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F R A N C I S T H O M P S O N

A

C A T H O L I C P O E T O F N A T U R E

C H A P T E R O N E

I N T R O D U C T I O N

A single sentence may contain the theme of volumes; a single thought may give rise to a whole series of speculations and research. It was thus with one thought of Francis Thompson's that I met: "To be the poet of the return to Nature is somewhat; but I would be the poet of the return to God." The statement was at once a token and a challenge. To a priest, it was at once a token of the poet's zeal and his concern for the honour and glory of God. It soon became a challenge - to discover how and to what extent Thompson's ambitions were realized.

Reading through the very limited number of books on the man, this problem of Thompson's treatment of nature received little light, for the matter was treated very casually. Predominantly, Thompson was treated either as a religious poet by Catholic writers who spent their enthusiasm on his 'Hound of Heaven', or he was treated

rather badly by non-Catholic writers who lost themselves and him in a froth of pseudo-mysticism. Logically, I turned to the works of the poet himself and an examination of his poetry and prose has resulted in this study; a study that as it has progressed has resulted in a tremendous admiration for Thompson as a man, as a thinker and as a poet. I am personally convinced of the man's great, nay, his heroic character, and if something of this grandness of soul is radiated by the following pages, it will have been derived from the man himself. In the following pages, Thompson's voice is dominant. My task has been to assemble and arrange the wealth of his thought.

It is obviously impossible to bring a great weight of authority to substantiate the various points that will be made in this study, for no such authority exists. Here and there, a pertinent quotation will be found written by some admirer or commentator on the poet, but in general, Thompson's own works are the chief authorities. I hope that the lack of secondary sources will be offset by the abundance of primary ones.

The central point of this study is a simple one and at the same time a far-reaching one. In a word, it is this: Thompson treated nature as a Catholic poet should. He came on the scene at a time when nature had suffered badly at the hands of the previous generations' poets. He inherited from his predecessors a nature philosophy that was sterile if not dead. He wisely started anew, and in prose and verse restored the freshness and vitality and truth that nature poetry so badly needed. Subsequent pages will illustrate both the negative and positive aspects of his thought. I call those aspects negative

which are concerned with tearing down the rotten superstructure and purging out the erroneous ideas, the positive, in which he displays in varied tones and widely-gleaned imagery a true philosophy of nature.

A Catholic, since he shares the same true philosophy of nature as Thompson displayed in his work, might be inclined to minimize Thompson's role as a defender of the truth. It is true that Thompson added nothing to the traditional views of a nature-lover like St. Francis of Assisi; his songs were fashioned out of the things that we who belong to the Catholic Church believe. To dispell any such impression, a short summary of the views of the leading nineteenth century poets will follow wherein one may see the chaos and confusion and gross error into which Nature had sunk. One may then be better able to grasp the magnificence of Thompson's efforts.

In examining the background of the 'nature heresy' in English poetry, I came upon the stimulating essay of Jacques Maritain on 'Rousseau' Nature's Saint.¹ This provocative and lucid exposition of the roots of the nature problem suggested the framework for this study. The misconceptions which the English Romantic poets promulgated stemmed from Rousseau through Wordsworth, and his naturalization of Christianity contained the germ of corruption. There was suggested then that this study might take the form of Francis Thompson's exposition of the basic errors regarding nature, and his demonstration of a true Catholic view.

1. Jacques Maritain, Three Reformers. Sheed and Ward, London, 1936. 'Rousseau', pp. 93 - 164.

The third chapter is concerned with a short description of such a Catholic view of nature, with particular emphasis on visible nature and the role of Divine Providence in the ordering of the affairs of this universe. I have deliberately omitted an elaborate series of footnotes in order to make the section more fluent and readable; my purpose has been to be simply expository, rather than apologetic.

With Thompson more than with most poets, the one preface to his poetry is his life story, and chapter four gives a short account of his background, family life, education and career. Since the tragic aspects of his life are so intermingled with his poetry, frequent references to his life story will be found as well in the main body of this thesis. This study is not meant to be an exhaustive commentary on Thompson's life and work, and only the details pertinent to our purpose will be found here. There are sundry theological and literary approaches to the man, but these have been treated only in so far as they bear on his work as a nature poet.

The main bulk of this study is found in chapter five which bears the title, 'The Catholic Poet of Nature'. Rather than subdivide the collected material into several chapters, I have placed it in one chapter with thirteen subsections. An exhaustive enumeration of the various aspects of nature poetry has been made, and Thompson's theory and practice of each has been stated. Where it seemed appropriate to heighten the effect, some contrasts with the Romantic poets and their successors have been inserted. Thompson's treatment of the Blessed Virgin Mary has been dealt with in the twelfth section of chapter five, since it serves both to show his attitude toward love and thus indirectly his attitude toward nature, and because it serves as an apt

preface to the consideration of the final fruits of Thompson's searchings - his mysticism. Again, the treatment of Thompson's mysticism is not intended to be exhaustive but only indicative of the strains of profound religion that run through his verse. Then too, the point that God's grace and not nature alone is the means of man reaching the highest pinnacle of intellectual and spiritual Truth, demands a special and final re-emphasis.

To all who read the poetry of Francis Thompson, the gloriously Catholic spirit of his work becomes apparent. Like a prophet of old his voice rings out clear, uncompromising and strong in the closing days of the nineteenth century. Like the prophets too, his voice fell largely on deaf ears, for Thompson is virtually unintelligible to one who does not share the same Catholic background and feeling. A sympathetic spirit is needed to share the poet's insights, and this spirit is alien indeed to a world that has grown indifferant to the things of God. To a great extent, the English speaking world has lost its traditions of Catholic culture and is content with the scattered husks of diluted dogma or the bleak wastes of materialism.

To appreciate Thompson, people must rise to his level; he never stoops to theirs. To obtain the full beauty of the countryside, one must see it from the vantage point of the mountain peak. To see the inherent grandeur of Thompson's poetry, one must view it from the heights of spiritual truth; to the spiritually blind, the total effect will be lost.

At the outset then, let us make our own the

C H A P T E R T W O

T H E D R I F T F R O M R E A L I T Y

A misconception, and perhaps the most fundamental misconception, that has brought to growth so many errors in the modern world is the naturalization of Christianity. Through this philosophic error begotten by Rousseau and given such a wide and lasting influence in English Letters by such Romantic poets as Wordsworth, much that was purely Christian and supernatural in aspect and origin was transplanted and made the common heritage of nature. "Above all - and this is the most important point - Jean-Jacques has perverted the Gospel by tearing it from the supernatural order and transporting certain fundamental aspects of Christianity into the sphere of simple nature." ¹

Many are the distortions that follow from this pernicious error: the absolute goodness of nature, personal whim the norm of conduct, reason a deception and a snare, and the human person of such excellence and so divine that it should not submit to any law other than itself. These were the attributes ascribed not to integral but to fallen nature. Any notion of original sin was ridiculed; Rousseau called such a dogma 'a blasphemy.' ²

In contrast to these erroneous notions may be placed the superb résumé of Catholic doctrine found in the recent Encyclical

1. Maritain, Three Reformers. op. cit. p.142.

2. Maritain, Opus citatum, p.144 (footnote).

letter of Pope Pius XII. "All know that the father of the whole human race was constituted by God in a state so exalted that he was to hand on to his posterity together with earthly existence the heavenly life of divine grace. But after the unhappy fall of Adam, the universal progeny of mankind infected by a hereditary strain lost their sharing of the divine nature, and we were all children of wrath. But God, all merciful, 'so loved the world as to give his only-begotten Son'; and the Word of the Eternal Father through this same divine love assumed human nature from the race of Adam, - but an innocent and spotless nature it was, - so that He, as a new Adam, might be the source whence the grace of the Holy Spirit should flow unto all the children of the first parent. Through the sin of the first man they had been excluded from adoption into the children of God; through the Word Incarnate made brothers according to the flesh of the only-begotten Son of God, they would receive the power to become the sons of God. As He hung upon the Cross, Christ Jesus not only avenged the justice of the Eternal Father that had been flouted, but He also won for us, His brothers, an unending flow of graces. It was possible for Him personally, immediately to impart these graces to men; but He wished to do so only through a visible Church that would be formed by the union of men, and thus through that Church every man would perform a work of collaboration with Him in dispensing the graces of Redemption. The Word of God willed to make use of our nature when in excruciating agony He would redeem mankind; in much the same way throughout the centuries He makes use of the Church that the work begun might endure." ¹

1. Pope Pius XII, The Mystical Body of Christ, 1943, pp.10-11.

One notes the timely insistence of the Holy Father on the supernaturality of true religion. This truth - the essentially supernatural character of Christianity - was what Rousseau denied, and that denial and its consequent acceptance was at the root of the nature heresy. Once the supernaturality of grace is denied or slighted, the product turns malignant. In spite of the Romantics' glorification of the individual and the extolling of humanity, the individual and humanity soon lose their true value unless they are esteemed for their true worth. Extravagant claims of excellence for the human person based not on his Divine adoption or eternal destiny, but on his native talents inevitably brings about a reaction. A humanism that is homo-centric and not theocentric lacks the needed balance since it is founded upon an absurdity. There is no such thing as attaining the ideal of the brotherhood of man once the ideal of the Fatherhood of God is removed. The glorification of humanity takes place through the merits of Christ; any other attempts at self-glorification bring lamentable results. The ideals of man's independence and total self-sufficiency announced by Rousseau have wrought cruel effects on man. If Man is the Master of things, and God is removed from the picture, such results are inevitable. A vile and diabolic hatred of man has taken the place of the liberty, equality and fraternity so proudly announced. Wars, civil and universal, oppression, persecution, super-race theories have marked the economic and political life of our country. This hatred of humanity has entered the domestic world and made for the facility of divorce, nay, it has even extended to the unborn child, and frustrated his very conception or taken his life before birth with the most ruthless cruelty and deli-

berate ferocity. If man is merely a 'noble savage', it is not long before the nobility departs and the savagery dominates.

To teach Christian truths, as Rousseau did, that are merely hollow shells of reality is at once to debase Christianity and to give to Nature a burden that it cannot stand. His was a religious disposition,¹ and he passed through the Church the better to purloin the words of life. "He perceived great Christian truths which his age had forgotten, and his strength lay in recalling them; but he perverted them... when he invokes against the critical nihilism of their vain reason the worth of nature and her primordial tendencies; when he justifies virtue, candour, the family, civic devotion; when he affirms the essential dignity of the conscience and human personality, then Rousseau is displaying Christian truths to his contemporaries. But they are Christian truths emptied of substance, of which nothing is left but the glittering husk. They fall in fragments at the first blow, for they no longer derive their existence from the objectivity of faith and reason, they no longer subsist except as expansions of the subjectivity of the appetite. They are puffed out and drivelling truths, declaring Nature absolutely good in every way, reason incapable of reaching truth and capable only of corrupting man, conscience infallible, the human person of such worth and so divine that it can validly obey nothing but itself."²

The basic perversion of Rousseau was making what was

1. Jacques Maritain, Op. cit., p. 141.

2. Jacques Maritain, Op.cit., pp. 141-142.

supernatural, and derived from faith, the common heritage of nature. But in truth, the absolute essential of Christianity is the supernatural quality of grace. Remove the supernatural quality and Christianity goes bad.¹ Once the supernatural essence of Christianity is stripped away and the resultant corruption foisted upon nature, there is unleashed a monster which can succeed only in destroying the very roots of nature itself. Half-truths are more malignant than whole errors, for 'c o r r u p t i o o p t i m i p e s s i m a'..*you will understand that you need only lessen and corrupt Christianity to hurl into the world half-truths and maddened virtues, as Chesterton says, which once kissed but will now forever hate each other, That is why the modern world abounds in debased analogies of Catholic mysticism and shreds of laicized Christianity."²

The denial of original sin was at the heart of Rousseau's nature heresy. In the state of integral nature Rousseau still pictured man, where he was necessarily good, innocent, happy and this fixed state of goodness and innocence was the true heritage of humanity. Man had but to shake off the dead weight of custom, free himself from the confines of law and rule and return to the state of pure nature. Nature for him performed all the functions that grace does in the Catholic system. All the evils that beset man, such as the concupiscence of the appetites, the darkness of the mind and the will's weakness, along with the sufferings and cares of life, all of these are the results and dire effects of civilization. If we can shake off these and return to the

1. Jacques Maritain, Op.cit., p.142.
2. Jacques Maritain, Op.cit., p.143.

purely natural and primitive we shall attain our true happiness.

