To have Yes, choose No;  
ll. 131-32

and

To eat  
Deny thy meat;  
ll. 135-36

This is in accordance with Christ's teaching and example: "If any man come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Matthew, xvi, 24).

Christ cherished a particular love for the innocence and simplicity of children and was wont to embrace and bless them. "Amen I say to you, unless you be converted and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew, xviii, 3). Thompson shows a childlike familiarity with Christ when he says,

God loves to jest  
With children small--a freak  
Of heavenly hide-and-seek,  
Any Saint, ll. 140-42

yet a mystical meaning easily defined is woven into the context.

Christ desires intimate union of soul with His creatures. Thompson intimates that when Christ calls the soul should be "free" to accept His invitation:

Free  
When His wings pen thee;  
ll. 147-48

These lines are a reflection of the plaintive utterance of our Lord shortly before His passion; "Jerusalem, thou that killlest the prophets and stonest them that are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered together thy children, as the hen doth gather her chickens under her wings, and thou wouldest not?" (Matthew, xxiii, 37).

Thompson concluded this poem by summing up the strange paradox of man's weakness and strength of which humility is born. Were man to think only of his nothingness, he must end in despair; were he to think of his greatness only, he must live in presumption. It is only when he considers himself as a compound of nothingness of himself and greatness through the power of God, that he is truly humble with the humility of her who said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord."<sup>10</sup>

Stoop, stoop; for thou dost fear  
The nettle's wrathful spear,  
So slight  
Art thou of might!  
ll. 165-68

"For without Me you can do nothing," Christ said to His apostles after the Last Supper.

Rise; for Heaven hath no frown  
When thou to thee pluck'st down  
Strong clod!  
The neck of God.  
ll. 169-72

The love of Christ for the soul, His spouse, is beautifully portrayed in Arab Love-Song. Thompson applies a mystical meaning to the poem as it is written:

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<sup>10</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 475.

Leave thy father, leave thy mother  
And thy brother;  
Leave the black tents of thy tribe apart!  
Am I not thy father and thy brother,  
And thy mother?  
And thou--what needest with thy tribe's black tents  
Who hast the red pavilion of my heart?  
ll. 10-16

"Amen I say to you, there is no man who hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or lands for my sake and for the gospel, who shall not receive an hundred times as much, now in this time;...and in the world to come life everlasting." (Mark, x, 29-30).

Christ frequently enjoined upon his hearers the duty of trusting in the Providence of God and to beware of covetousness. In the similitude of the covetous rich man, his barns and his anticipation of "take thy rest; eat, drink, make good cheer," (Luke, xii, 19), He said very pointedly: "Thou fool, this night do they require thy soul of thee; and whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?" (Ibid., 20).

Thompson evidently had these texts in mind when he wrote the lines which hint his belief in the immortality of his poetry:

I said unto my heart; 'Be light!  
Thy grain will soon for long delight  
Oppress the future's granary;'  
Poor fool! and did not hear--'This night  
They shall demand thy song of thee.'  
Love in Dian's Lap, Proemium, ll. 31-35

What elicited the most sublime and sympathetic imagery in connection with the life of Christ was Thompson's reflection on his Savior's passion and death. He speaks of this supreme sacrifice of love with sentiments so compassionate that one is imperceptibly drawn to share his feelings. He

sometimes makes general allusions:

Thy proper blood dost thou not give,  
That Earth, the gusty Maenad, drink and dance?  
Orient Ode, ll. 165-66

Again he includes several phases of the passion in some passages, using telling and appropriate figures, as in Laus Amara Doloris, a poem "In Bitter Praise of Pain":

Thy pale in purple sovereignty was dipt  
Beneath the tree of Golgotha;  
And from the Hand, wherein the reed was clipt,  
Thy bare and antique sceptre thou dost draw.  
That God-sprung Lover to thy front allows,  
Fairest, the bloody honor of His brows.  
The great reversion of that diadem  
Which did His drenched locks hem.

ll. 148-55

The sun in its repeated setting and rising is a type of Christ's death and resurrection and His ascension. The metaphorical language is particularly effective:

Thou art of Him a type memorial,  
Like Him thou hang'st in dreadful pomp of blood  
Upon thy Western rood;  
And His stained brow did vail like thine tonight,  
Yet lift once more Its light,  
And, risen, again depart from our bale,  
But when It set on earth arose in Heaven.  
Ode to the Setting Sun, ll. 218-224

A prophetic description of Christ by Isaias centuries before His appearance on earth betokens a graphic picture of the sufferings of the Redeemer. "I have trodden the winepress alone, and of the Gentiles there is not a man with me: I have trampled on them in my indignation, and have trodden them down in my wrath, and their blood is sprinkled upon my garments, and I have stained all my apparel." (Isaias, lxiii, 3). The poet says:

We know what never-cadent Sun

Thy lamped clusters throbbed upon,  
What plumed feet the winepress trod.

To a Poet Breaking Silence, ll. 64-66

He refers to Mrs. Meynell in her double personality of poet and follower of Christ. Hers are the "plumed feet" that have trodden the winepress with Christ.

In organizing the references to the passion and death of Christ, which occur and recur throughout Thompson's poetry, one will obtain a correlated story of the sufferings of the Redeemer.

During His last sublime discourse after the Last Supper, Christ described Himself and His apostles in these terms: "I am the vine; you are the branches; he that abideth in me and I in him, the same beareth much fruit: for without me you can do nothing." (John, xv, 5). There is a reference to Christ, "the parched Vine", in To the English Martyrs, which is derived from this text, while at the same time it suggests Jesus thirsting on the cross:

Ah, blest! who bathed the parched Vine  
With richer than His Cana-wine,  
ll. 35-36

It was about ten o'clock in the evening when Jesus and His apostles walked through the deserted streets of Jerusalem into the Valley of the Cedron. After crossing the brook of Cedron, the little company entered the Garden of Gethsemani. Taking with Him Peter, James, and John, Jesus went deeper into the garden, and there began His indescribable sufferings with an agony which only a God-man could survive.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Carroll, op. cit., p. 299.

This sorrowful scene is recalled by Thompson in a poem, the theme of which he states as follows: "No man ever attained supreme knowledge, unless his heart had been torn up by the roots."

If my soul cries the uncomprehended cry  
When the red agony oozed on Olivet.  
Yet not for this, a caitiff, falter I.  
A Holocaust, ll. 17-19

"My Father, if it be possible let this chalice pass from me. Nevertheless, not as I will but as thou wilt." (Matthew xxvi, 38-39).

There is an echo of the same agonizing prayer and an allusion of Christ's words to His weary apostles: "Watch ye, and pray that you enter not into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak," in Thompson's hymn to "inevadible Pain":

Swerv'st thou? behold, I swerve not:-strike,  
nor spare!  
Not my will shudders, but my flesh,  
Laus Amora Doloris, ll. 36-37

The unhappy Judas now enters upon the scene. His story is told in a poignant little poem, 'Whereto Art Thou Come?' in which the Redeemer is personified as Verity:

'Friend, where to art thou come?' Thus Verity;  
Of each that to the world's sad Olivet  
Comes with no multitude, but alone by night,  
Lit with the one torch of his lifted soul,  
Seeking her that he may lay hands on her;  
Thus: and waits answer from the mouth of deed.

.....  
So he betrays,  
Not truth, the unbetrayable, but himself:  
And with his kiss's rated traitor-craft  
The Haceldama of a plot of days  
Then buys, to consummate his Judasry  
Therin with Judas' guerdon of despair.  
ll. 1-6, 12-17

Thompson is speaking of a "light-o'-love," a harlot, who degrades Truth and is unfaithful, and whose actions and end the poet compares with Judas' plot and "guerdon", the halter.

After the traitorous kiss had been given by Judas, the armed band of soldiers surrounded Jesus and took Him captive. Thompson asks, in The Veteran of Heaven:

Was it on a day of rout they compassed Thee about,  
Or gat Ye these adornings when Ye wrought  
their overthrow?

ll. 3-4

and the "Veteran" replies:

'Twas on a day of rout they girded Me about,  
They wounded all My brow, and they smote Me  
through the side:

My hand held no sword when I met their arm'd horde,  
And the conqueror fell down, and the  
Conquered bruised his pride.'

ll. 5-8

The sword of the impetuous Peter flashed in the torchlight, "...and striking the servant of the high priest, cut off his ear." (Matthew, xxvi, 51). There is a brief suggestion of this incident in the exclamation,

What is this, unheard before, that the Unarmed  
makes war,

l. 9

although the "Unarmed" is Christ Himself, whose "war" wrought salvation for the world.

Ignominiously led from one tribunal to another, our Lord was subjected to the most outrageous insults and sufferings. Cast into a dungeon, he was hailed as a mock king and given a diadem of thorns. In his apostrophe to Pain, Thompson borrows from Holy Scripture:

...the bloody honour of His brows,

The great reversion of that diadem  
Which did His drenched locks hem.  
Laus Amora Doloris, ll. 153-55

Condemned to the death of the cross, Christ walked the weary way to Calvary. One incident of this journey is reflected in The House of Sorrows, a poem which recounts the anguish and griefs of Elizabeth, Empress of Austria. The Empress has turned to Christ for consolation, and "The Women's Pitier heard." The "Pitier", turning to the holy women who were weeping at the sight of His sufferings, said: "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not over me, but weep for yourselves and for your children." (Luke, xxiii, 28).

Finally the hill of Calvary is reached, and the innocent Victim is sacrificed. The scene on Calvary is rehearsed in lines like these:

The Word was made flesh, and crucified,  
From the beginning and blasphemed:  
Its profaned raiment men divide,  
Damned by what, reverenced, had redeemed.  
Grace of the Way, ll. 41-44

The "Gamblers on Calvary", as Rev. Fulton Sheen calls them,<sup>12</sup> after they had crucified Him, divided His garments.

In several of his reflections on the Passion Thompson reverently speaks of the wounds inflicted upon the body of the Savior:

O Captain of the wars, whence won Ye so  
great scars?  
In what fight did Ye smite, and what  
manner was the foe?  
Veteran of Heaven, ll. 1-2

<sup>12</sup>Fulton J. Sheen, The Eternal Galilean, p. 105.

That these wounds were still retained after the resurrection we know from the account of our Lord's appearance to St. Thomas:

"Then he saith to Thomas: Put in thy finger hither, and see my hands; and bring hither thy hand, and put it in my side." (John, xx, 27). In the poem Thompson refers to the wounds of Christ's glorified body in heaven where they are now an adournment since they are signs of His victory.<sup>13</sup> In another reference the poet is compassionating the Mother of Christ in her untold grief:

In the five wounds of Jesus dyed,  
And in thy bleeding thoughts, Mary!  
The soldier struck a triple stroke,  
That smote thy Jesus on the tree:  
The Passion of Mary, ll. 7-10

The Gospel narrative relates how the Jews disputed Christ's title as King. Even after His death they demurred when Pilate's superscription read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." A very definite reference to Christ as King occurs in the ecclesiastical ballad, The Veteran of Heaven:

But my titles that are high, are they not upon My  
thigh?  
"King of Kings!" are the words, "Lord of Lords!"  
ll. 24-25

Thompson borrowed quite literally a text from the Apocalypse: "And he hath on his garment and on his thigh written: King of Kings and Lord of Lords."

When Jesus was dying on the cross His pallid lips uttered seven sentences, each word of which tells its own story.

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<sup>13</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 389.

Thompson enriches his lines by metaphorically incorporating references to several of these last words. We read how one of the **thieves**, filled with admiration at Christ's patient fortitude, was touched by grace and petitioned the Redeemer: "Lord remember me when thou shalt come into thy kingdom. And Jesus said to him, Amen I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with me in paradise." (Luke, xxiii, 42-43). When Thompson prays to our Blessed Lady in Assumpta Maria, he borrows from the words of the "good thief":

Since to such sweet Kingdom comest,  
Remember me, poor Thief of Song!  
ll. 99-100

One of the agonies peculiar to crucifixion was the thirst suffered by the victim. The cry of Jesus, "I thirst," indicated a literal thirst as well as that spiritual thirst upon which Gospel commentators insist.<sup>14</sup> Writing about the English martyrs who gave their lives for Christ and His church, Thompson refers to this plaintive cry of the crucified Savior:

Christ, in the form of His true Bride,  
Again hung pierced and crucified,  
And groaned, 'I thirst!'  
To the English Martyrs, ll. 29-31

One of the last words of Christ on the cross was "It is finished." There is an adaptation of this in the single expression, Consummatum:

If thou art assumed to Heaven,  
Or is Heaven assumed to thee!  
Consummatum.  
Assumpta Maria, ll. 95-97

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<sup>14</sup>Carroll, op. cit., p. 319.

Thompson has written a poem, *Peace*, which was inspired on the occasion when the treaty of peace was signed that ended the Boer War (1899-1902). He thinks not merely of material peace, but of the peace of Christ. One significant passage must be interpreted here:

Ended, the patient drip of women's tears,  
Which joined the patient drip of faithful  
blood

To make of blood and water the sore flood  
That pays our conquest's costliest cost.

ll. 22-25

Father Connolly offers this interpretation: "Ultimately, in life, if the peace of Christ is to abide in us, we must learn to detect in 'the patient drip of women's tears' and 'the patient drip of faithful blood' the tears of the Mother of Sorrows beneath the cross and the dripping of the Precious Blood of Christ."<sup>15</sup> The expression "blood and water" may likewise refer to the opening of Christ's side: "But one of the soldiers with a spear opened his side, and immediately there came out blood and water." (John, xix, 34).

It is thus that Thompson tells the story of his Master's life and death. Affitting conclusion is an extract from Sister Songs into which he has crowded imagery that portrays the spirit of Christ's submission to the laws of nature in the mysteries of His Incarnation, His life and His death:

For supreme Spirit subject was to clay,  
And Law from its own servants learned a law,  
And Light besought a lamp unto its way,  
    And Awe was reined in awe  
At one small house of Nazareth;  
    And Golgotha

<sup>15</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 531.

Saw Breath to breathlessness resign its breath,  
And Life do homage for its crown to death.

Part the Second, ll. 348-55

Francis Thompson's somewhat analytic and reverent portrayal of the life of Christ corroborates the statement of Coventry Patmore: "He is of all men I have known most naturally a Catholic." Drawing his inspiration from Holy Scripture, he suggests or illustrates various phases of Our Lord's earthly career which, if assembled, give an adequate reproduction of the scriptural narrative.

1. Thompson alludes to the mystery of the Incarnation; he calls Christ the "true Orient", and refers to the adoration of the Magi.

2. Several of the miracles of our Lord are reflected in his poems: changing of water into wine at Cana, the transfiguration, Christ walking on the waters of Gennesareth.

3. Numerous passages point to the discourses of Christ as they are summarized by the Evangelists.

4. Beginning with an allusion to Christ's words after the Last Supper, Thompson rehearses a number of the events of the passion: the agony in the Garden of Olives; the treason of Judas; the capture of Christ; Peter's attempt to defend his Master; the crowning with thorns; the death of Judas; meeting with the weeping women; the crucifixion; casting lots for the garments of Christ; His words on the cross; His five wounds, and finally, His death.

It may be suggested here that Thompson uses scriptural

imagery in two ways: sometimes his figures are deliberately intended to illustrate specifically some phase of our Lord's life; again, although they refer to incidents connected with the life of the Redeemer, they do not explain them, but are used by the poet to emphasize and interpret some other line of thought.

It is evident that of Thompson's figurative allusions those pertaining to the Scriptures should be the most easily recognized, unless the reader is totally unacquainted with the Bible. The metaphors ("I never use a simile if I can use a metaphor.") produce not only an artistic and spiritual effect but permit the "master of compression" to combine in a few phrases a whole commentary of thought. Although his habit of words sometimes results in a "wordy war" which occasionally renders his meaning unintelligible, there is but a slight indication of this tendency in his Biblical allusions.

CHAPTER VII  
THE CELESTIAL KINGDOM

"Blessed be God in His Angels and in His Saints."

In his epistle to the Romans St. Paul writes: "O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are his judgments, and how unsearchable are his ways!" (Romans, ci, 33-34). With an undisguised conviction of the grandeur and dignity of God, Francis Thompson speaks exultantly of His attributes and perfections.