"It was Rousseau who completed that amazing performance, which Luther began, of inventing a Christianity apart from the Church of Christ: it was he who completed the naturalization of the Gospel. It is to him that we owe that corpse of Christian ideas whose immense putrefaction poisons the universe to-day... A heresy, a complete realization of the Pelagian heresy through the mysticism of sensation; let us say more exactly that Rousseauism is a radical naturalistic corruption of Christian feeling."¹

This is precisely the framework upon which the following study is to be based. It contains the basic points of the nature heresy and the ideas that were given such currency by the English Romantic poets. In this system, nature performs all the functions of grace, and since nature is wholly devoid of any qualities other than those that God gives it, the followers of Naturalism have cut themselves off from the sole source of spiritual enlightenment and moral strength. We need not try to sift to the most fundamental error: whether it was the denial of Christ's teachings, the rejection of the authority of the Catholic Church, the denial of original sin, etc., that came first, historically or psychologically, in any case the effects are the same. The nineteenth century English poets writing out of an effete Protestant culture did much to propagate the errors of Naturalism. True, they sought in general to retain the human aspirations of Christianity and to preserve the broad outlines of Christian civilization, but most irrationally they sought at the same time to eliminate Christ. With the denial of His

I. Jacques Maritain, *Op. cit.*, p.147.

Divinity, the hollow truths, stripped of their supernatural sanction, soon lost their vitality. The denial of the sin of the first Adam leads inevitably to the denial of the merits of the new Adam raised on the Cross.

*The mysticism of sensation' quoted above will be shown as it runs through the works of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats; this is at once the grandeur of their poetry, and their weakness as consistent thinkers. In due course, we shall see the solid intellectualism of Thompson standing in sharp contrast to this false glorification of sensory knowledge. Thompson was cognizant of the errors into which the literary clan had led the masses of humanity with their romantic emphasis of the self-sufficiency of nature, and he attacked the problem at its roots.

The remaining pages of this chapter will be concerned with an application of Rousseau's teachings as it affected the thought and writings of the poets of the nineteenth century.

- MAN AND NATURAL RELIGION -

The human mind can never pass with ease and assurance from any form of faith to complete agnosticism or unbelief without a great emotional strain. As with men, so with generations of men, the drift from belief to skepticism is a slow process. One generation denies a particular dogma of religion, and once the seamless robe of Truth is frayed, the slow disintegration of the whole goes relentlessly on. Sixteenth century reformers made little of the role of the Virgin

Mary in God's redemptive plan, and now, through a process of historical religious decay, the descendants of those reformers have lost the idea of the Divinity of Mary's Son.

The transition from medieval Catholic faith to the scientific positivism which largely dominates the minds of men to-day was effected partly through Protestantism, and as it lost its force, through a romantic worship and cult of nature. As we stated above, it was Rousseau who was greatly responsible for instituting this philosophical bridge by which men might pass casually and without excessive emotional qualms from faith to skepticism. There are many stopping places on this philosophical bridge, and all of them have been the anchors to which men have fixed their hopes and aspirations. Men in general hunger for security and truth, but the only record of human aspirations is that of literary people, and of these, the poets are the chief spokesmen of men's longings and emotions. The poets at once reflect the longings of the human heart, and direct the thought of the human mind.

The relation of nature to God and the relation of man's soul to God and to nature have been the recurring themes of the poets. Few poets have struck a true balance in this equation. I am convinced that Francis Thompson was one of the select circle of true poets who saw clearly, consistently, and completely the relations between God and man and nature, and the purpose of this study is to show those relations as they are reflected in his poetry and prose. Coming as he did at the close of the nineteenth century, when the exuberance of the nature-poets was pruned by the insistent and dogmatic claims of science, he re-stated clearly and emphatically the Catholic views which at once,

safeguard the truths of religion and at the same time utilize all that science (religion's hand-maiden) has to offer.

The tendency to substitute nature for God is more or less present in all the characteristic nature-poets, especially those of Thompson's century. This philosophic aberration is called naturalism, which retains some of the attributes of God but mistakenly applies them to nature. In its varied phases, some notion of God is always present to account for the rationality, purposiveness and benevolence of nature. In the naturalistic view of life, the elements derived from religion and those from science were maintained in a kind of equilibrium through metaphysics, but the fusion was never of a very substantial nature, and it tended to break down as either the notions derived from religion or those from science, dominated.

In their very use of the term 'nature' many of the poets, since they shared no common philosophical heritage, had a different concept in mind. With some, it meant the visible universe (Keats, for example); with others (Shelley) it was the principle underlying the visible universe; with still others (Wordsworth) it was virtually synonymous with God. Nearly all were fond of personifying Nature; many, especially the Pantheists, literally so. The use of the term nature came from the poet's desire to associate the obvious, external, beauties of the visible world with some fundamental law and order. They sought in this way to give greater depth and meaning to ordinary sense perceptions, and to attain in some way to a union with the underlying principle of nature. Most of the Romantic poets were revolutionary at heart, and since they were devoid of religious traditions and

beliefs, they turned to the evident beauty and purpose and order in nature as an object of worship. Nature was ever permanent in the application of her laws, while chaos and strife marked human affairs, whence the poets sought in nature for some basic, substantial principle which might apply as well to human affairs.

Ideas from religion and science went to make up such theories. Even as the scientific aspects came to be stressed, it was still felt that nature was fundamentally good and purposeful and guided by some genial spiritual power. A man like Shelley, an open and avowed atheist, still clung to the idea of a harmonious and inspiring nature. With him as with others, the concept of nature was enlarged and decked out to take the place of a dogmatic religion. The human mind must worship something, and when the dogmas of Christianity were set aside, naturalism was asserted to be the substitute for revealed religion.

Behind the whole notion of nature as a purposeful and ordered entity rests the idea of Divine Providence; otherwise, the apparent regularity of nature is purely a chance affair. Science of course was incapable of attaining to this spiritual principle, and it became necessary for the poets to conceive of some faculty for penetrating to the inner life of things. Whether this approach was an affair of the senses, and the creative imagination as with Wordsworth, or an intellectual approach as with Shelley, both lead to some form of 'mysticism', but it was a false and ill-founded kind which resulted in turning a man like Wordsworth from his worship of nature to the orthodox Anglicanism of his day. There is little doubt that Shelley did not

derive satisfaction from his nature worship, and perhaps he too might have turned to orthodoxy had not death intervened.

The problem of how man, a conscious, thinking being, with a free will, could draw his animating principle from an inanimate nature, was another source of mystification to the adherent of a purely naturalistic philosophy. In the early days of the problem, some form of pantheism seemed to be the only solution. Later in the nineteenth century, following the popularization of Darwin's evolutionary theory, this problem was apparently solved by reducing mind and thought to a purely materialistic basis. The solution of the problem was short-lived, for the theory of evolution also put forth the contention that nature was not benevolent and purposive at all; rather it was a fierce survival of the fittest. There was little consolation, then, to have derived man's soul from nature, if nature herself was cruel, chaotic and purposeless. The fate of those who had hitched their wagon to the star of nature became a pathetic one. Confusion, if not absolute skepticism reigned in the realm of poetry. True religion rests on definite and objective truths, namely, the existence of God and our dependence on Him. Once the intellectual content of faith disappears, religion becomes an affair of the emotions only, and rapid and inevitable disintegration follows.

The worship of nature was the vogue of the romantics. With them it had the freshness and vitality of a novelty. An idea of God, though a false one, is discernible in the early stages, but this is gradually weakened, confused and lost, until at the close of the nineteenth century skepticism was the resort of the poets.

To see more clearly the exact state of 'nature' when Francis Thompson began his poetic career, a very brief survey of the nature philosophy's current throughout the century follows. This will serve to show the literary tradition Thompson inherited, and also point out the mistaken concepts of nature which he sought to replace with his own Catholic views.

It was Wordsworth who gave the greatest impetus to Nature poetry in the early nineteenth century. The physical joys of the unhampered wanderings of his youth among mountains and lakes prompted a sort of primitive animism which made him feel that there was 'a spirit in the woods'. His university studies at Cambridge which was then under the domination of Newton's physics, left this feeling undisturbed. Wordsworth's sojourn in France and association with the Revolutionaries, and later, the influence of Godwin tore his mind away from the influence of nature, and it was only the work of Coleridge and his sister Dorothy that rescued him from despair, and turned him once more to the pleasures of a simple life close to the earth. In thankfulness for this restoration arose the nature poetry of the Lyrical Ballads which reconciled Wordsworth's aesthetic, scientific and religious needs.

" Sweet is the lore that Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Misshapes the beateous forms of things:-
We murder to dissect." ¹

1. William Wordsworth, The Tables Turned, lines 25-28.

Notice the false glorification of nature's powers in the following:

" a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things." ¹

The passage sounds religious, but it is purely naturalistic and devoid of any reference to God. It was only after the death of his brother that Wordsworth's thought took on a distinctly Christian colouring. Unfortunately, Wordsworth's greatest powers were spent before he abandoned his faulty views of nature, and in his orthodox role, his influence is little felt.

It is the early Wordsworth who was wont to commune with the vague World Spirit that influenced Shelley in his exalted but pathetically inadequate description of the fate of Keats:

"He is made one with Nature; there is heard
His voice in all her music, from the moan
Of thunder to the song of night's sweet bird;
He is a presence to be felt and known
In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,
Spreading itself wher'er that Power may move
Which has withdrawn his being to its own;
Which wields the world with never-wearied love,
Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it above." ²

After Adonais, union with Nature is offered as a consolation in the main English elegies, replacing the Christian Heaven of

1. William Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey, lines 96 - 103.
2. P.B. Shelley, Adonais. Lines 370-378.

Milton's *Lycidas*, completely in Arnold's 'Thyrsis' and Swinburne's 'Ave atque Vale' and blending with it in Tennyson's 'In Memoriam'. Shelley's treatment of nature differed from Wordsworth's in that he entered imaginatively into the very life of the things he described: the cloud, the mountain, the sensitive plant, to interpret its characteristic joys and sorrows.

It was Shelley that turned Byron from ridicule of Wordsworth to respect for his nature-poetry. 'The Prisoner of Chillon' is aroused from despair in his solitary dungeon by the 'carol of a bird', and by his calm contemplation of simple things, he was led to friendship with such unprepossessing creatures as spiders and mice. In the cult of nature the anti-clerical Byron found a substitute for Christian orthodoxy.

"Are not the mountains, waves and skies a part
of me and of my soul, as I of them?
.
My altars are the Mountains and the Ocean,
Earth, - air, - stars, all that spring from the Great Whole
Who has produced and will receive my Soul." 1

Stung by his ostracism in 1816, Byron proclaimed his preference of nature to his fellow man.

" I can see
Nothing to loathe in Nature, save to be
A link reluctant in a fleshy chain,
Classed among creatures, when the soul can flee,
And with the sky - the peak - the heaving plain
Of ocean, or the stars, mingle - and not in vain." 2

1. Lord Byron, *Childe Harold*, Canto III, lines 107 & sqq.
2. Lord Byron, *Ibid.* 683 - 688.

To Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron, the foremost members of the Romantic school, nature was something sacred. It had a perfection to which man, fallen from Eden or from some state of primitive harmony with his environment, could not pretend. This was the common faith of deists like Rousseau, atheists like Holbach and orthodox Christians like Cowper. A natural religion was evolved from the behaviour of things in an ordered universe, and nature became a visible standard for the guidance of man. Perhaps the extremest statement of this view is that of Wordsworth:

"One impulse from the vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can."¹

Nature is not only the ideal of beauty but of goodness as well.

Reaction to this over-praise of nature's powers was inevitable. It came in the later verses of Wordsworth and Coleridge, but Byron, Shelley, and Keats died before the reaction appeared in their poetry.

Typical of this reaction in English letters is a sonnet in the first published verse of Matthew Arnold. Since it is so appropriate to our purpose, it is inserted here.

"In harmony with Nature? Restless fool,
Who with such heat dost preach what were to thee,
When true, the last impossibility;
To be like Nature strong, like Nature cool:-
Know, man hath all which Nature hath, but more

1. William Wordsworth, The Tables Turned, lines 21-24.

And in that more lies all his hopes of good.
Nature is cruel; man is sick of blood:
Nature is stubborn; man would fain adore:
Nature is fickle; man hath need of rest:
Nature forgives no debt, and fears no grave;
Nature would be mild, and with safe conscience blest.
Man must begin, know this, where Nature ends;
Nature and man can never be fast friends.
Fool, if thou canst not pass her, rest her slave! " 1

This vigorous repudiation of nature as a moral guide comes of a disappointed love for nature. It is negatively true, in that it denies to nature what it does not possess, but the denunciation of nature's cruelty is as baseless as the glorification of her benevolence if nature is personalized into a cruel tyrant. The absolute neutrality of nature was a truth that was slow of apprehension.

Tennyson's nature poetry covers such long period of time and is marked by such modifications that it is hard to generalize. 'In Memoriam' opens with a strain of blank despair over the death of his friend Hallam, goes on to decry the futility of the consolation that nature can bring, and ends on a hopeful note, a note incidentally that derives from faith rather than natural religion.