The existence of God has been a pertinent question in ages gone by, and even today atheistic Communism seeks to propagate its malicious doctrine, "There is no God," particularly among our youth. We find Thompson speaking in an altogether different vein, and the text he chooses is that in which God answers Moses upon his query, "If they say to me: What is his name, what shall I say to them? God said to Moses: I AM WHO AM. Thus shalt thou say to the children of Israel: HE WHO IS sent me to you." (Exodus, iii, 13-14). In both New Year's Chimes and in The Singer Saith of his Song the poet has inserted lines the meaning of which can at once be ascertained when considered in relation to the Bible text. The first reference reads thus:

And the dream of the world is dream in dream,  
But the one Is is, or nought would seem;  
11. 55-56

and the other,

Behind her secret cloud of hair  
She sees the Is beyond the Seems.  
ll. 7-8

What a gleam of supernatural hope is brought out in the last line!

The words of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth," are clearly substantiated in several of Thompson's poems, particularly in The Making of Viola,<sup>1</sup> in Carmen Genesis, and in the Ode to the Setting Sun.

Carmen Genesis, specifically an analogy between the Poet's and God's creative acts, presents the story of the creation. "Profound thought, and far-fetched splendor of imagery, and nimble-witted discernment of those analogies which are the 'roots' of the poet's language, abound"<sup>2</sup> in his poetical development of the story found in the Book of Genesis:

Sing how the uncreated light  
Moved first upon the deep and night,  
And, at Its fiat lux,  
Created light unfurled, to be  
God's pinions--stirred perpetually  
In flux and reflux.

ll. 1-6

The same idea is expressed in the Ode to the Setting Sun where, upon the command of the Almighty

....chaos rolled back from the wonder  
And the First Morn knelt doen to thy visage  
of thunder.

ll. 69-70

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<sup>1</sup>The import of this poem has been discussed in the chapter entitled "The Heart of Childhood".

<sup>2</sup>Coventry Patmore, Courage in Politics, p. 160.

Especially effective is the imagery evolved in the description of the division of the waters:

The regent light his strong decree  
Then laid upon the snarling sea;  
Shook all its wallowing girth.  
The shaggy brute, and did (for wrath  
Low bellowing in its chafed path)  
Sullen disglut the earth.

ll. 19-24

Then he proceeds to tell how Night and Day were two, yet one, until

Dividual splendor did begin  
Its procreant task, and, globing, spin,  
In moon, and stars, and sun.

ll. 28-30

Finally man, the king of creation, is fashinned by God:

And, last, Man's self, the little world  
Where was Creation's semblance furled,  
Rose at the linking nod:

ll. 43-45

In the second part of Carmen Genesis Thompson shows that the Poet, too, is a "little maker", and with the Biblical narrative in mind he proceeds to build up his theme in a beautiful analogy:

Poet! still, still thou dost rehearse,  
In the great fiat of thy Verse,  
Creation's primal plot;  
And what thy Maker in the whole  
Worked, little maker, in thy soul  
Thou work'st, and men know not.

Thine intellect, a luminous voice,  
Compulsive moved above the noise  
Of thy still-fluctuous sense;  
And Song, a water-child like Earth,  
Stands with feet sea-washed, a wild birth  
Amid their subsidence.

Bold copyist'. who dost relimn  
The traits, in man's gross mind grown dim,  
Of the first Masterpiece--

Re-marking in thy one Day:--  
God give the Sabbath to repay  
Thy sad work with full peace!  
11. 52-72

The best commentary on these lines is a note written by Thompson himself:

In the beginning, at the great mandate of light, the sea suddenly disglutted the earth: and still, in the microcosm of the poetic, the making mind, Creation imitates her august and remembered origins. Still, at the luminous compulsion of the poet's intellect, from the subsidence of his fluctuant senses emerges the express and founded consistence of the poem; confession, by manifold tokens, its twofold parentage, quickened with intellectual light, and freshened with the humidities of feeling. Of generations it shall endure the spiritual treading and to generations afford its fruits, a terra firma which may scarce wear out before the prototypal earth itself. This is the function of the maker since God first imagined: though Poetry's Book of Genesis is yet unwritten which might be written, and its Moses is desired and late. An art not unworthy, the Seraphic Order and the handling of Saints. For the poet is an Elias, that when he comes makes all things new. It is a converse, alas, and lamentable truth, that the false poet makes even new things old.<sup>3</sup>

The analogy between the Poet and Elias' vocation of restoring all things is found in Thompson's rendition of a passage of Pico della Mirandola: "That should be precisely the function of poetry--to see and restore the Divine idea of things, freed from the disfiguring accidents of their Fall."<sup>4</sup>

The statement has been made that Thompson certainly was not a botanist, that he never learned "to distinguish the oak from the elm, or to know the name of the commonest flowers of

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<sup>3</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 481.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 481-82.

the field, or even the garden,"<sup>5</sup> but he knew full well whence issued all the beauties of nature, and attributes its charms to the beauty of God. He describes how a simple field flower springs from the hand of God. The passage is sublime:

God took a fit of Paradise-wind  
A slip of coerule weather,  
A thought as simple as Himself,  
And ravelled them together.

Field Flower, ll. 1-4

The Snowflake tells how it evolved:

God was my shaper.  
Passing surmisal,  
He hammered, He wrought me,  
From curled silver vapour.

ll. 11-14

If God is the designer of the universe, He must of necessity be its King and Ruler. His infinite wisdom so directs and governs it that it may attain to the fulfilment of His divine purpose. Man, too, is part of this great world. From experience he knows that nothing created can ever fill his heart, and that if he wishes to be perfectly happy he must center his desires and affections on God. Very pathetically does Thompson exclaim in The Sere of the Leaf:

I am your child, you may not shut me out!  
1. 121

In an essay on "Nature's Immortality" Thompson says: "If the Trinity were not revealed, I should nevertheless be induced to suspect the existence of such a master-key by the trinities through which expounds itself the spirit of man."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>"Tortured Life of a Great Poet," Current Literature, (February, 1908), p. 173.

<sup>6</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 83.

Father Downey offers this brief expositin: "By the Blessed Trinity we mean the mystery of one God in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, each subsisting distinct in the same identical divine nature."<sup>7</sup> We speak of the mystery of the Blessed Trinity

...because clearly we are stating a truth which is above or beyond reason, when we say that in the same divine nature there are three distinct persons. As far as our experience goes, wherever we have a plurality of persons, we also have a plurality of individual natures. Apart from revelation we should never even have conceived the possibility of such a thing as absolute identity of nature in three distinct persons.<sup>8</sup>

Thompson's poems contain several references to this "master-key", the Blessed Trinity. In To my Godchild he asks his little friend to pass by

A silv'rn segregation, globed complete  
In sandalled shadow of the Triune feet,  
ll. 61-62

when he looks for his sponsor in heaven.

When the Poet and the Rhymer appear before the throne of God to have judgment passed upon their labors, then

...sat in the heart of His aged dominions  
The great Triune, and Mary nigh.  
A Judgement in Heaven, ll. 16-17

The "Poet" is quite clearly a reflection of Thompson himself. Various passages in other poems show Thompson's unsparing judgment of himself as man (To the Dead Cardinal of Westminster and Any Saint), but at the same time he also speaks of himself as destined to immortality as a poet. (The Poppy).

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<sup>7</sup>Richard Downey, B. D., The Blessed Trinity, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

In A Judgement in Heaven Thompson develops both these thoughts and speaks trustfully of the mercy and goodness of God.

Neither the Poet nor the Rhymer considered himself to be worthy of God's beneficent appraisal, but both were greater in God's sight than their own humility permitted them to realize, great enough to be clothed in a "Paradisal garb" at the command of God the Father and to be received into the graces of "Princess Mary".<sup>9</sup> In the Epilogue to this poem Thompson queries:

Is this the all-severest mode  
To see ourselves with the eyes of God?  
ll. 14-15

and in answer he prays:

God rather grant, at His assize,  
He sees us not with our own eyes!  
ll. 16-17

Humility sometimes leads a man to regard himself as worse than he really is in the eyes of God. The sentiment of these lines is the possession of those rarer souls, who like Thompson, have seen the depth in the light of the heights. What "depths" Thompson had actually seen during his outcast days in London may be conjectured from the conclusion that was forced from him later: "...for naked bestiality you must go to the modern bete humaine".<sup>10</sup> Yet his trust in the Divine Mercy is so firm that he does not hesitate to say,

Yea, and His Mercy, I do think it well,  
Is flashed back from the brazen gates of Hell.  
Sister Songs, Part the Second, ll. 344-45

<sup>9</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 408.

<sup>10</sup>Meynell, op. cit., pp. 50.

The thought developed in these citations represents his more normal mood. Nevertheless, when his "dark hours" were upon him he feared the justice of God almost as much as he habitually confided in His mercy. He confesses this fear in a letter to Mrs. Meynell:

You know that I believe in eternal punishment: you know that, when my dark hour is on me, this individual terror is the most monstrous of all that haunt me. But it is individual. For others even if the darker view were true, the fewness is relative to the total mass of mankind, not absolute.<sup>11</sup>

The fear of death and hell was not constant with Thompson. In the letter just quoted he concludes with the remark: "But if you would see the present state of my convictions on the subject turn to the new Epilogue of my 'Judgment in Heaven!'"<sup>12</sup>

His ode To the Dead Cardinal of Westminster is a poem on himself rather than on Cardinal Manning, wherein he stresses the awfulness of God's justice. He addresses the Cardinal:

I have no thought that I,  
When at the last I die,  
    Shall reach  
To gain your speech.

But you, should that be so,  
May very well, I know,  
    May well  
To me in hell

With recognizing eyes  
Look from your Paradise--  
    'God bless  
Thy hopelessness!'  
    11. 93-104

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 169.

He requests the sainted Cardinal in the most touching words to plead his cause and to speak in his behalf:

'Deaf is he to the world's tongue;  
He scorneth for his song  
    The loud  
    Shouts of the crowd;

'He asketh not for the world's eyes;  
Not to world's ears he cries;  
    Saith,--"These  
    Shut, if ye please!"

ll. 129-36

Speaking of these lines, Wilfrid Meynell wrote: "...his verse was himself; he lived every line of it, fulfilling to the last letter his own description of the poet, piteous yet proud."<sup>13</sup> Of the metrical form of this poem Megroz says that it bears testimony to "the fertility of the poet's mind, which has to perform acrobatic feats between rhymes only four or two words apart."<sup>14</sup>

As King of Heaven God receives the homage and adoration of those who inhabit the celestial courts, the angels and the saints. Angels are pure spirits, immortal and incorruptible, possessed of a beauty and power of intellect not equaled by anything on earth.<sup>15</sup> Saints at one time were ordinary people just as we, but because their lives were pleasing to God they now enjoy the Beatific Vision. After the General Resurrection their body and soul will be reunited and in that state they will praise God for all eternity.

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<sup>13</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 386.

<sup>14</sup>Megroz, op. cit., p. 67.

<sup>15</sup>Wm. Cardinal O'Connell, "The Guardian Angels," The Catholic Mind, (October 8, 1929), p. 362.

Angels were a part of Thompson's world. In his long walks by day and night he was attended by magnificent company. In the country, in the streets of London he was accompanied

...by seraphim and cherubim. The heavenly visions were more real to him than London Bridge. He would have it that the angels are all about us. They do not live in some distant Paradise, the only gate to which is death,--they are here now, and their element is the familiar atmosphere of the earth.<sup>16</sup>

There is a spirit world about us, more populous, more powerful, far more resourceful than our own visible world.<sup>17</sup> It is a universal Catholic belief that every human being, whether Christian or non-Christian, has been given an angel guardian and that he remains during his entire life under the care of this guardian spirit. The Hound of Heaven contains a passage which voices Thompson's adherence to the belief in an angel protector:

But just as their young eyes grew sudden fair  
With dawning answers there  
Their angel plucked them from me by the hair.

ll. 58-60

The Gospel records Christ's own positive doctrine on this subject. "See that you despise not one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew, xciii, 10).

A Carrier Song furnishes an additional illustration of the existence of guardian angels:

Whereso your angel is,  
My angel goeth;  
ll. 27-28

<sup>16</sup>Wm. Lyon Phelps, The Advance of English Poetry in the Twentieth Century, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup>O'Connell, op. cit., p. 3.

The technique of this song is artistic. Frequently both rhythm and rime of Thompson's poetry are difficult and of a type that only a trained ear can appreciate. In this poem both are unusually facile, yet with no trace of the obvious or even an overtone of jingle. Though the refrain is not such as Poe would have liked--a blend of repetition and variation--it is very effective and free from monotony when read aloud. This selection stands the supreme test of vocalization.<sup>18</sup> The refrain, identical in each stanza, is addressed to the Seraphim:

Seraphim,  
Her to hymn,  
Might leave their portals;  
And at my feet learn  
The harping of mortals!

Another reference to the Seraphim is found in Her Portrait, where the poet says:

...and who dare, who dare,  
Adulate the seraphim for their burning hair?  
ll. 15-16

The inventive genius of Thompson here suggests an image that may require interpretation. The Seraphim are considered as possessing a consuming love of God; hence the expression, "burning hair". Another reference to this characteristic love of the Seraphim is found in the same poem:

But the superior seraphim do know  
None other music but to flame and glow.  
ll. 60-61

In one of his poems Thompson alludes to the land

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<sup>18</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 344.

Where seven-quired psalterings meet;  
By Reason of Thy Law, l. 47

Undoubtedly Thompson had in mind the hierarchies or orders of angels; however, there are nine choirs of angels, not seven, as this quotation suggests. "We know on the authority of Scripture that there are nine orders of angels, viz., Angels, Archangels, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Dominations, Thrones, Cherubim, and Seraphim," the Seraphim being the highest order.<sup>19</sup>

The word "angel" means "one who is sent," a messenger. The Holy Scriptures furnish a number of examples which prove that God frequently made His wishes known through the instrumentality of angels. For instance, it was the angel Gabriel who appeared to the Blessed Virgin Mary and delivered the message of the Most High. "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: Blessed art thou among women." (Luke, i, 28). When Mary was "troubled" at these words, the angel reassured her. "Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace with God. Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and shalt bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name Jesus." (Ibid., 30-31). Thompson alludes to this in the Orient Ode when he says briefly and simply,

Which at thy first white Ave shall conceive.  
l. 27

Thompson's writings indicate that he must have lived in close communication with God and the saints. "Saintship is

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<sup>19</sup>Catholic Encyclopedia, 1, p. 478.

the touch of God," he says. "To most, even good people, God is a belief. To the saints He is an embrace...His heart has beaten against their side. They do not believe in him, for they know Him."<sup>20</sup> St. Francis of Assisi, whom he admired very sincerely, was his special patron. He speaks of him as

The Assisian, who kept plighted faith  
to three  
To Song, to Sanctitude, and Poverty.  
To my Godchild, ll. 20-21

There was also St. Francis de Sales, whose gentleness was the product of a long and determined struggle against a natural irascibility:

He the sweet Sales, of whom we scarcely ken  
How God he could love more, he so loved men;  
ll. 23-34

Thompson, gazing on the hands of the great solemn faced city clocks found in the shape of the minute hand the very perfect epithet--"barbed minutes".

(I) Stood bound and helplessly  
For time to shoot his barbed minutes at me;  
Sister Songs, Part the First, ll. 282-83

The metaphor suggests the martyrdom of St. Sebastian pierced with many arrows. Here again is a reference to the poet's days when he was the "outcast mark" of all those "heavenly passers' scrutiny," and when the arrows of loneliness and pain made a veritable martyr of him.

In Thompson's notebooks were found passages which showed that he was particularly attracted to St. John the Evangelist, or the "Beloved Disciple", as he is often called.

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20Thompson, op. cit., p. 90.

In an invocation he calls him the

Foreshadower  
Prophet of Prophets  
Seer of Seers  
Poet and Prophet  
Mystic of Mystics  
Lover of Lovers,

and utters a prayer as follows:

Pray for us, that we may love as the Heart on which thou layest,

Pray for us that we may be wise with the Prophets, glad with the Poets, see with the Seers, desire with the Mystics, believe with the Divines, and that the least of us may love with the Lovers.<sup>21</sup>

The poem which follows is given in its entirety since it illustrates so well the inclination of his heart and his close proximity to the saints of God. It was written during his last illness while he was the guest of Wilfrid Blunt. At the time "...he was too ill to recover his old inspirations," wrote Mrs. Meynell. "But he had with him a notebook, as well as the prayerbook over which, propped up on his pillow, he pored far into the night; and in his notebook I find these verses, the last of his making."<sup>22</sup>

Pardon, O Saint John Divine,  
That I change a word of thee--  
None the less, aid thou me!  
And Siena's Catherine!  
Lofty Doctor Augustine,  
Glorious penitent! And be  
Assisi's Francis also mine!  
Mine be Padua's Anthony;  
And that other Francis, he  
Called of Sales! Let all combine  
To counsel (of great charity)

<sup>21</sup>"Notebooks of Francis Thompson," Living Age, (August 4, 1917), p. 292.