With the publication of Darwin's Origin of the Species in 1859, a new direction was given to the nature poets. They had sought some sort of spiritual fellowship with the world of nature, but were given instead an assurance of their physical and psychological kinship with animals, plants and the material world... It may even be that the ground was paved for the reception of Darwin's suggestions of

1. Matthew Arnold, To an Independant Preacher Who Preached That We Should be in'Harmony with Nature'. Collected Works, Oxford Press, p.60.

man being descended from the animal by the previous generations of poets insisting on man's spiritual debt to lakes, sunsets and other inanimate things.

Materialistic evolution failed to inspire the poets. The novelists fared better with such, and in the works of Thomas Hardy and George Eliot there is the theme of the survival of the fittest. The main scientific derivative was objectivity in description such as the meticulous accuracy of observation on which Tennyson prided himself. The poets seemed to sense a clash between the findings of science and the truths of revealed religion, and those with little faith soon lost that little and degenerated into skepticism.

The greater writers of the last half of the nineteenth century - Tennyson, Browning and Dickens, had so strong a grasp of first principles that they were less shaken by the chaotic storms that swept lesser men away. "The anti-Christian movement in literature was not primarily an intellectual movement. It was emotional; and it was largely based on popular misinterpretations of contemporary scientific thought. But the effect on several generations of young readers at the universities can hardly be exaggerated. It induced a mood (a mood rather than a way of thought) which had little more philosophical significance than an artistic fashion, yet it went far towards establishing a new paganism."¹

1. Alfred Noyes, The Unknown God, p. 297.

Swinburne in his 'Hymn of Man' reached the height
(or depth) of the trend when he wrote:

"By thy name that in hell-fire was written, and burned
at the point of the sword,
Thou art smitten, thou God, thou art smitten. Thy death
is upon thee, O Lord;
And the love-song of earth as thou diest, resounds through
the wind of her wings:
Glory to man in the highest, for man is the master
of things." ¹

While it is hardly just to abuse God in language whose beauty is borrowed from the Bible, Swinburne at least unconsciously repudiated the idea of a loveless God. The idea of man's soul being nothing more than a casual conglomeration of electrons surging through meaningless time and indefinite space proved despicable, and in spite of the bold assertions of Swinburne's avowed atheism the longings of his heart cannot be stifled. The determination to be rid of God did not abate human sufferings. "Cancers did not vanish, hunger was not fed, suffering was not eliminated by the destruction of the only religion that has ever taken suffering to the heart of his God and found Him ready to bear it. Disbelief in the remedy and dismissal of the Healer did not abolish the disease, but rather redoubled its pangs by rendering them meaningless."²

Thus in briefest outline we may see the trend that characterized nature poetry in the nineteenth century. In general, a note of flippant skepticism marked the work of those who treated explicitly

1. A Swinburne, The Hymn of Man, (concluding four lines.)
2. Alfred Noyes, The Unknown God, pp. 299 -300.

of nature. A less courageous man than Thompson might have been inclined to pass over the whole problem and to confine himself to generalizations on man and society. However, Thompson did not neglect the problem of nature, but attacked it with vigor and success. Anxious to rescue nature poetry from the abyss into which it had fallen, he threw the radiant light of a true Catholic philosophy on the whole matter. His was a twofold treatment: an exposition of the errors and a concrete example of the truth. One more timid might have concerned himself only with writing correctly of nature and letting those in error detect it by comparison. But in his prose and poetry, Thompson attacked the errors that were inherent in the philosophy of the 'nature-worshippers', and in his own nature-poetry he showed clearly the inter-relations among nature, man and their Creator. Thompson was not cowed by the current ascendancy of Science, for he was well aware that there could be no conflict between true science and true religion. Nor was he lulled by the beautiful language of the previous nature-poets and blinded to the lack of ideas that their poetry contained. No matter how beautifully an error may be stated, it remains an error, and Thompson sensed that the basic error of the romantic poets was their confusion of God and nature. To oppose this error and replace it with a sound Catholic philosophy was the cause to which Thompson devoted his life and talents.

It would be pleasant to be able to say at the outset that Thompson achieved a remarkable transformation on his contemporaries, and that all subsequent nature poets have followed his tradition. But such, obviously, is not the case. It is not within the planned range of this study to show what influences Francis Thompson did exer-

cise. That might well constitute material for another thesis. Our immediate concern here is to show that Thompson was indeed a Catholic poet of nature, and that he wrote effectively and beautifully, without doubts or digressions, and penetrated to the core of the whole problem of just what nature can mean to mankind.

That others have failed to follow his clear and emphatic teaching may cause us sorrow, but it should not cause us surprise. If Truth may fall from Divine lips on stony hearts, what may not be the fate of that from human lips.

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C H A P T E R T H R E E

A C A T H O L I C C O N C E P T I O N O F N A T U R E

At the very basis of the Catholic view of life lies the conviction that the natural order depends on the supernatural order. From it, it derives its origin and its end. Man was made in the image and to the likeness of God; man's ultimate destiny is a supernatural one, and the beatitude he seeks is a divine beatitude the object of which is God. Man's moral life is enacted on the stage of life with God as the exemplar and the judge. The success or failure of a man's life depends on the salvation of his immortal soul. Beside this great reality, all other things pale into relative insignificance.

With such a definitely supernatural caste to his whole being, it might be felt that the Catholic would be wholly contemptuous of the natural world. Yet in the true view of things, the natural world too is a product of the Divine Intelligence and it depends for its existence and continuity on the conserving power of the Divine Will.

In our philosophy, the term 'nature' has many and varied significances. Without attempting to elucidate all of these, it may be said that "a natural being is an active substance, with operations flowing from its essence, and necessarily determined by that essence. As for Nature, it is simply the sum-total of natures; and its charac-

teristic attributes are therefore the same, that is to say fecundity and necessity."¹

Thomistic philosophy recognizes in the corporeal world two substantial principles: matter and form. This 'matter' is not the matter of the mechanists with the idea of extension, but matter in its utmost purity, a principle wholly indeterminate, incapable of separate existence, but capable of existing in conjunction with something else (the form). The 'form' is an active principle which determines the purely passive first 'matter', somewhat as the form imposed by the sculptor determines the clay. The form of a thing determines the thing's specific nature and makes it what it really is.

This doctrine which considers a body as a compound of matter and form is known as hylomorphism. It accepts the reality of matter, the corporeal world, physical qualities and various species. It reveals too the presence, even in inanimate bodies and living things devoid of reason, of a substantial principle, immaterial in its nature, which, however, differs from spirits in the strict sense, in its capacity to exist apart from matter. This doctrine is especially apt to explain the union in the human being of matter and a spiritual soul which is the form of the human body, but differs from other substantial forms in that it can exist apart from matter.

The term 'essence', 'quiddity' and 'nature' are virtually synonymous, but strictly speaking, the term 'nature' alone is compatible with the predicate 'individual'.² The term 'essence' is used to refer

1. E. Gilson, The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy. Scribner's, New York, 1936, p. 365.

2. J. Maritain, An Introduction to Philosophy. Sheed & Ward, London 1930, p. 213.

to the thing in so far as it is intelligible, while the term 'nature' is used in reference to the operations which anything is adapted to perform. Our definitions of things must be based on the essence, for the functions that a thing may perform need not indicate the true nature of the thing, as for example, an apple may be used as a paper weight, a function quite alien to the nature of the apple. The confusion of essence and nature would seem to have led to many modern errors. The denial of fundamental essences removes the basis for any real knowledge of the external world, and all knowledge, (witness the scientists) is derived from motion, function and action.

"The school of Aristotle and St. Thomas teaches that God is known by the natural reason analogically, so that we perceive the divine perfections (being, unity, goodness, wisdom, love, etc.) in the mirror of creatures, without asserting any unity of nature, common measure or proportion, or mixture or confusion of any kind between God and created things. This teaching is opposed to two contrary errors: the error of the agnostics, who maintain that the Divine Being is beyond the ken of our intellect and God unknowable by the reason (sceptics, phenomenologists, positivists like Comte and Spencer, the Kantian school as a whole), and the error of the pantheists, who confuse the Divine Being with the being of created things (Parmenides, Heraclitus, the Stoics, Spinoza, the German metaphysicians after Lessing and Kant, the modernists and immanentists."¹ The distinction is a basic one, and it has enabled the Catholic poet and thinker to preserve the proper relationships between God and man and nature.

1. J.Maritain, An Introduction to Philosophy (op.cit.) pp.259-260.

Nature signifies what is primitive and original, or according to etymology, that which a thing is at birth, as opposed to what is acquired or added from external sources. In actual experience, the line that marks the natural from the artificial cannot always be drawn with precision. Non-living beings never change except under the influence of external agencies and in the same circumstances their mode of activity is uniform and constant. Organisms present a greater complexity of structure, power of adaptation, and variety of activity. For their development out of a primitive germ (or seed) they require the co-operation of many external factors, yet they have within themselves the principle of activity by which external substances are elaborated and assimilated. Thus the acorn, placed in the right circumstances grows and thrives as it takes nourishment from the various chemicals of the soil.

In any being the changes due to necessary causes are called natural (e.g. the acorn's growth), and those produced by intentional human activity (trimming the oak tree to a particular shape) are called artificial. It is clear however that art presupposes nature and is but a special adaptation of natural aptitudes, capacities and activities for useful or aesthetic purposes. Stars, rivers and forests are works of nature; parks, canals, gardens and machines are works of art. There is a certain blindness about nature. Alike she nourishes the garden vegetable and the weed adjoining it; each follows the necessary laws governing plant life. It is thus too in the inanimate world and in the realm of sensitive life. Blindly and impartially, nature fosters existence. Man's industry and intelligence may modify

nature, but it cannot usurp the peculiar functions of nature.

In traditional Catholic philosophy, nature, essence and substance are closely related terms. Essence and substance imply a static point of view, while nature implies a dynamic point of view and refers to innate tendencies. From the theological point of view, the distinctions between nature and supernature, and between nature and person are of profound significance. The traditional doctrine of original sin too has modified our conceptions of the inherent moral goodness of natural impulses. Since original sin disturbed the balance on man's rational and emotional life, the passions are no longer wholly swayed by reason and as such what is 'natural' for them is not necessarily good. To those, however, who deny original sin, the natural impulses of man are essentially good, and the consequent chaos in our world shows how erroneous this view is. Aggression, rapine and might are the laws of the jungle where relatively greater powers are there to combat the others. Our century is finding that the same code makes for very disturbed living in the human sphere.

The distinction between nature and person takes rise from the dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarnation. In the former, there is the one Divine Nature and three distinct persons; in the Incarnation we have two natures in Christ, the Divine and the human, but yet only the one personality. The human nature of Christ is complete and perfect as nature, yet it lacks that which would make it a person. The one Divine personality of Christ covers as it were the two natures, and constitutes one person and not two.

Thus is the whole scale of beings from the inanimate to the Divine, the idea of the word 'nature' runs the gamut. It is not predicated in the same way of all things. The Divine Nature is a transcendently different thing than inanimate nature. God does not raise stones and animals to the beatific vision, but every nature, by virtue of its obediencial power, can be modified according to the mind of God since He created it. This is precisely the nature of the intellect which can be enlarged without any destruction of its essence, but rather with the fulfillment of its essence. The whole idea of grace does not destroy nature, but rather perfects it. Were the human soul not susceptible to grace, God could not bestow it without destroying human nature, but He so constituted it, that it readily responds to the animating principle of grace, and shares in the Divine life. Human nature is passively open to the influences of its Creator, and non-rational nature is as an instrument in the hands of God.¹ Human beings, since they are free, may co-operate with God's graces and be divine collaborators, while non-rational natures are always used by God as instruments, that is, they are moved infallibly, inflexibly and necessarily.

The failure to appreciate the pure instrumentality of inanimate nature has led many of the poets to lavish excessive praise or excessive blame on nature. Some concession may be made to the poetic figure of Personification, but an excessive insistence, as we see in Wordsworth, Shelley and Byron, on the conscious acts of nature shows how completely these men have misconstrued a fundamental point. We

1. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Ia,2ae, 1,2, Resp.

have seen a child scolding a stone for causing it to stumble; a similar naiveté is seen in the poet castigating the laws of nature.

The term 'nature' indicates the specific essence and it is associated with the activity of a thing. The Catholic conception of nature is sufficiently flexible in scope to include all, from the inanimate to the Divine modes of being. It leaves the way open for, nay, it invites the infusion of divine grace into human nature, for though firmly rooted laws are the special characteristics of natures, the same God who made the nature made the laws that govern it, and these can be modified according to his Providence.

- VISIBLE AND PHYSICAL NATURE -

Passing from a general consideration of nature in its wide and philosophic connotations, we come to the immediate problem that will be our concern in this treatise, the visible, physical universe, the world of sense perception. Since this too is the world of the scientist, we may call it the material world. It is as well, the world of the poet's descriptions and reflexions on external nature, and before considering Francis Thompson's treatment of this world, it seems fitting to discuss briefly the aspects of this universe as they are apparent from observation and the traditional Catholic point of view.

The first characteristic that must be noted of the visible world is its contingency. (Included here too is the whole world of minutiae disclosed by the microscope). Contingency is the antithesis of necessity, and by it we mean dependent, not self-existent but relying

on something else for its existence. The universe and its contents are contingent. Man himself may or may not exist, for his existence is not necessary. He is brought into the world by the agency of other human beings; his life depends on the food he eats; the food is derived from plants and animals, and these in turn owe their existence to others of their species. As with man, so with all other things in this universe, they are dependent on others. Extended as may be our search through the realms of effect and cause, we must arrive at a First Cause of all things, for no finite series can constitute an infinity. As all its parts are contingent, so must the universe as a whole be such and it too must have derived its existence from God.

A second feature of the universe is the obvious order that pervades it. All the findings of the scientist as well as the observation of our senses attest to this order. Astronomy shows us that there is order in the heavens, The earth moves in its orbit; the planets hold to their courses; days follow nights; the seasons change regularly, and so regular are the various elements in the universe that apparent exceptions such as eclipses can be predicted with accuracy. The physicist tells us that sound, light, heat, electricity produce results that can be mathematically ascertained. The chemist discloses that the very atoms have certain, fixed qualities and characteristics which remain constant and uniform so that chemical changes take place with regularity and precision. In biology, we learn that all living things obey the same laws. They nourish themselves, they grow, they reproduce others of their species. The whole world, animate and inanimate, rational and

irrational, follows nature's laws and is systematic and orderly in its activities.

The traditional Catholic view of natural phenomena has always been to associate the order in the universe with an intelligence behind it, for order and intelligence are correlative terms. So, just as the very existence of things demands a Prime Cause, so too does the order of things demand a Prime Intelligence. Centuries of study and investigation have left man still baffled by the mysteries of nature. Each time a new discovery rolls back the veil, a new complex design is disclosed in nature's structure. Then too, men often confuse the discovery of a law in nature with the establishment of that law. It is one thing to discover the law of gravity and quite another thing to have established and to sustain that law. Men often fail to render to Newton the credit that is Newton's, and to God the power that is God's.

Men have objected that the very prodigality which is evident in nature argues against an all-wise plan in the universe. True, there appears to many to be useless and superfluous things in nature: the numberless bacteria in the world, the wasted pollen grains of the plant, the profusion of weeds. Surely this is the height of irrationality - to close one's eyes to the obvious evidences of design and concentrate on the unexplored exceptions. Just as passed discoveries of science have brought to light unsuspected wealth in apparent waste, so too may future findings bear out the fact that nature's very prodigality is purposeful. The Catholic view of things has always insisted on the existence of a Divine Intelligence at work in the universe. If human intelligence could grasp all the ramifications of the Divine plan

in the universe would not that very fact indicate the mediocrity of Divine design? In their attitude towards the universe and all that is in it, the Catholic outlook is content with some mystery. It rests confidently on its ground and full of assurance that no newly discovered truth will militate against its concept of Divine Truth, for truth cannot contradict itself.

Another characteristic, apparent to all, that marks visible nature is beauty. Each season has its special charms; each landscape its peculiar merits. From ages immemorial, and in diverse tongues, the poets of this world have sung of the countless aspects of nature's beauty. From the radiant glory of the setting sun to the secret beauty of a hidden flower, from the chill grandeur of the stars on a winter's night to the warmth of the song of spring's first robin, this universe teems with beautiful things. In His creation, God has left His superscription, and earth is generously dotted with little vestiges of resemblance to its Divine Exemplar. Unless vitiated the human soul thirsts for beauty, and when religion became a matter of the emotions, the beauties of nature became a pale substitute for the grandeurs of revealed truth. Is not the history of English poetry merely a record of man's progressive pre-occupation with material beauty to the exclusion of things spiritual? The beauties of the earth were never meant to be the satisfying food of man's mind, yet they are in truth very real ones, for God Himself "looked on them and saw that they were good."¹ That man has miscon-

1. Genesis, Chapter I, Verse 10.

trued the beauties of nature and exalted their purpose must not blind us the very real loveliness that exists in nature.

To confuse God and nature is as much an error as to remove God completely from the scheme of things. In point of fact, Pantheism has been a stepping stone to atheism, for by muddling all reality into one vague emanation, it is inevitable that the idea of God will become so degraded, that the only rational step is to try to get rid of it.

Finally, among the characteristics of external nature that might be noted, the Catholic view of life places the idea of fertility or abundance. The Catholic is aware that the things of this universe were made for man's use, and the thoughtful soul is ever grateful for the divine generosity that so completely satisfies his material needs. Given the conditions that their natures need for growth - and a watchful Providence sends the needed light and heat and moisture - the living things of nature never fail to prosper for they follow the inflexible laws that govern them. Often, as ungrateful children, man may forget the God that feeds them, but the appreciative person is aware of the countless agencies at work in external nature, through God's beneficent plan, for satisfying human cravings.

- THE DIVINE GOVERNMENT OF THE PHYSICAL WORLD: PROVIDENCE -

As we have indicated, the same power is needed to sustain the world and the things in it, as was needed to first call them into existence. There is the same need of an intelligent government in nature as there is in human society. In each case, were the ruling power

removed, complete chaos, confusion and anarchy would reign. Today, modern materialistic philosophers have reached the naive state of championing anarchy in the cosmos, and at the same time encouraging and giving full confidence to the scientists who are constantly discovering the laws that prevail in that anarchy. Such is the paradox of the modern mind which attributes political and social ills to poor direction, poor government; while it traces perfection in the universe to a complete lack of direction, a complete lack of government.

The position is scarcely an intelligent one, but then the modern man has had many a bitter quarrel with intelligence, and has sunk to the shallows of skepticism, wherein the very validity of Truth is called into question. This modern absurdity in the face of the evident order in the universe stems from the first sustained attack at order, the so-called Reformation. If religion could prosper without direction and order and government, it seemed to be the logical deduction that all things could shake off the restraining hand, and go their own way. "What was the reformation in religion was skepticism in philosophy, running the whole gamut from humble doubts to bold denials and reaching its smashing climax in our own days when the existence of a faculty capable of valid universal knowledge is hardly taken seriously."¹

It means nothing to the modern skeptic that the divine government of the universe is insisted on emphatically in Sacred Scriptures, and that Christ reiterated the truth in unmistakable terms. And yet, this is the only rational explanation of the order in the universe. Any cause intrinsic in the universe cannot be invoked for that is merely begging the question. Chance is not a solution for it is not an expla-

¹ I. Farrell, A Companion to the Summa, Vol.I, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1941, p. 368.

nation of the order that reigns in the universe but only a statement of that order which merely happened to occur. The innumerable evidences of the internal finality of things are themselves created things, demanding a rational explanation which mere chance cannot furnish. Even admitting the truth of a material evolution, we still must face the problem of origins, for evolution is concerned with the varieties of the species and does not explain the origin of the first species, however elemental that may have been.

Any consideration of the problems of creation, evolution and origin fails inevitably unless we invoke the power of God. Any attempt to explain the obvious adaptation of effect and cause, of existence and purpose, of origin and end, in the physical world is absurd that leaves out the intelligence of its Divine Designer. For, it is absurd to 'explain' a consistent design by mere chance, and a constant intelligent process by blind necessity. The rejection of God's revealed truth in religion has brought the inevitable and equally dire rejection of the power and intelligence of God in the visible universe.

Since the whole universe and all the living things in it are beyond the power of man to make, it must be realized that God, acting as a perfect agent, acts quite differently than do His creatures. Apart from God's own statement of what He had in mind when he made the universe and us, we have no way of knowing. We cannot tell ourselves: the scientist can tell us what we are made of, or rather, what our bodies are made of, but he cannot tell us what we are made for: and in comparison with this altogether vital matter, what the scientist has to say about the physical constituents of this universe, interesting as it is, is but trivial.

Attempts to explain the purpose of human life and the universe around us usually fail through a failure to grasp the whole nature of things. And even if the complete nature of things were grasped without error, the purpose of man's life and the universe would be known only if that purpose were inherent in their natures, that is, if man's purpose in this life meant the highest activity possible to his own nature. The scientist then is foredoomed to failure since he limits himself to the 'what' of things and refuses to seek the 'why'. It is assumed of course that reference is made to the materialistic and atheistic scientist who roots like a blind mole in the dismal darkness of matter.

Less skeptical, but equally irrational, is the recourse to Pantheism to explain the order and purpose of the universe. It is less skeptical in the sense that it at least seeks a cause for things, but in reducing God to the level of mundane things, pantheism merely retains the name of God. In reality, it denies His existence, to intermingle hopelessly the Necessary and the contingent, the Independent and the dependent, the Uncaused and the caused, is to forsake the clear channels of reason. The absurdities that flow from the doctrine, in making God identical with the unclean, sordid, and evil things of the world, render the idea of a supremely intelligent God a mockery.

The only solution to explain the harmony in the universe is the Providence of God. That God had a definite end in view for His creation is evident from the fact that no intelligent being can act without an end. Since God is wholly perfect, the end He had in creating this universe and all that is in it must have been Himself. Otherwise,

we would have the impasse of the supremely perfect God being motivated by someone or something outside of Himself, and this would at once indicate an imperfection in Himself, and destroy our concept of God. The primary end then of the visible universe is God Himself. He must have created it for that purpose, for God could not act for an end that is not absolutely perfect.

This is apparent to all whose vision is unclouded. As I look out the window a tree, decked in autumn's gorgeous raiment, convinces me of the Divine Intelligence behind all visible nature. Some years ago a little seed was planted in the earth. The seed did not languish in self-pity at its dismal lot, nor did it speculate on what it would make of itself. Following fixed physical laws it thrust its roots into the moist soil, and pushed its tendrils up to the light and heat and grew and developed under the influence of light and heat and moisture. As it attained stature its growth became more vigorous and rapid, as its roots ranged farther for the sustenance it needed. Never once was the little tree surprised by the killing frosts of winter. Had it remained growing and filled with sap during the winter months, it would have been burst open by the expansive force of frozen moisture. But each autumn as the summer's heat waned, the tree withdrew its vital fluids from branches and trunk, it let fall its leaves and resigned itself to a temporary 'death' to preserve itself from a permanent one. Even its exit from the stage of vitality was a glorious affair, and in the richest brown and red colouring, it sang its mute song of praise to the Divine Intelligence that guided it. Its song

was elegiac rather than lyrical, for the hand of death had touched it. The riotous colouring of autumn in nature is as the funeral prelude to the bleak cold of winter. As the swan sings most beautifully just before it dies, according to the legend, so too does nature dress most ravishingly in her seasonal finale.

If this one tree alone followed this remarkably intelligent course of action, we might perhaps dismiss the incident with a casual shrug. But each year uncounted millions of trees and plants, all unintelligent beings, act in a most intelligent way.

To assert that all things follow this orderly course to attain their own perfection and the perfection of their species does not explain itself. True, it is of the nature of plants to act in this way, but the determination of a nature does not explain itself, for the nature of plants did not give birth to this determination; it did not exist before the determination. The orderliness of creation must come from One outside that creation, for it is apparent that all nature is guided and governed by consistent and marvellous intelligence.

In a way, everything in nature is a miracle. At the marriage of Cana Jesus made water into wine and everybody was astounded; but rain becomes wine in our vines every day, and we take it all as a matter of course. Nevertheless, it is God who creates the rain and the vine and the wine, but He does it regularly, and we get so accustomed to it that we cease to wonder. Though in very truth, regularity and recurrence do not explain away the need of Divine Government; their very existence affirms it. As St. Augustine said: "The very God, the

Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, makes and rules all things by His Word; these primary miracles are effected by the Word of God; the secondary and later ones are effected by the same Word, but now Incarnate and made man for us. Since we wonder at the mighty works of the man Jesus, let us also wonder at what He has done as God."¹ Between the 'primary' miracles and the 'secondary' ones mentioned by Saint Augustine, there is no essential metaphysical difference. Divine omnipotence must be invoked to account for both.