<sup>22</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 553.

What I write! Thy wings incline,  
Ah my Angel, o'er the line!  
Last and first, O Queen Mary,  
Of thy white Immaculacy,  
If my work may profit aught,  
Fill with lilies every thought!  
I surmise  
What is white will then be wise.

(To which I add)

Thomas More  
Teach (thereof my need is sore)  
What thou showest well on earth--  
Good writ, good wit, make goodly mirth!  
Motto and Invocation

To the English Martyrs is one of the few poems of any consequence Thompson wrote after the appearance of New Poems in 1897. He himself tells us what martyrs he had in mind when he wrote this ode. "Some three hundred in all, of whom one hundred suffered at Tyburn; the first, John Houghton, Carthusian (4th May 1646); the last Archbishop Oliver Plunket (1st July 1681). Their names including More and Fisher, were added to the Roman Martyrology in 1886."<sup>23</sup> After eulogizing the martyr band in general, he directs his attention to several outstanding figures, the chief of whom is Thomas More. This saint's keen wit and charming humor led Thompson to give the appellations of "happy Fool of Christ" and "dear Jester in the Courts of God." Both More and Fisher died by decapitation and were canonized by the present Holy Father on May 2, 1935. Thompson identifies Ralph Sherwin, a priest, by the words he spoke two days before his death:

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<sup>23</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 519.

He that spoke--and to the sun  
Pointed--'I shall shortly be  
Above yon fellow.'

ll. 132-34

And John Sugar who was drawn, hanged and quartered, pronounced these memorable words:

'...Though I shall have  
Sharp dinner, yet I trust in Christ  
To have a most sweet supper.'

ll. 136-38

The imagery of this selection is particularly effective. The "Tyburn tree" on which the "red rain" fell is an opening figure which at once creates the atmosphere that pervades the poem. Thompson's mystical mind sees Christ, in the form of "His true Bride", the Church, pierced and crucified, His cry of "I thirst" being answered by the martyrs who "kept the best wine to the last!" The images themselves are not of a type that require specific information on the part of the reader; however, two of the martyr saints are unnamed and the allusions to them, although sufficiently significant, do not serve as identification unless one possesses a previous knowledge of the facts referred to in his eulogy.

Some of the most fundamental doctrines of the Catholic Church pertaining to God, the angels and the saints are suggested by Thompson in various passages of his poems. God receives ample recognition as the Creator and King of the universe. Most convincingly does the poet sing of creation in Carmen Genesis, a poem "heavily freighted" with superb imagery which serves not only to add to the beauty of the

verses, but which tends, by its magnificence, to impress one with the grandeur of God's handiwork and of His omnipotent power. He believes firmly and steadfastly in the Triune God, praises and magnifies His mercy as is illustrated in A Judgment in Heaven, while he fears His justice as is shown in his poem addressed to the deceased Cardinal Manning.

In The Hound of Heaven and in A Carrier Song he suggests the existence and protection of guardian angels; By Reason of Thy Law attests to the division of the angel world into choirs of hierarchies, and one single line in the Orient Ode bears witness that the angels are God's messengers.

Intimate and childlike are his relations with the saints. His Motto and Invocation, probably the last verses he wrote, is a simple, trustful prayer to various saints in which he asks them to counsel him in his literary aspirations. To the martyr saints he has dedicated a special poem in which he recounts their sufferings and eulogizes their heroic fortitude. Almost every line of this poem presents an unfailing wealth of thought and power of language.

Only seldom did Thompson sing the praises of the saints, though when he did it was with a neighborly understanding and ecstatic devotion. Cory says that the facts of his life, (and one may add, of his poetry) reveal simply that he himself was a saint.<sup>24</sup>

It may be safely assumed that the figures of the poems

<sup>24</sup>H. E. Cory, "Francis Thompson, His Life and His Work", Dial, (February 1, 1914), p. 99.

considered in this study assist to enlarge and qualify the significant points stressed by Thompson, and that they bear and nourish thoughts that can only be expressed through them. Meynell has suggested that Thompson carried his demand for clarity of thought and intention to great lengths, although he was not always so precise about the diction he employed.<sup>25</sup>

Agnes de La Gorce's estimate is perhaps the most satisfactory conclusion to what has been discussed in this chapter:

His respect towards God became that of a child who loves its father. And so, the poet of his time, being guided by rare instinct, he resembles certain religious poets of the past who were still living with God, the angels and the saints. For them the three churches, triumphant (saints in heaven), suffering (souls in purgatory) and militant (faithful on earth), were not abstractions of theological thought, nor were they dreams of a love which longs for eternity, but they were real worlds between which communication never ceases, inexhaustible fountains of strength that exceed our own.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Meynell, op. cit., p. 148.

<sup>26</sup>La Gorce, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE RELIGIOUS MIND

"The Lord is nigh unto all that call upon Him."

To the final chapter of this study have been relegated several themes which could not be appropriately considered in any of the preceding discussions. In the first place, various matters pertaining to Catholic belief have summarily evolved. Then there are references to the poet's outcast days based on Scriptural allusions. Finally, one discovers figures used a mere symbols adapted from Catholic sources without any particular spiritual application. These scattered allusions and miscellaneous facts will be treated in the order specified.

It has been said that not long ago the following statement was made by Clarence Darrow, an American lawyer: "When I die--as I shall soon--my body will decay. My mind will decay and my intellect will be gone. My soul? There is no such thing." The author's utterance is full of absurd contradictions. He says he has a mind and an intellect but that he has no soul. But if there is no soul there can be neither mind nor intellect, because both mind and intellect are merely different faculties of the soul. It would be just as consistent for Darrow to say that he has hands and feet but no

body.<sup>1</sup>

In Sister Songs Thompson gives a poetic rendition of some of the fundamental truths of Christian psychology in regard to the soul:

What think we of thy soul?  
Which has no parts, and cannot grow,  
Unfurled not from an embryo;  
Part the Second, ll. 318-20

In these lines we are told of the simplicity of the soul of man and the creation of every individual soul. The passage that follows is an imaginative development of the soul's dependence upon its spiritual faculties and bodily senses for the manifestation of its power during the years that precede "the age of reason":<sup>2</sup>

Born of full stature, lineal to control;  
And yet a pigmy's yoke must undergo:  
Yet must keep pace and tarry, patient, kind,  
With its unwilling scholar, the dull, tardy mind;  
Must be obsequious to the body's powers,  
Whose low hands mete its paths, set ope and close  
its ways;  
Must do obeisance to the days,  
And wait the little pleasure of the hours;  
Yea, ripe for kingship, yet must be  
Captive in statuted minority!  
ll. 321-30

The poet has been still more definite as to the divine origin of the soul in The Making of Viola, a poem of luxuriant imagery and tenderness transfigured by faith:

Breathe, Lord Paraclete,  
To a bubbled crystal meet--  
Breathe, Lord Paraclete--

<sup>1</sup>John E. McAniff, "How to be Happy--Though Religious", The Catholic Mind, (July 22, 1935), p. 280.

<sup>2</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 332.

Crystal soul for Viola.  
11. 25-28

Since the body is the habitation of the soul, Thompson regards it as the "Temple of God". His little poem, Domus Tua, is an adaptation of the Psalmist's words: "I have loved, O Lord, the beauty of thy house; and the place where thy glory dwelleth." (Psalm xxv,8).

A Perfect woman--Thine be laud!  
Her body is a Temple of God.  
At Doom-bar dare I make avows:  
I have loved the beauty of Thy house.