However, we Catholics do not think of placing the events of the marriage of Cana on the same footing as events that we call natural. It is only in a certain sense that all things are miracles, and our amazement at a true miracle is due to its happening out of the ordinary course of nature. A strict miracle, - i.e. an event calling for the direct application of God's power apart from the regular course of His action, - is not in itself necessarily more admirable than the daily spectacle of nature. The government of the universe, - from the planets soaring through space incalculable to the germination of the tiniest seed, - in scope and in its least details, is a much more marvellous thing than the feeding of the five thousand with five loaves. In each case, we have the work of God; in the former, the regular, consistent universal laws of divine government may be seen; in the latter, an extraordinary gesture of divine generosity is apparent. In neither case, do I wish to minimize the role of God's providence, but rather to stress the fact that divine omnipotence is apparent in the daily

1. St. Augustine, On the Gospel of St. John, VIII.

'miracle' of the sunrise and the yearly marvel of the rose. What we call the order of nature in no way denies but most cogently affirms the guiding presence and eternal vigilance of God's sustaining power. It is but part of God's omniscience to direct transitory and temporal things through secondary causes, but these causes depend none the less on Him.

The secondary causes as well as the effects they direct are equally plastic in the hands of God. For this reason, the notion of a miracle (in the strict sense) causes no distress to the Catholic, for the Law-Giver can depose His law without violating anything. In derogating from the law of nature, God but follows a higher law, against which there can be no complaint since it is synonymous with God Himself.

God's governance of the universe differs from our human type of government. No matter how gentle our direction or government of things is, there is always an aspect of violence about it, in the sense that it is always from outside. It lacks the freedom and ease of divine government which flows from the essence of the thing itself. Just as we cannot pour knowledge into another's head, so we cannot implant a principle of action into another being. We may train a vine to follow a lattice, we may accelerate or retard the vine's growth, but we in no way can claim to have instilled the vitality into the vine. The divine direction of things reaches to the very depths of the thing's being, so the divine government of things flows easily from the principle of nature. Though regular and unostentatious, it is none the less real, and far from proving the absence of Divine government, it is a constant natural parade of God's wisdom and power. The fact that God can

implant His directing forces within the nature of natural things themselves only indicates the transcendence of His Omnipotence.

I have elaborated on this point of the presence of the Power of God in natural laws and phenomena because it is an important, nay, a central point in Francis Thompson's attitude towards and treatment of nature. So intense was Thompson's Catholic faith that he always retained a sense of the sanctity of nature since it was fresh from the hand of God. For him, the beauties of nature are presented as sacramental symbols of the Divine, which may be traced to the liturgy and symbols of the Church. To him all nature seemed sacerdotal. He looked on the universe as the Temple of God, and the part assigned to the earth was that of a censer swinging before the Throne of God. In this distinctively Catholic image he speaks of evening:

"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 enbannered Throne?"¹

As the architects of old fashioned the medieval churches, so Francis Thompson gleaned from nature the materials for the temple of his Muse. Both were expressions of faith. The ancient builders made

1. Francis Thompson, A Corymbus For Autumn, lines 81-91.

their churches symbolic of the Blessed Trinity and the Redemption, notably in the division into nave and side aisles, and the cruciform plan in which their cathedrals were built. From his Temple, Francis Thompson looked to the panels of the west, and saw there, as he might on a cathedral window, a type of Calvary:

"Thou art of Him a type . memorial,
Like Him thou hangst in dreadful pomp of blood
Upon thy western rood."¹

The setting sun was for Thompson an image of Christ hanging on the Cross. This is no isolated passage from Thompson's work, but rather a typical passage showing the fervour and reverence with which he regarded the things of nature. With such an attitude and temperament it might be expected that he would at times lose hold on sound doctrine, but inevitably he avoids the errors of pantheism which led Shelley and Wordsworth astray. There is no hint of nature-worship in his work, but there is a wealth of sincere Catholic insight into the true functions and relations of the visible things of this universe. Note the following lines, rich in imagery borrowed from the poet's Catholic background, and drenched in the spirit of Catholicism.

"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 orb'd Sacrament confest
Which sprinkles benediction through the dawn;
And when the grave processions ceased,

1. Francis Thompson, Ode to the Setting Sun. lines 218-220.

The earth with due illustrious rite
Blessed - ere the frail fingers featly
Of twilight, violet-cassocked acolyte,
His sacerdotal robes unvest -
Sets, for high close of the mysterious feast,
The sun in august exposition meetly,
Within the flaming monstrance of the West."¹

Not only is the passage redolent of a Catholic view of nature, but it is unintelligible to one unsympathetic to things Catholic. With such of Thompson's poems as 'The Hound of Heaven' any earnest soul may follow the thread of thought and catch the sublimity of the imagery. But when he unlooses his outbursts of liturgical splendour, much more than good will is needed on the part of the reader.

The dominating and ever-present powers of Divine providence in nature was a truth that Thompson never lost sight of. Even in his days of direst dereliction, this truth was his constant inspiration and the star that guided him. The realization that he was a child of God, a child redeemed by the sufferings of Christ, and destined for an eternity of happiness in heaven, were the truths that helped Thompson throw off the degrading circumstances of his outcast life, and enrich the annals of literature with his powerful and inspiring songs.

The subsequent chapter containing a brief biographical sketch will bring out both the unfortunate aspects of his life and the greatness of soul that enabled him to emerge unscathed from the sordid surroundings of his outcast days with his soul unsullied with bitterness, despair or sin.

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1. Francis Thompson, Orient Ode. Lines 1 - 15.

C H A P T E R F O U R

F R A N C I S T H O M P S O N H I S L I F E A N D W O R K

Francis Thompson was born at Preston, England, on the 18th day of December, 1859. He was the second son of Charles Thompson and his wife, Mary Turner Morton. Francis was the second of five children, all of whom were born at Preston. When Francis was five years old, he moved with his family to Ashton-under-Lyne, whither his father's medical profession called him. In 1870 Francis was sent to St. Cuthbert's College, Ushaw, which was a combination preparatory school, college and seminary. His preparation for Ushaw was made at home at the hands of his mother and the family governess. Ushaw was well known at the time for its literary associations with Lingard and Wiseman and later with Lafcadio Hearn.

It was his parent's wish that his college studies should be such as to fit him for the priesthood, or failing a vocation, such as would be of assistance in his father's profession of medicine; such instructions were given by the college authorities.

Francis soon evinced a remarkable love of books, and being specially indulged by his masters in his taste for reading the classics, he early distinguished himself in such subjects as their ample reading would naturally improve. Most of his leisure time was spent in the well-stocked libraries, and not having the physical sta-

ture to excell in athletics, reading seemed to have been his chief pastime. He did, however, have an interest in cricket, and was accounted a good judge of the game. Towards the end of his life he knew all the scores of the famous games of the previous quarter of a century. It may be mentioned in passing that Thompson wrote a lengthy criticism of "The Jubilee Book of Cricket" in the Academy - a criticism full of Cricket acumen.¹

A description of the young Thompson was given by Bishop Casartelli as he remembered his arrival at Ushaw. "I well remember taking him up to Ushaw as a timid, shrinking little boy... and how the other boys in the carriage teased and frightened him... I never thought he had the germs of divine poesy in him then."²

The whole question of tracing literary lineage is always an unsatisfactory one. Certainly there was nothing in Thompson's family background that would single it out as the ideal poetic preparation. But in all poets the same thing is generally true. Rarely has a great poet or writer passed on to his children any of his own powers. Genius seems rather like lightning; it may and does strike anywhere. So with Thompson it is impossible to say that his poetic genius blossomed early, for the few casual verses that date from his college days exhibit little of the power and range that were to mark his mature work.

As a student Thompson often carried off the prizes in English and essay-writing, but he was lamentably weak in mathematics.

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1. Thompson, John: Francis Thompson, the Preston-born Poet. (Herder, St.Louis), 1912, p.22.
 2. Meynell, Everard: The Life of Francis Thompson. (Scribner's, N.Y.)

It was intended that he study for the priesthood but at last his spiritual advisers found him unfitted and he was advised to relinquish all ideas of such a life. The seven years he spent at Ushaw stamped his after-life deeply with its religious atmosphere. He was orthodox through and through and all his life a strong religious spirit permeated his poetry. Though it was not his lot to receive a call to the priesthood, he was ever a poet-priest, and his verses more than any other poet's are vestment-clad and odorous of the incense of the sanctuary. His fidelity in verse to the ritual of the Church was the only ordered thing in his later disordered life. Many of his images were derived from the liturgy and the spiritual tone of his verse certainly came from his recollections of his days at Ushaw.

After his departure from Ushaw, the clouds of Thompson's life began to gather. He returned to his home (now at Ashton-under-Lyne) and in July 1877, his father sent him to Owens College, Manchester, to study medicine. The choice was a most unhappy one. The subject was most distasteful to him and though he did well in a preliminary examination in Greek, he did not devote either his time or his talents to the profession it was intended he should follow. He was more engrossed by volumes of poetry than by treatises on anatomy. He wantonly cut classes, and the lecture halls saw him but seldom. Most of his time was spent in the public libraries of Manchester with his favourite authors, the poets. Thompson, nor anyone else, has ever criticized the college or placed the blame for his failure on the lack of skilled instructors. The simple truth was that he was a misfit, and his hopes of healing lay elsewhere than in the consulting room. Seven futile years

were spent at Owens before he withdrew from the medical courses. During this time, in 1879, Thompson fell ill, and did not recover until after a long siege of fever. It is most probable that it was during this illness that he first contracted the laudanum habit. Ironically enough, the last gift his mother gave him before her death in 1880, was De Quincey's Confessions of an English Opium Eater. It would be easy, and there is a temptation, to over-estimate the psychological significance of this gift. That there are parallels in the thought, mannerisms and lives of the two is apparent. De Quincey like Francis had spent much time in the Manchester library; they both made their vocabularies from the same Elizabethans and especially from Sir Thomas Browne. Both sunk to the abyss of despondency. It must be admitted that though the Confessions of De Quincey were not instrumental in forming the opium habit with Thompson, they did much to confirm it.

While the influence of this habit on Thompson's life and work must be dealt with more fully later on, it seems fitting here to insert a quotation from Meynell. "On the one hand it staved off the assaults of tuberculosis; it gave him the wavering strength that made life just possible for him, whether on the streets or through all those other distresses and discomforts that it was his character deeply to resent but not to remove by any normal courses; if it could threaten physical degradation he was able by conquest to tower to moral and mental glory. It made doctoring or any sober course of life even more impractical that it was already rendered by native incapacities, and to his failure in such careers we owe his poetry. On the other hand, it dealt remorselessly with him as it dealt with Coleridge and all

its consumers. It put him in such constant strife with his own conscience that he had ever to hide himself from himself, and for concealment he fled to that which made him ashamed, until it was as if the fig-leaf were of necessity plucked from the Tree of the Fall. It killed in him the capacity for acknowledging those duties to his family and friends which, had his heart not been in shackles, he would have owned with no ordinary ardour."¹

Thompson's full estrangement from his father came with his repeated failure in his medical examinations, and he left his home in 1885 for London which he was to know as a stony-hearted step-mother. The unfortunate part of the failures was not so much Francis' lack of success as that he seemed to have deliberately courted failure, not having the courage openly to dispute his father's decision in regard to a career.

Having reached London, without means and without any prospects before him, his life's tragedy began. He worked for a while as an assistant in a boot-shop; later he got a job as collector for a bookseller, for whom he had to haul heavy sacks through the streets of the town. There were many days apparently when no employment of any kind could be had, and a homeless night followed the hungry day. Those who see in Thompson's poem, "The Hound of Heaven" a narration of his own experiences, will find many a passage which may have been suggested by this period.

1. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson. pp. 49 -50.

"In the rash lustihead of my young powers,
I shook the pillaring hours
And pulled my life upon me; grimed with smears,
I stand amid the dust o' the mounded years -
My mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap.
My days have crackled and gone up in smoke,
Have puffed and burst as sun-starts on a stream."¹

Thompson was never in all his life physically robust. He had been afflicted with a nervous breakdown before leaving Manchester, from the effects of which he never recovered. His life in London before he was discovered by the Meynells, cut off from home and without a friend, must indeed have been pathetic. At times utterly destitute, at other times glad to earn a trifling sum by any odd jobs (selling matches and the like) that chance threw his way, oppressed by the thoughts of filial duty unfulfilled, it is small wonder that he sought the attractions of laudanum to bring some measure of relief. On more than one occasion, so over-powering was the sense of tragedy and futility that befell him, that he came near seeking his own destruction.

Thompson did not, like his saintly namesake, need to court the Lady Poverty; but only a poet who was something of a saint could have been preserved through those dark days of starvation, and drug-taking and cruel exposure. One ray of kindness at least lighted the gloom on one occasion when a poor girl of the streets saved him though she did not save herself. In his own matchless way, Thompson recorded the incident in his volume of Sister Songs. 'A Child's Kiss.'

1. The Hound of Heaven. Collected works, Vol. I, p. 111

" Then there came past
A child; like thee, a Spring flower; but a flower
Fallen from the budded coronal of Spring,
And through the city streets blown withering.
She passed, - O brave, sad, lovingest, tender thing! -
And of her own scant pittance did she give,
That I might eat and live:
Then fled, a swift and trackless fugitive."¹

Those who knew Thompson best, - The Meynells - opposed with vigour the least insinuation that there was any moral degradation on his part.²

The dramatic possibilities of the episode have been dealt with in a play called "Song out of Sorrow" by Felix Doherty. The whole treatment is fanciful, but the spirit of the play is sound, and bears out the fact that the charity of the unknown girl was pure. The poet, later in life, when he had reached a more secure position, tried in vain to find the girl so that he might alleviate her misery; but his searchings were in vain.

Yet all Thompson's physical sufferings were ~~asthōthing~~ in comparison with the moral revulsion he felt at being thrown into the dregs of society. "Their conversation is impossible to repeat," he afterwards wrote. "If you want to know it (and you are in every way a gainer by not knowing it, while you lose what you can never regain by knowing it) go to Rabelais and his like, where you will find a very faint image of it. Nearer you may get by reading 'Westminster Drolleries' and other 18th century collections of swine-trough hoggerly.

1. Sister Songs. Part I, lines 289 - 296.

2. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson. pp. 81 - 84.

For the naked bestiality you must go to the modern 'bête humaine'." ¹

The turning point in Thompson's career came when he sent some verses to "Merry England", a magazine edited jointly by Mr. Meynell and his wife. Because of their unpromising appearance, Thompson's work was set aside for almost a year, but when Meynell finally read them he recognized them as most promising and published one of them in the hope that in this way he might be able to get in contact with the author. I like to regard it as significant that the poem published was his tribute to the Mother of God, called 'The Passion of Mary'. Perhaps it was through the intercession of Our Blessed Lady that Thompson was reclaimed from his abject surroundings and placed in such a position that his poetic powers could be so marvellous an instrument for singing the glories of Her Divine Son.

The only address Thompson affixed to his document was: 'Post Office, Charing Cross', and this afforded only a slight clue to the whereabouts of the vagrant poet who was then in a pitiable condition after his three years of London vagrancy and months of appalling suffering. At last, through a contact with the chemist from whom Thompson procured the drug which he used to ease his 'human smart', the poet was traced to his lodging to be rescued when everything seemed to be utterly lost.

Won over by the sympathetic understanding of Mr. and Mrs. Meynell, Thompson agreed to place himself under their care. He was received temporarily into their home and made the friend of their

1. Terence Connolly, Poems of Francis Thompson, Appleton, N.Y. p.xix.

children. Fortunate indeed was this new-found friendship with two of the purest Catholic souls of the literary world of their day. The Meynell family was to be the inspiration of his finest poetry, and, under God, the salvation of his soul.

Through the influence of the Meynells Thompson went to a private hospital in London, and as soon as he was able to travel, they placed him in the care of the Canons Regular at the Premonstratensian Priory in Storrington. He remained in this intensely Catholic atmosphere for a year and in February 1890 he returned to London, where he always remained close to the Meynells and under their influence.

After about two years in London, in 1892, he made his way to Pantasaph, Wales, where he was to live within the grounds of the Capuchin Monastery, on terms of intimacy with the monks of the Community. Here he remained for five years, enjoying the profoundly religious atmosphere of the place, an atmosphere that is reflected in so many of 'New Poems' written during this period. Of these poems, especially the 'Hound of Heaven', we shall have more to say in detail in the appropriate place.

It was while Thompson was at Pantasaph that he first met his militantly Catholic contemporary, Coventry Patmore, who, as a member of the Third Order of St. Francis, had come to stay at the Monastery. The learned Patmore did much to help Thompson formulate and express his Catholic philosophy of life and art, and during the time of their intimacy which continued till Patmore's death in 1896, the two men were much together. Shortly after Patmore's death, Thompson returned to London where he worked spasmodically at book-reviewing and jour-

nalism for the remaining ten years of his life, always in close contact with the Meynells.

His journalistic efforts were mainly for the Academy and the Athenaeum to which he contributed many noteworthy articles and reviews. His was a most unbusinesslike attitude toward 'deadlines', but his understanding editors appreciated him and were patient for in due time they got from him what no one else could give at all. One of his associates on the Academy staff has left us this sympathetic picture of our poet: "A stranger figure than Thompson's was not to be seen in London. Gentle in looks, half-wild in externals, his face worked by pain and the fierce reactions of laudanum, his hair and straggling beard neglected, he had yet a distinction and an aloofness of bearing that marked him in the crowd; and when he opened his lips he spoke as a gentleman and a scholar. A cleaner mind, a more naively courteous manner, were not to be found. It was impossible and unnecessary to think always of the tragic side of his life. He still had to live and work in his fashion, and his entries and exits became our most cheerful institutions...."

"No money (and in later years Thompson suffered more from the possession of money than from the lack of it) could keep him in a decent suit of clothes for long. Yet he was never seedy. From a newness too dazzling to last, and seldom achieved at that, he passed at once into a picturesque nondescript garb that was all his own and made him resemble some weird pedlar or packman in an etching by Ostrade. This impression of him was helped by the strange object - his fish-

basket, we called it - which he wore slung round his shoulders by a strap."¹

Despite Thompson's sorrow-filled life he was never soured by his dreadful experiences, but he was invariably patient, kindly and tender with his associates. A reconciliation was effected with his father which was mutually gratifying and thorough and complete.

Thompson died of consumption, a disease he had contracted during his outcast days. In november 1907, he entered the Hospital of St. Elizabeth and St. John in London, and his closing days were eased by the kindly ministrations of the nuns. He prepared himself devoutly for the end, and fortified by the Last Sacraments, he died at dawn, on November 13, 1907, and was buried in St. Mary's Cemetery, Kensal Green. His grave now bears a stone on which, in beautiful lettering (the work of the sculptor Eric Gill) are the words:

F R A N C I S T H O M P S O N

1 8 5 9 - 1 9 0 7

"LOOK FOR ME IN THE NURSERIES OF HEAVEN"

Surely no more suitable epitaph from his own works could have been chosen for one, who with all his gifts, was still a child at heart.

This brief note on Thompson's life is not meant to be exhaustive. Emphasis will be placed on special aspects and incidents of that life as we proceed to discuss the significant characteristics of his poetry, and how these derived from the life he led.

1. Wilfred Whitten, Quoted in The Life of Francis Thompson, pp.253-254.

The setting sun, which moved him more deeply than other sight in nature, is the most apt symbol of Thompson's life and poetry. The solemnity of evening invests all his poetry, but it is the solemn grandeur of the sunset sky-colourful, majestic, and with the suggestion of something gorgeous that is passing away. And just as the evening sunset seems to catch up all the floating glories of the whole day and merge them into one majestic portrait, so too Thompson catches up many of the poetic beauties of former days, and culls from the poetic utterances of the past, most that is pure and sweet in them.

Thompson is most often compared with Crashaw, Herbert and others of the Metaphysical school, but he also shows affinities with the school of Shakespeare. He is at once the disciple of Milton, the familiar of Pope and Dryden, in sympathy with the Lake poets and a companion spirit with Shelley. The poet of his own day that he most resembles is Coventry Patmore, and he was often inspired by the work of Mrs. Maynell. Yet for all these derivatives, Thompson is essentially original. His poetry, more than that of most poets, has a poignancy that is the expression of his own life.

It is easy to liken Francis Thompson's poetry to a cathedral.¹ His frequent employment of dogmatical and liturgical figures make such a comparison unavoidable. Some superficial souls are so dazzled and deadened and thrilled by the thronging pictures, the organ-blasts, the flute-notes that they do not perceive the sadness and terror and glory of what is sung. Many marvel at the conception and

1. Claude Williamson, Great Catholics. Macmillan, New York, 1939, p. 402.

depiction of 'The Hound of Heaven' without once thinking that the same God of love may be pursuing them. In other words, Thompson is most often regarded as just another religious poet, a Catholic religious poet at that, and hence one dedicated to propaganda. Not that Thompson is an easy poet to read; his vocabulary is as remote as Milton's is from the speech of everyday life, and he nearly always uses it except in a few lyrics of child-like simplicity.

The main region of Thompson's poetry is the inexhaustible realm of Catholic thought, and the rare artistry that he brought to his delineation of things Catholic is an eloquent testimony to his insight and his erudition. Thompson's genius shed a new glory on Catholicism, and for that he demands our lasting esteem.

In his study of Victorian literature, G.K. Chesterton said that the point of it might well be described by saying that Francis Thompson stood outside it.¹ The exact relationship Thompson bore to his contemporaries and other poetic luminaries of his century will be shown in due place as a discussion of the unique aspects of his work arises.

A word should be added to clarify some misunderstandings. With the modern preoccupation with the sensational and the insane delight in pointing out and emphasizing the moral weaknesses of past heroes, many imply that Thompson sunk to the depths of moral degradation in his associations with a woman of the streets during his sojourn in the London slums. The only reason for this assumption is that it must have happened. True, the circumstances were such that it would seem to be

1. G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature. Henry Holt, London, 1913, p. 203.

inevitable, but there is no grounds for the assumption. Meynell touches the point with apparent honesty and reserve, and Thompson himself alludes to the episode several times in his poetry, but always without shame or false modesty, only with sincere gratitude, and regret that he was not able to repay the girl for her charitable kindness.

Meynell's account of the incident is a masterpiece of good taste. Few biographers could have resisted the sensational possibilities of the event. Few could have described the incident so briefly. "This girl gave out of her scant and pitiable opulence, consisting of a room, warmth, and food, and a cab thereto. When the streets were no longer crowded with shameful possibilities she would think of the only tryst that her heart regarded and, a sister of charity, would take her beggar into her vehicle at the appointed place and cherish him with an affection maidenly and motherly, and passionate in both these capacities. Two outcasts, they sat marvelling that there were joys for them to unbury and share... Weakness and confidence, humility and reverence, were gifts unknown to her except at his hands, and she repaid them with graces as lovely as a child's, and as unhesitating as a saint's... Her sacrifice was to fly from him: learning he had found new friends, she said that he must go to them and leave her. After his first interview with my father he had taken her his news., 'They will never understand our friendship', she said, and then, 'I always knew you were a genius.' And so she strangled the opportunity; she killed the child, the sister; the mother had come to life within her -she went away. Without warning she went to unknown lodgings and was lost to him. In 'the mighty labyrinths of London' he lay in wait for her,

nor would he leave the streets, thinking that in doing so he would make a final severance. Like De Quincey's Ann, she was sought, but never found, along the pavements at the place where she had been used to find him."¹

In 'Sister Songs', Thompson refers to the event in a manner that gives the lie to any false insinuations.

" Therefore I kissed in thee
The heart of Childhood, so divine for me;
And her, through what sore ways
And what unchildish days.
Borne from me now as then, a trackless fugitive.
Therefore I kissed in thee
Her, child! and innocency."²

Thompson was not given to excusing himself nor did he in any way exonerate himself for his wasted years, so it seems but just to infer that there was nothing to be excused.

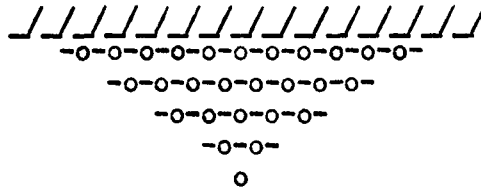
Eugene Mason substantiates this opinion. "Occasionally, however, his (Thompson's) rigid reticence breaks down. 'Sister Songs' for example, dedicated to two innocent girls happy as spring flowers, suddenly tells with piercing poignancy the story of that other flower, fallen from spring's coronal and blown withering through the city streets. It records how the brave and loving girl gave of her scanty pittance to him, a stranger, the he might eat, then fled, a trackless fugitive."³ The late Father Vincent McNabb also endorses this view. "Once he was rescued from starvation and death by a fellow-outcast to

1. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson. pp. 81 - 83.

2. Francis Thompson, Sister Songs, part I, lines

3. Eugene Mason, Preferences in Literature. Wilson, London, 1905,
(A Catholic Poet, Francis Thompson, and his Legend) p.157.

whom he has given immortal thanks, wreathed in the immortal recollection of his dark night of the Soul."¹ Too, when we consider Thompson's exalted attitude towards womankind and especially his love and veneration for the Blessed Virgin Mary, it seems absurd that such could come from the pen of a moral pervert.