In sympathy with the same thought Coventry Patmore says in The Rod, the Root, and the Flower: "The Catholic Church... attaches the first importance to the preservation of the sanctity and purity of the body, as actually the 'House of God.'"<sup>3</sup>

The Old Testament narrative of the Israelites supplied adequate figures for a beautiful comparison which Thompson's mystical mind drew from "the sign which led the Israelite":

Like to the sign which led the Israelite,  
Thy soul, through day or dark,  
A visible brightness on the chosen ark  
    of thy sweet body and pure,  
        Shall it assure,  
With auspice large and tutelary gleams,  
Appointed solemn courts, and covenanted streams.  
Sister Songs, Part the First, 11. 360-66

Thompson likens the child's "sweet body and pure" to the Ark of the Covenant, and the luminous cloud to the child's soul. He wishes to say: "As the luminous cloud and pillar of fire illuminated the Ark, so may your soul render your body bright and beautiful." The "covenanted streams" were the streams in

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<sup>3</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 348.

the journey along which God led the Israelites according to His covenant. In effect, Thompson says: "As that same sign guided the Ark along the journey God had decreed for it, so may your soul guide you along the path of life God has willed for you."<sup>4</sup>

With his thought centered on grace, the gratuitous gift of God to the soul, Thompson, by means of simple but effective imagery shows that we are not always alert to the inspirations of grace and must admit with Jacob of old that God at times was present and we "knew it not":

Of her, the Way's one mortal grace,  
    Own, save thy seeing be all forgot,  
That, truly, God was in this place,  
    And thou, unblessed, knew'st it not.  
Grace of the Way, ll. 49-52

The reference here is to the vision of Jacob on his journey to Mesopotamia in which he saw angels ascending and descending a ladder which rested on the earth and touched the heavens. The Lord, leaning upon the ladder, promised to give him and his descendants the land on which he was sleeping and to multiply his seed. (Genesis, xxviii, 12-14). "And when Jacob awaked out of sleep, he said: indeed the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not." (*Ibid.*, 16).

A study of Thompson's poetry reveals more and more the deep Catholic insight that was his, an insight born of faith. Amidst the riot of metaphor and simile of a lyrical poem which he himself called a "phantasy" he gives evidence of this in-

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<sup>4</sup>Connolly, op. cit., pp. 324-35

sight which is not foreign to those who have the blessing of faith. He is telling how a field flower grew:

His fingers pushed it through the sod--  
It came up redolent of God,  
Garrulous to the eyes of God  
To all the breezes near it;  
Musical of the mouth of God  
To all had ears to hear it;  
Mystical of the mirth of God,  
That glow-like did ensphere it.

Field-Flower, ll. 9-16

How well does this passage illustrate the conviction of Thompson that the beauties of nature are but a reflection of the beauty of God!

Again and again reflections on death occur in the poetry of Thompson. But his thoughts do not abide there; they travel on to the "life after death". He has written a brief poem presenting an eternal truth that looks to the hereafter:

'Tis said there were no thought of hell,  
Save hell were taught; that there should be  
A Heaven for all's self-credible.  
Not so the thing appears to me.  
'Tis Heaven that lies beyond our sights,  
And hell too possible that proves;  
For all can feel the God that smites,  
But ah, now few the God that loves!

Heaven and Hell

In common with many others of his calibre, Thompson feels that our realization of the incomprehensible love of God for man is overshadowed by the fear of His punishment. By means of this poem he attests to the existence of heaven and hell.

That there is a heaven is so deeply engraved in the hearts of men that no testimony from Revelation is required to prove it. The very idea of a just God implies the idea of reward. Men would sooner deny the existence of hell; so

it was with the Sadducees of old. However, the Church teaches that there is a hell, and she bases her teaching on tradition, the Scriptures, and reason. One of the best proofs is found in the Gospel of St. Mark where the Evangelist has recorded the most explicit and fearsome warning from Christ's lips against hell-fire. "If thy hand scandalise thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life, maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into unquenchable fire, where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not extinguished." (Mark, ix, 42). In Holy Scripture hell is called "a furnace of fire" (Matthew, xii, 42); "everlasting punishment". (Ibid., xxv, 46); "a place of torment" (Luke, xvi, 28); "a pool burning with fire and brimstone which is the second death" (Apocalypse, xxi, 8).

Besides heaven and hell there is a third state in the after-life, and that is purgatory, where those suffer for a time who die guilty of venial sins, or without having satisfied for the punishment due to their sins. In regard to purgatory there are only two points which faith commands us to believe: that there is a purgatory, and that the souls detained therein can be helped by the suffrages of the faithful, and especially by the holy sacrifice of the Mass.<sup>5</sup> Even if there were no proofs of the existence of purgatory contained in the Scriptures and in tradition, reason tells us that there must be some place of confinement for those who are neither good enough for heaven nor bad enough for hell.

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<sup>5</sup>Lanslots, op. cit., p. 613

We find a few references in Thompson's poetry relative to purgatory. Although couched in figurative language, the following citation from The Sere of the Leaf illustrates his interpretation of purgatory:

Not always does the lost, 'twixt the fires of heat  
and frost,  
Envy those whom the healing lustres bless;  
But may sometimes, in the pain of a yearning past  
attain,  
Thank the angels for their happiness;  
'Twixt the fire and fiery ice,  
Looking up to Paradise,  
Thank the angels for their happiness.  
ll. 104-10

The pains of purgatory are "healing lustres" which purify the soul from its stains. The early Fathers spoke of the purifying fire. Although the Church has pronounced that hell is a real fire, she has given no dogmatic decision to the effect that there is a puratorial fire.<sup>6</sup> The greatest suffering endured by the poor souls in purgatory is that of being deprived, even though for a time, of the Beatific Vision of God. Besides this pain of loss there is also a pain of the senses which, as has been said, has never been defined by the Church, but is the common sentiment of Christians.<sup>7</sup> Being certain of the attainment of eternal felicity, the souls in purgatory look "up to Paradise" and "Thank the angels for their happiness". The following lines from The Dream of Gerontius by Cardinal Newman is a passionate expression of heart-rending anguish and heart-healing hope. The soul,

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<sup>6</sup>J. B. McLaughlin, O.S.B., Purgatory, or the Church Suffering, pp. 31-32.

<sup>7</sup>Lanslots, op. cit., p. 613.

sentenced to purgatory, is speaking:

'Take me away, and in the lowest deep  
There let me be,  
And there in hope the lone night-watches keep,  
Told out for me.  
There, motionless and happy in my pain,  
Lone, not forlorn,  
There will I sing my sad perpetual strain,  
Until the morn.  
There will I sing, and soothe my stricken breast,  
Which ne'er can cease  
To throb, and pine, and languish, till possesst  
Of its Sole Peace.  
There will I sing my absent Lord and Love:--  
    Take me away,  
That sooner I may rise, and go above,  
And see Him in the truth of everlasting day."<sup>8</sup>

ll. 860-75

The souls in purgatory are certain of attaining eternal happiness and are assisted toward that felicity through the suffrages of the faithful. The Church has established a feast known as All Souls' Day which falls on the second of November. This is a day of special commemoration of all the faithful departed. A reference to this feast occurs in one of Thompson's occasional poems, Ode for the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, 1897, in which he reverts to the dead who in the days of their prime added to the glory of England:

This living feast is also of the dead,  
And this, O England, is thine All  
Souls' Day.

ll. 131-32

In two instances Thompson uses the term hell when obviously another meaning is apparent. He is addressing the deceased Cardinal Manning:

But you, should that be so,

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<sup>8</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 413.

May very well, I know,  
    May well  
    To me in hell

With recognizing eyes  
Look from your Paradise--  
To the Dead Cardinal of Westminster,  
    11. 97-102

In itself the word hell may mean purgatory, as it frequently does in Catholic theological writings. In the "Apostles' Creed" our Lord's descent into limbo after His resurrection is described in the words, "He descended into hell." But here, in view of the time expressed by the verbs in succeeding lines, it seems to refer to Thompson's life here on earth. 9

Then, in his Epilogue to A Judgement in Heaven he begins by saying, "Virtue may unlock hell." The meaning implied here is that good deeds offered for the souls in purgatory hastens their release from their state of purification.

The duration of purgatory, according to the belief of the Church, will not extend beyond the day of the general judgment<sup>10</sup> which follows upon the general resurrection of all mankind.

The resurrection of the body is a revealed doctrine set forth in unmistakable fashion in Scripture and tradition and taught by the divine authority of the Church from the beginning of Christianity.<sup>11</sup>

Nature reminded Thompson of so many things that are in-

<sup>9</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 384.

<sup>10</sup>Lanslots, op. cit., p. 614.

<sup>11</sup>Dom Justin McCann, *The Resurrection of the Body*, p. 3.

herent in Catholic belief. His biographer says::

Transfiguration is for Thompson the most familiar of mysteries. Good faith needs no Burning Bush. Or, rather, for the faithful every bush is alight. For this faithful poet the seasons were full of the promise of the Resurrection.<sup>12</sup>

In spring he calls:

Hark to the Jubilate of the bird  
For them that found the dying way to life!  
From the Night of Forebeing, ll. 76-77

The jubilant note of these lines may be traced back to a verse of the Psalms: "Jubilate Deo omnis terra: cantate et exultate et psallite." Translated, the verse reads: "Sing joyfully to God, all the earth: make melody, rejoice and sing." (Psalm xcvi, 4).