1. Fr. Vincent McNabb, Francis Thompson and Other Essays. Pepler and Sewell, London, 1935, p. 6.

C H A P T E R F I V E

T H E C A T H O L I C P O E T O F N A T U R E

It is seldom in a study of this sort¹ that the poet being treated can speak for himself. In the case of Thompson, he not only wrote poetry, but he also wrote a good deal about poetry, both in verse and prose. To substantiate our various conclusions about this man and his work, wherever possible, we will let the poet speak for himself. Some of these quotations are lengthy, but they will be incorporated into the text of this thesis and not relegated to the footnotes; their singular appropriateness seems to justify this procedure. Then too, since we are treating of a man and his life's work, even though partially, the various quotations may help to fill in the picture of the personality and the thought we are trying to depict.

I.

THOMPSON'S REACTION

TO THE ROMANTIC VIEW OF NATURE

Among the poets of the nineteenth century, Francis Thompson is usually classed by himself. So unlike men like Kipling, Henley and Masfield, his contemporaries, he is regarded as outside the reactionary movement begun by them. He is generally placed with Crashaw, Donne, Vaughan and Traherene, and labelled a throw-back to

the seventeenth century. One might readily follow this view if one were to lose sight of the very core of Thompson's thought. He does indeed break with his contemporaries and the poets of his century, but his is a break in the direction of reality. Aware of the absurd interpretations that had been placed on Nature by the poets of the nineteenth century, interpretations covering the whole range of human error, Thompson in his poetry and prose reacted against these views and dedicated himself to the cause of Truth. Of the so-called great Nature poet, Wordsworth, Mrs. Meynell echoed Thompson's feelings:

" Wordsworth, he
Conceived the love of Nature childishly
As no adult heart can."¹

Thompson agreed with this denunciation, and in his 'Hound of Heaven', 'Of Nature:Laud and Plaint', 'Orient Ode', and many other poems dealing with Nature, are phrased most carefully to avoid any of the romantic excesses into which the other poet fell. In his prose works too, Thompson takes the greatest pains to explain exactly his Catholic concept of Nature and to show the fallacies and absurdities in which a false conception may lead.

Speaking of the sympathy of Nature, Thompson says:
"You speak and you think she answers you. It is the echo of your own voice. You think you hear the throbbing of her heart, and it is the throbbing of your own. I do not believe that Nature has a heart; and

L. Agnes Meynell, Poems. Scribners, New York. 'Two Boyhoods', lines 21-23

I suspect that, like many an other beauty, she has been credited with a heart because of her face. You go to her, this great, beautiful, tranquil, self-satisfied Nature, and you look for sympathy? Yes: the sympathy of a cat, sitting by the fire and blinking at you. What, indeed does she want with a heart or brain? She knows that she is beautiful, and she is placidly content with the knowledge; she was made to be gazed on, and she fulfills the end of her creation. After a careful anatomization of Nature, I pronounce that she has nothing more than lymphatic vesicle. She cannot give what she does not need; and if we were but similarly organized we should be independent of sympathy."¹

So much for writing around the subject. Now notice the clear and emphatic tones of serious thought: "Yet the thing is, after all, too deep for jest. What is this heart of Nature, if it exist at all? Is it, according to the conventional doctrine derived from Wordsworth and Shelley, a heart of love, according to the heart of man, and stealing out to him through a thousand avenues of mute sympathy? No: in this sense, I repeat seriously what I said lightly: Nature has no heart."²

This view of Thompson stands in sharp contrast to that of the Romantics. His view rests on the common sense of the perennial philosophy of Catholic tradition; their views rest on a false or inadequate notion of God, of man, of nature and the inter-relations of each.

1. Francis Thompson, Nature's Immortality (Prose Works), p. 80.

2. Ibid. p. 81.

lyrics, Thompson expresses the same idea of the creative act with an insight born of true faith. In 'The Field Flower', he writes:

"His fingers pushed it through the sod -
It came up redolent of God,
Garrulous of the eyes of God
To all the breezes near it;
Musical of the mouth of God
To all had ears to hear it;
Mystical with the mirth of God,
That glow - like did ensphere it."¹

Note too in 'The Snow-Flake' the clear and emphatic insistence on the Creative Act of God. While it is true that God rules the world through secondary causes, it is always safer to refer things to their ultimate source, for in this way there is obviated the danger of ascribing to the intermediate cause a power that it does not possess.

"God was my shaper.
Passing surmised,
He hammered, He wrought me
From curled silver vapour,
To lust of His mind."²

Later developments in this chapter will show much more completely Thompson's Catholic view of the relation between God and Nature. The present concern is merely to indicate in a general way Thompson's reaction to the Romantic views which confused and mixed God, man and nature in a hopeless tangle.

Thompson was equally clear, emphatic and Catholic in his attitude towards the possible effects that nature might have on

1. Francis Thompson, Field Flower. lines 9-16.

2. Francis Thompson, To A Snowflake. lines 11-15.

man: "Coleridge speaking, not as Wordsworth had taught him to speak,
but from his own bitter experiences said the truth:

O Lady! we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live:
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!
.
I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

The truth, in relation to ourselves; though not the truth with regard to Nature absolutely. Absolute Nature lives not in our life, nor yet is lifeless, but lives in the life of God; and in so far, and so far merely as man himself lives in that life, does he come into sympathy with nature and Nature with him. She is God's daughter, and stretches her hand only to her Father's friends. Not Shelley, not Wordsworth himself, ever drew so close to the heart of Nature as did the Seraph of Assisi, who was close to the heart of God."¹

Thompson agrees with Coleridge's bitter realizations that Nature is incapable of soothing the crushed and bruised soul of man, but again he is careful to establish the certain truth that nature does not depend for her existence on the will of man but on God. On the one hand, Thompson agrees with Coleridge on the matter of nature's impotence, but he also is anxious to see justice done. He will not see Nature relegated to a mere role where she depends on man's whim for her existence. Thompson never fell into the error of the Idealists or modern wishful thinkers who would make of nature whatever man might choose.

1. Francis Thompson, Nature's Immortality. p. 82

We shall see this same impartiality and balance present in Thompson's thought as we progress. His is not a merely negative attitude toward Nature, but a balanced one, bent on showing the right perspective of things, as well as eliminating the errors that previous romantics have begotten.

Thompson's emphasis on the right method of getting in contact with nature is at once profound and a return to tradition. This point is a central one in the theology of Catholic mystics who are aware that to know God in nature is to try to know the cause in the effect.¹ It is true that from a contemplation of visible nature a man may rise to a knowledge of the existence of God. But such knowledge is vague and uncertain and, looking over the annals of history, is seldom certainly attained. When a man tries to know things through God, he is on the correct pathway. Thompson surely was on this pathway when he asserted: "She (Nature) is God's daughter who stretches her hand only to her Father's friends."² Thompson had seen the errors into which a sentimentalized treatment of Nature had brought men, and he was most careful, not only to avoid the same errors, but also to state and follow a true philosophy of life.

Thompson, with a true Catholic insight into causality, places the blame for the misunderstanding of Nature in the proper place. "There is one reason for human confusion which is nearly always ignored. The world -the universe - is a fallen world... That should be preci-

1. St. John of the Cross, The Living Flame of Love. Canto xv, 5.
2. Francis Thompson, Nature's Immortality. p.82.

sely the function of poetry - to see and restore the Divine idea of things, freed from the disfiguring accident of their Fall - that is what the Ideal really is, or should be... But of how many poets can this be truly said? That gift also is among the countless gifts we waste and pervert; and surely not the least heavy we must render is the account of its stewardship."¹

Continued search throws light on the fact that the work of Thompson is a reaction to nineteenth century romanticism as begun by Wordsworth and carried to excesses by his weak imitators. Thompson criticizes Wordsworth for his pantheism and naturalism, but he admired that poet's zeal and love of nature. He could see the ultimate results of the romantic theory in the aestheticism of Swinburne, Dowson and Wilde, in the pseudo-mediaevalism of Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites. Thompson's protest is the realism of St. Thomas Aquinas, couched in the language of Shakespeare and Milton, and uttered with all the fire and zeal that a sincere Catholic could master.

Thompson's is a true reaction to romanticism for he states a philosophy of life and nature to back it up. The so-called reactions of his day merely continued the romantic theory or were its logical outcome. Masfield and Kipling dedicated themselves to the common man - 'the ranker, the tramp of the road', to 'things as they are' both obvious echoes of Wordsworth and Rousseau. Hardy, Masfield and a host of others celebrate in the verse some particular district of the English countryside. They sing in plain words of 'the dust and

1. E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson. p. 204

scum of the 'earth' for they too believed that there was no language set aside for poetry alone.

"According to the late Stuart Sherman", wrote Mr. Irving Babbitt, "the task of the nineteenth century thinkers was to put man into Nature. The great task of the twentieth century thinkers is to get him out again."¹ Francis Thompson set out to do this. Note the opening verse of 'Nature: Laud and Plaint.'

"Lo, there stand I and Nature, gaze to gaze,
And I the greater. Couch thou at my feet,
Barren of heart, and beautiful of ways,
Strong to weak purpose, fair and brute-brained beast.
I am not of thy fools
Who goddess thee with impious flatteries sweet,
Stolen from ~~the~~ little Schools
Which cheeped when the great mouth of Rydal ceased.
A little suffer that I try
What thou art, Child, and what am I -
Thy younger, forward brother, subtle and small,
As thou art gross and of thy person great withal."²

Several points should be noted in this passage. In the first place, man is greater than nature, and therefore, he owes her no reverence. Nature has no heart. She is beautiful, weak in will, and marked with the brutishness of the beast. She is not the Rousseauistic paradise where compassionate animals wander and meet and mate and part, Thompson admires Nature, for the poem is a song of praise as well as a complaint. He admired Wordsworth... 'that great mouth of Rydal'. Those who followed him, did not sing. In comparison, they merely 'cheeped'.

1. Irving Babbitt, On Being Creative: Coleridge and Imagination.
Houghton-Mifflin Co., Boston, 1932, p. 132
2. Francis Thompson, Nature: Laud and Plaint.

In his Essay 'Paganism Old and New', Thompson points out carefully the change that Christianity effected in the attitude towards Nature. He writes: "Assuredly, no heathen ever saw the same tree as Wordsworth, For it is a noteworthy fact that the intellect of man seems unable to seize the divine beauty of Nature, until moving beyond the outward beauty, it gazes on the spirit of Nature: even as the mind seems unable to appreciate the beautiful face of woman until it has learned to appreciate the more beautiful beauty of her soul."¹ Thompson's quarrel was not with Wordsworth as a man or as a writer, but rather with his naturalistic theory of Nature that had led a whole century astray.

Thompson feels that Shelley is closer to a true view of Nature than the early romantics. "For with Nature the Wordsworthians will admit no tampering: they exact the direct interpretative reproduction of her; that the poet should follow her as a mistress, not use her as a handmaid. To such a following of Nature, Shelley felt no call. He saw in her not a picture set for his copying, but a palette set for his brush; not a habitation prepared for his inhabiting, but a Coliseum whence he might quarry stones for his own palaces. Even in his descriptive passages the dream-character of his scenery is notorious; it is not the clear, recognizable scenery of Wordsworth, but a landscape that hovers athwart the heat and haze arising from his crackling fantasies."²

To a very real degree, as we shall see later, this was Thompson's own treatment of Nature in his poetry. Of course, the Catho-

1. Francis Thompson, Paganism Old and New, Prose Works, p. 44.

2. Francis Thompson, Shelley, Prose Works, p.19.

lic imprint is deep on everything he wrote, and thus it is with the treatment of natural scenery. He expresses her under symbols and in terms derived from the doctrine and ritual of the Church; the sun is likened to the Host, with the sky as a monstrance; to Christ with the sombre line of the horizon for Rood; to the altar wafer and signed with cross. The twilight is violet-cassocked; day is a dedicated priest in all his robes pontifical. Thompson was certainly no Pantheist or Nature Worshipper. He complained that she had no heart and that she was only a cruel and obdurate abundance of clay. His purpose and attitude is summed up admirably in his statement: "To be the poet of the return to Nature is somewhat; but I would be the poet of the return to God."¹

II.

THE CHILD AND NATURE

Any system of naturalistic philosophy is bound to pay a good deal of attention to the child. The child, as yet unspoiled by human institutions and still bright with its primitive heritage, is regarded by the naturalists as something pure, untainted and perfect. This theory is all the more plausible because none of us remembers just what went through our minds during the early months and years of our sojourn on this earth, and so that period of life becomes the ideal proving ground for all fantastic theories of intuition. The romantic poets too, were preoccupied with childhood, and some of them

1. E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, p. 205.

wrote some rather meaningless and inane things about innocent youth.

Note Wordsworth's epitome of the child:

"Thou whose exterior semblance doth belie
Thy soul's immensity;
Thou best philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
Haunted forever by the eternal mind, -
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!"¹

Now simply, such a eulogy is wrong, extremely wrong. Observation, reason, faith, - human and divine -, and recollection, all attest to the error. The only reason for holding such a belief, or pretending such to be true, is that it enables one to say bitter things about the oppression of human customs and the stifling effects of education, government, religion, and such like. Certainly this false glorification is not a compliment to the child who is in no position to use the rare gifts of insight ascribed to him; to the grown man, it is of even less consolation to be told that he has bartered away his birthright (which he did not know he possessed) for a mess of pottage (that his nurse would not let him eat).