The rebirth of the earth after winter is the figure of the future life:

Thou wak'st, O Earth,  
And work'st from change to change and birth to birth  
Creation old as hope, and new as sight;  
ll. 135-37

Again he says:

And all the springs are flash-lights of one Spring.  
1. 190

In this line Thompson uses the same thought and imagery that we find in Cardinal Newman's famous sermon, The Second Spring:

Once only in the year, yet once, does the world which we see show forth its hidden powers, and in a manner manifest itself. Then there is a sudden rush and burst outwardly of that hidden life which God has lodged in the material world....This earth which now buds forth in leaves and blossoms, will one day burst forth into a new world of light and glory.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Meynell, op. cit., p. 151.

<sup>13</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 464.

References filled with compact and profound imagery suggest the Last Day and the events accompanying it. From the Night of Forebeing is saturated with thoughts of death and life, both literal and figurative. The marvelous imagery in the passage that follows foreshadows the end of the world which, as Thompson puts it, had been preordained already at the creation:

O imagery  
Of that which was the first, and is the last!  
For, as the dark profound nativity,  
God saw the end should be,  
When the world's infant horoscope He cast.

ll. 106-10

The expression "that which was the first, and is the last" refers to Chaos and Darkness which was in the beginning and which will again follow the "tribulation of those days," when "the sun shall be darkened and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from the heavens, and the powers of heaven shall be moved." (Matthew, xxiv, 29).

Thompson continues:

The graves are riven,  
And the Sun comes with power amid the clouds  
of heaven.

ll. 81-82

"...And they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with much power and majesty." (Ibid., 30).

In the citation which follows Thompson hears the trumpeting of March in his proper tongue, speaking not of the awakening of external nature, but of his own resurrection from the dead:

A higher and a solemn voice  
I heard through your gay-hearted noise;

A solemn meaning and a stiller voice  
Sounds to me from far days when I too shall  
        rejoice,  
Nor more be with your jollity at strife.  
O prophecy  
Of things that are, and are not, and shall be!  
The great-vanned Angel March  
Hath trumpeted  
His clangorous 'Sleep no more' to all the dead--  
Beat his strong vans o'er earth, and air, and sea.  
And they have heard:

ll. 64-75

"And he shall send his Angels with a trumpet, and a great  
<sup>voice</sup>  
voice: and they shall gather together his elect from the four  
winds, from the farthest parts of the heavens to the utmost  
bounds of them." (Matthew, xxiv, 31).

In The Song of the Hours Thompson gives a description  
which is essentially the same as Christ's prophetic descrip-  
tion of the Last Day:

You pass, by whose fixture man voweth;  
God breathes you forth as a bubble  
        And shall suck you back into His mouth!  
Through earth, sea, and heaven a doom shall  
        be driven,  
And, sown in the furrows it plougheth,  
As fire bursts from stubble  
        Shall spring the new wonders none troweth.

ll. 136-42

"And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in  
the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, by reason  
of the confusion of the roaring of the sea and of the waves."  
(Luke, xxi, 25). "Amen, I say to you, this generation shall  
not pass away, till all things be fulfilled. Heaven and earth  
shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. (Ibid., 32-  
33).

Coursing through many of Thompson's poems is the remem-  
brance of his outcast days in London. The facts of his life

show that after a disagreement with his father in November, 1885, he went down to London destitute and broken in health.

He tried to earn his living, at first as a book-agent and then as a shoe-mender's helper. Finally he became a common tramp, earning a few pence during the day by selling matches or calling cabs and spending his nights in wretched lodging-houses or in the doorways of darkened alleys. And all this time Thompson had been suffering the agony of a drug-addict, an agony of which no one who has not witnessed it can have the faintest conception.<sup>14</sup>

And yet his physical sufferings were nothing in comparison with the moral revulsion he felt in being thrown into the midst of the dregs of humanity. After these experiences he wrote:

Their conversation is impossible of report. If you want to know it (and you are in every way a gainer by not knowing it, while you lose what can never be regained by knowing it) go to Rabelais and his like, where you may get<sup>15</sup> by reading 'Westminster Drolleries' and other eighteenth century collections of swine-trough hoggery. For naked bestiality you must go to the modern bete humaine.<sup>15</sup>

It must be remembered though that during the three years of his outcast days in the London streets he never changed his Catholic ideals. He has interwoven Biblical allusions into some of his most poignant experiences which tend to make them all the more pathetic. It is especially in The Hound of Heaven that he bewails his London existence:

In the rash lustihood 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.

ll. 117-21

<sup>14</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. xix.

<sup>15</sup>Meynell, op. cit., p. 50.

In view of the context, "young powers" would seem to mean the soul's former strength of youth now seen in retrospect as strength used to shake the pillars supporting the "arches of the years," bringing down in ruins about him the temple of life that might have been. Thompson vividly recalls the scene in which Samson shook the two principal pillars of the temple of Dagon, the Philistine god, so violently that "the house fell upon all the princes, and the rest of the multitude that was there: and he killed many more at his death than he had killed before in his life." (Judges, xvi, 30).

Thompson continues more plaintively:

My days have crackled and gone up in smoke,  
Have puffed and burst as sun-starts on a stream.  
11. 122-23

With the Psalmist he says: "For my days are vanished like smoke: and my bones are grown dry like fuel for the fire. I am smitten as grass, and my heart is withered; because I forgot to eat my bread." (Psalm ci, 4-5).

The poet develops still further the anguish that was his in the derelict London days. All the more substantial objects of love and consolatory powers had failed him. Now even the dream of the dreamer, the music of the lutanist, the musings of the poet--none of these offer relief:

Yea, faileth now even dreams  
The dreamer, and the lute the lutanist;  
Even the linked fantasies, in whose blossoming twist  
I swung the earth a trinket at my wrist,  
Are yielding:  
11. 124-28

A Scriptural reflection of Thompson's sentiment is found in the history of the chosen people during the Baby-

Ionian Captivity when their sorrow was so great that it drove all poetry and song from their souls:

Upon the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept;  
when we remembered Sion. On the willows in the  
midst thereof we hung up our instruments. For there  
they that led us into captivity required of us the  
words of songs. And they that carried us away,  
said: Sing ye to ~~us~~ a hymn of the songs of Sion.  
How shall we sing the song of the Lord in a strange  
land? (Psalm, cxxxvi, 1-4).

Some critics have expressed their surprise that Thompson did not become a poet of the city streets since he himself had lived in the "highways and byways" of London and had seen that vast city without any of those concealments which make it unknown to many who have spent their lives there. "How he could have portrayed it all,—the glare, the vice, the riotous profanity, the barbarous passion, the squalor and all that sum of wrong inflicted and endured."<sup>16</sup> But we find his memories of London, as of other places, aflame with the luminous image of

...the traffic of Jacob's ladder  
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, Thompson uses figures from Catholic sources as mere symbols without any apparent spiritual signification. Several of these point to Mrs. Meynell, the lady for whom he

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<sup>16</sup>Davies, op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>17</sup>Charing Cross was the site of one of the nine Gothic crosses placed by Edward I to mark the resting places of Queen Elenore's funeral on the way to Westminster. It is the center of London's commercial activity and its most thickly populated district. It was the scene of Thompson's most tragic days. Connolly, op. cit., p. 552.

had a sincere affection and an "ethereal" love. Singing her charms in Her Portrait he regrets that he was not a "heavenly grammar" with which to utter his sentiments. His speech seems to him a "brutish jargon" akin to the confusion of tongues which thwarted the completion of the tower of Babel:

Or if that language yet with us abode  
Which Adam in the garden talked with God!  
But our untempered speech descends--poor heirs!  
Grimy and rough-cast still from Babel's bricklayers.

ll. 6-9

The sonnet sequence, Ad Amicam, is addressed to Mrs. Meynell. The first lines present a blend of beauty and awe in the play of Thompson's imagination that makes the dove returning to the ark a symbol of his admired lady:

Dear Dove, that bear'st to my sole-labouring ark  
The olive-branch of so long wished rest.

ll. 1-2

The reference is clearly to the dove sent forth a second time which returned "in the evening, carrying a bough of an olive tree, with green leaves, in her mouth." (Genesis, viii, 11). But a raven which had been sent out from the ark before the dove "...went forth and did not return." (Ibid., 7). Thompson seems fearful that perhaps Mrs. Meynell's love may find some other lodgment, and therefore he gives utterance to a heartfelt wish:

Oh, may that doubted day not come, not come,  
When you shall fail, my heavenly messenger,  
And drift into the distance and the doom  
Of all my impermissible things that were!

ll. 5-8

When in the House of Bondage the poet asks what shall force open the seal which bars entrance into the inner shrine

of the heart, the figurative reply recalls the engulfing of Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea:

Not the sea  
Which did englut great Egypt and his war.  
ll. 4-5

Wishing to give some estimate of the "minatory might" of the sun, Thompson reverts to the story of Samson, and in exquisite figures addresses the burning orb:

Samson's riddling meanings merging  
In thy twofold sceptre meet:  
Out of thy minatory might,  
Burning Lion, burning Lion,  
Comes the honey of all sweet,  
And out of thee, the Eater, comes forth meat.  
Orient Ode, ll. 86-91

The Bible story tells how Samson, unaided, killed a raging and roaring lion. "And after some days returning...he went aside to see the carcass of the lion, and behold there was a swarm of bees in the mouth of the lion and a honey-comb. And when he had taken it in his hands, he went on eating." (Judges, xiv, 8-9). In consequence of this happening Samson later proposed the following riddle: "Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness." (Ibid., 14). Thompson suggests that the sun "like the lion, consumes yet gives life, and though strong it produces the sweetness of external beauty in nature."<sup>18</sup>

In his poem Peace written on the occasion of the signing of the treaty of peace which concluded the Boer War, 1902, the poet selects as a particularly appropriate type of Eng-

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<sup>18</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. 455.

land's avarice Dalila, through whose seductive wiles Samson was robbed of his strength:

Resume the arms of thy false Dalila, Gold,  
Shameful and nowise fair:

ll. 36-37

Very effective and suggestive are the images he uses in describing the deluge, which,

When the ancient heavens did in rains depart,  
While the high-danced whirls  
of the tossed scud made hiss thy drenched curls?  
Ode to the Setting Sun, ll. 102-104

Particularly notable is the onomatopoetic effect procured when Thompson's imagination pictures the waters of the deluge rising so high that the "tossed scud" drenched the hot curls of the sun and made them hiss.

David dancing before the Ark supplied an appropriate figure for the homage the earth renders the sun. The lines evidence his usual skillful management of the metaphor:

And like a jocund maid  
In garland-flowers arrayed  
Before thy ark Earth keeps her sacred dance.  
ll. 152-54

Several considerations have entered into the concluding chapter of this survey, the first being those on doctrinal matters which, because of their nature, could not be included in any of the preceding chapters. Thompson expresses his belief in the soul and in its divine origin; the body is sacred because it is the "Temple of God", the habitation of the soul which is sustained by grace, a supernatural gift of God; there is a heaven reserved for the just, a hell for those who die

as enemies of God, and a place of purgation--purgatory--where souls are cleansed before they are admitted to heavenly bliss; all men will rise at the general resurrection on the Last Day and with body and soul reunited, will be either forever happy or eternally miserable.

Memories of Thompson's London days are mapped out in imagery drawn from the Scriptures; at the same time we learn that amid it all, the poet retained his integrity of heart and mind.

Finally, allusions from the Scriptures ingeniously serve to portray Thompson's affection for Mrs. Meynell, the power of the sun based on the scriptural narrative of Samson's strength, the avarice of England represented by Dalila, and the homage rendered by the earth to the sun likened to David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant.

It is possible that some of the figures which point to Catholic doctrine may offer difficulty to the ordinary reader. On the other hand, the scriptural allusions are more readily comprehended and serve to intensify the sentiment expressed in the language of metaphor and simile.

## CONCLUSIONS

So strongly have Francis Thompson's life and Catholicity influenced his poems that they are an almost complete revelation of his own soul. His poetry is peculiarly himself, for in it he fought his battles, saw his visions, eased his joy and sorrow, and by a profusion of Catholic imagery gave definite evidence of an inherent religious training and deep-seated convictions.

It probably never occurred to Thompson that the experiences of his "midnight time" in London might later be converted into the stuff of literature, nor that these harrowing days constituted a spiritual training. During these years he learnt what sin was--not by sinning, but by coming in contact with the "fumes of congregated evil". Knowing what God is, he encompassed the two poles of the spiritual life according to the words of St. Augustine, "That I may know Thee, that I may know myself," and combined the two in his poetry.

Thompson's most marked individuality lies in his ecstatic apprehension of nature. His ecstasy is not so much about nature itself, but is expressed in the terms of nature in the symbolism with which endows divine interpretations. This is particularly true of his majestic liturgical poem, the Orient Ode; there is also the Ode to the Setting Sun, a pageant of scintillating color and sound; From the Night of

Forebeing, an ode containing baffling imagery and sublime thoughts of life and death; A Corymbus for Autumn, characterized by "wild and Bacchic gladness"; and in a lesser degree, Of Nature: Laud and Plaint.

Although the general atmosphere of his poems is spiritual and mystical, there are some which are especially conducive to the awakening of silences of thought and soulful meditation. In the first rank must be placed his masterpiece, The Hound of Heaven, followed by The Mistress of Vision, his stark gospel of renunciation, and To Any Saint, a most marvelous compendium of Christian mysticism.

Obviously influenced by his knowledge of Catholic doctrine are such poems as Assumpta Maria, The Passion of Mary, The Making of Viola, and The Veteran of Heaven. To be inclusive: there are lines on children and on cricket; occasional poems; impassioned verses to Mrs. Meynell; chants of autumn and nature; odes to the rising and sinking sun; poetic representations of scientific truth; poems of sadness and poems of ecstasy; detached fragments of thought and philosophy; flights into the realms of mythology and theology; images drawn from the Scriptures and the liturgy of the Church--all bearing the impress of his life and spirituality.

Since Thompson employs so much Catholic imagery so much, in fact, that it has been impossible to treat it adequately in so brief a study as this--his poetry will attract mainly such as have the necessary background for its interpretation, and those who are willing at least to make an attempt at com-

prehending it. Nevertheless, many of his poems are intelligible to the generality of readers, for his central idea is clear enough to be seen by any who take the trouble to do a little logical thinking. On the other hand, there are a number of selections which can be enjoyed and appreciated by the ordinary reader. The fact remains that the faults of which Francis Thompson must stand convicted are the defects of his qualities. His failings are due to the wealth of his imagination, to the lightning rapidity of his perception, to the height and depth of his spiritual intuition. As a result his poetry presents a riot of simile and metaphor, numerous neologisms and word coinages; there are some irritating ellipses and digressions, an apparent lack of sequence, and his so-called obscurity. However, his rich and varied colorings, his rapt mysticism and high thinking, the wide range of his mental vision, the answering splendors of his lofty imaginings, the simplicity and childlike appeal of his poetry more than redeem his defects. His biographer has left this note: "Devoted friends lament him, no less for himself than for his singing. He had made all men his debtors, leaving to those who loved him the memory of a unique personality, and to English poetry an imperishable name."

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## APPENDIX

Presentation Convent,  
Livesey St.,  
Manchester 4  
27/3/37

Dear Sister M. Evelyn,

Your kind letter has indeed been somewhat neglected; however I trust you will excuse the unavoidable delay. Any information I can give you regarding my brother you are welcome to, but so much has been written about him, there is little left to tell.

You ask for any hints as to what led him to write with so many Catholic allusions. Probably the chief reason is the entirely Catholic home life he had; we led a very quiet life, not mixing in any society except that <sup>was</sup> of priests. We were 'Catholics', and in those days this was sufficient to isolate us from any communication with the non-Catholic inhabitants of the town we lived in; i.e. they would have nothing to do with us. Then when he was ten years of age he was sent to Ushaw College to study for the priesthood; after eight years there it was decided he had no vocation. As you are already aware, after Mr. Meynell discovered him, my brother was for some time in a Premonstratensian Priory, (not as a Religious) and later was about four years under the care of the good Capuchin Fathers in Pantasaph, N. Wales, from whom he learned much Theology, especially from Father Kenealy, who became later Archbishop of Simla. I am sorry to say that I have nothing belonging to Francis in my possession; the few things I did possess have been given away.

I may say that the good done to many souls through my brother's poetry has been the cause of much gratification to me; indeed I have met more than one who has entered the Church through the study of his poems.

Thanking you for your promise to remember me before the Tabernacle,

Sincerely yours in the S. Heart,

Sister Austin