Our concern here is not to trace the origin of this error which, according to Maritain, "doubtless depends on the great current of naturalism flowing from the Renaissance and the Cartesian Reformation... Its true origins should be sought not only in the theory of the good savage invented by the imprudent apologetic of the missionaries of the eighteenth century, but also, and more thoroughly

1. William Wordsworth, Intimations of Immortality. lines 109-114.

on one side, in the naturalization of the very idea of grace... and on the other side, in Jansenism and Protestantism, in that heretical exaggeration of pessimism which so many historians go on taking for the Christian spirit, and which caused the privileges of the state of innocence to be regarded as due to human nature before it was essentially corrupted by original sin."¹

The claims of the Romantic poets about the essential goodness of human nature goes against all evidence, for the effects of original sin are patent in everyday life, and make necessary careful supervision and controlled guidance in the proper education of the young. "This supervision and guidance must be continued until the intellect has been enlightened, the will strengthened, and disorderly inclinations brought under control through strict and continuous adherence to moral principles. Then, only can a measure of freedom be given the child... but always subject to the control of legitimate authority."²

Those who deny the effects of original sin not only demand excessive freedom, for which the child has not the necessary maturity and training, but they also advocate that all training of the child should be separated completely from any religious foundation. This is contrary to his very nature, and a rank injustice is done to the child in teaching him to live "as if there existed no Decalogue, no Gospel law, no law even of nature stamped by God on the heart of man, promulgated by right reason and codified in positive Revelation by God Himself in the Ten Commandments."³ These of necessity, are im-

1. J. Maritain, Three Reformers (op.cit.), pp. 231-232.

2. J.D. Redden & F.A. Ryan, A Catholic Philosophy of Education. Bruce, Milwaukee, 1942, p.175.

3. Pope Pius XI, The Christian Education of Youth. New York, The America Press, 1936, p.21.

pressed on man's conscience, and are the real basis of self-control, self-sacrifice, self-denial, and at the same time of self-realization. The inevitable result of rejecting Christian morality from education is that educators and philosophers have been forced to seek and are still seeking a substitute moral code. Man, by his nature, cannot be without a code of right and wrong, and the experiences of our century must indicate that this sanction must be a supernatural one.

Pope Pius XI sums up well this need. "Hence every form of pedagogic naturalism which in any way excludes or overlooks supernatural Christian formation in the teaching of youth, is false. Every method of education founded, wholly or in part, on the denial or forgetfulness of original sin and of grace, and relying on the sole powers of human nature, is unsound. Such, generally speaking, are those modern systems bearing various names which appeal to pretended self-government and unrestrained freedom on the part of the child, and which diminish or even repress the teacher's authority and action, attributing to the child an exclusive primacy of initiative, and an activity independent of any higher law, natural or Divine, in the work of his education."¹

The errors implied in the naturalistic philosophy of the Romantic poets are vicious and far-reaching. While they distort the true proportion of the whole of life, perhaps in no place are they more deadly than in the false glorification and misinterpretation of childhood. Some of the results of their perverted theory may be seen

1. Pope Pius XI, Op.cit., p. 20.

in the disregard for supernatural truth and supernatural religion in the instruction of youth, which is at once to twist the child's concept of this life, and virtually to exclude him from eternal salvation. The essential aids of the sacraments, prayer and grace are removed from the child, and he is left alone to combat his evil desires and immoral tendencies. The benign influences of family and school are destroyed in so far as the proponents of naturalism deny the power of influence, care, formation, guidance, discipline, and development of good habits, and leave the child to his own 'unspoiled' resources. By denying the spiritual aspect of man's nature, and by the exclusion of the supernatural from man's life and final destiny, the naturalistic school of thought renders meaningless the whole of human living, and launches the child into a blind existence stripped of objective, ideal or restraining influence.

The essential goodness of the child, according to Wordsworth,¹ Blake and Shelley, was effected without any recourse to the sacrament of Baptism. The effects of original sin were wholly denied, hence there was no need for any regeneration or purgation. In a sentimental and false way the romantic poets looked backward to the child (or the idiot). Aware that man had to have some dignity and purpose in some way, they assumed that this essential dignity was the property of the days of youth and that it had since been torn away by the erroneous practices of a false environment. The error was given wide currency by the poets of the nineteenth century, and its effects are still

1. He has been designated the poet of childhood: Babenroth, A.C. English Childhood, 1922, chapter VII.

rampant in our educational system to-day in our so-called Progressive schools where the child is a law unto himself.

Francis Thompson saw the inherent evil in this false emphasis on childhood and wrote clearly and logically against it. While our professed purpose in this study is to treat of Thompson as a nature poet, by considering his attitude towards children and his treatment of them in his writings, we can gain a fuller notion of his philosophy of nature. Thompson saw that the misconceptions regarding the child sprung from the romantics' misconceptions regarding nature. He saw that it was more than a mere sentimental over-emphasis of the beauty and loveliness of childhood, and that it was in fact, on a wholly mistaken philosophy of nature and human nature that it rested. A short treatment of his attitude toward children will be revealing.

While no poet ever loved children more intensely or wrote of them with such feeling, Thompson rejected the theory of the glorification of youth. The modern analysis of children received no sympathy from him... "Just as in the effete French society before the Revolution, the Queen played at Arcadia, the King played at being a mechanic, everyone played at simplicity and universal philanthropy... so in our own society the talk of the benevolence and the cult of childhood are the very fashion of the hour. We, of this self-conscious, incredulous generation, sentimentalize our children, analyse our children, think we are endowed with a special capacity to sympathize and identify ourselves with our children; we play at being children. And the result is that we are not more child-like, but that our children are less child-like. It is so tiring to stoop to the child, so much easier to

lift the child up to you." ¹ The last sentence points out the essential error of the naturalists who ascribed to the child whatever features they would like him to possess to furnish the basis for their theories.

In one of the most ornate and penetrating passages of English prose, Thompson gives us the fruit of his loving and penetrating observation of children. "Know you not what it is to be a child? It is to be something very different from the man of to-day. 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 ears; 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."² Observe how eloquently Thompson is able to safeguard all the world of make-believe that surrounds the child, all the sincerity and open credulity, and at the same time stress the importance of the cleansing waters of baptism.

1. Francis Thompson, Shelley. (Prose Works), p. 7.
2. Francis Thompson, Ibid. pp.7 - 8.

Thomson's fundamental sympathy with children is brought out in his essay on Shelley when he makes this observation: "Children's griefs are little, certainly, but so is the child, so is its endurance, so is its field of vision, while its nervous impressionability is keener than ours."¹ Grief and sadness are relative things; so too is worry, and the problems of the child are relatively as great as any he will ever have to face. Thompson understood children because to a great extent he never grew up. Like Shelley he was an 'encysted child' who never lost the sense of wonder and amazement that fills the mind of the child when he is confronted by the most common things.

In spite of his child-like wonder, Thompson was a realist when it was a matter of discussing the conditions under which children lived in the London slums. In his essay 'In Darkest England', referring to General Booth's suggestions he says: "Let those who are robust enough not to take injury from the terrible directness with which things are stated read the chapter entitled The Children of the Lost. For it drives home a truth which I fear the English public, with all its compassion for our destitute children, scarcely realizes, knows but in a vague, general way: namely, that they are brought up in sin from their cradles, that they know evil before they know good, that the boys are ruffians and profligates, the girls harlots in their mother's womb. This to me is the most nightmarish idea in all the nightmare of those poor little lives."²

As an ardent Catholic, Thompson saw the tragedy of these

1. Francis Thompson, Shelley (Prose Works), p. 10

2. Francis Thompson, In Darkest England, (Prose Works), pp. 54-55.

children's lives in terms of spritual ruin as well as in bodily discomforts. Note the impassioned plea near the conclusion of his essay: "If Christ stood in the midst of your London slums, He could not say: 'Except ye become as one of these little children.' For better your children were cast from the Bridges of London than that they should become as one of those little ones. Could they be gathered together and educated in the truest sense of the word; could the children of the nation at large be so educated as to cut off future recruits to the ranks of Darkest England; then it would need no astrology to cast the horoscope of to-morrow... Who grasps the child grasps the future."¹

The line inscribed on Thompson's tombstone in St, Mary's Cemetery, Kensal Green, is, most appropriately:

"Look for me in the nurseries of Heaven."²

No better choice could have been made to symbolize the spirit of humility and worldly detachment that marked the poet. He was never more at home than when in the company of children, and his earliest poetry, written after his reclamation from the sordid life of London's streets, was inspired by children. The Meynell children were his dearest earthly friends, and successively they inspired and occasioned some of his best verse. His work 'Poems on Children' approaches childhood sympathetically and with deep feeling. Though child-like in simplicity and directness they are not childish. Nearly always, we get the impression

1. Francis Thompson, In Darkest England, (Prose Works), p. 64-65.
2. Francis Thompson, To My Godchild, line 67.

that Thompson's poems on Children are about one child, - himself, as he looks back over 'the twenty withered years' to his own childhood, and relives the months and years of mental and physical anguish that had intruded since then.

Turning to Thompson's poem 'The Daisy', we note some special characteristics. It was one of his first three poems to appear in a book being inserted by Meynell in 'The Child Set In the Midst', an anthology, in 1892. The immediate circumstance that proved the inspiration for 'The Daisy' was a casual walk along the common in Storrington, where he met the lovely village child whom he has immortalized. Her identity has never been established beyond the fact that she was one of a family of nine children, 'the last four, all flowers - Rose, Daisy, Lily and Violet.'¹

Critics have called attention to the striking similarity between this poem and Wordsworth's poems inspired by childhood. However, I think the similarities are rather superficial. Mr. Albert Cook has given us this thoughtful observation: "Seldom does Wordsworth point out the moral of his allegories and visions, seldom does he analyse the content of his creed. It is enough that there is a creed, that there is Childhood, that there is God. This restraint (is it restraint or vagueness?) which is, of course, of the essence of poetic proportion, is supreme in the 'Lucy' poems. In 'She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways', the imagery itself is negative and restrained. The ways are untrodden, none to praise her, and few were there to love her..."

1. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, p. 104

Thompson's 'Lucy' was 'Daisy' and the poem so-called must stand beside Wordsworth's for pathos, for directness, for simplicity, but not for restraint... In Thompson's poem no less than three stanzas in three differing moments of the narrative carry us from Daisy to the poet's heart of pain... The rhythm, the form, are the rhythm and form of Wordsworth, but the voice is the voice of another."¹

Thompson's poem resembles Wordsworth's only in being a poem about a child and in being extremely simple. Wordsworth studied children as the fathers of men, because he found their intuitions instructive. Thompson studied them not at all; he contemplated them. Most of Thompson's child-poems are really not about childhood. They are about the vanquished hopes and the hopeless bliss that the sight of childish innocence makes a grown man dream of; for in the presence of children, Thompson's own sense of isolation from the rest of mankind became doubly poignant. The simplicity of 'The Daisy' is not instinctive but something cunningly achieved. Thompson does not catch the child's point of view, nor does he make any attempt to catch it. Both the child and nature and the circumstances are all used to present his own point of view. If he were to present the child's view of life as his own, the poem would be childish and not child-like. This is the essential difference between Thompson and the romantic naturalists. They oversentimentalized the child's feelings and intuitions; he refused to look backward and downward to the child because of its nearness to nature,

1. Albert Cock, The Dublin Review, October 1911.

for nature is merely a creature too, and devoid of all power to bless us.

The child is important to Thompson because of its innocence. Beside the child he is conscious of the tattered, soiled garment of his own soul. A child's innocence is something to be guarded and cherished, for once lost, it can never be regained.

'The Making of Viola' shows completely how different was Thompson's view of children. To him, they were the manufacture and gift of God Himself, a beautiful result of the joint services of God Himself, and of Jesus, and of the Blessed Virgin and the Angels. This is the reason that Thompson has succeeded so well in conveying to us an idea of the dignity of the child's body and soul. It is no mere work of Nature, but of super-nature. The marvellous mystery of childish innocence and purity and beauty far surpass the mere grist of an evolutionary process; they show forth the glory of God at work as no inanimate beauty of nature can do. This spirit in Thompson's poetry of childhood is no mere imitation as he tells us: "the spirit of such poems as 'The Making of Viola' and 'The Judgment in Heaven' is no mere medieval imitation, but the natural temper of my Catholic training in a simple provincial home."¹

Finally, attention must be called to Thompson's poem 'Little Jesus', sub-titled 'Ex ore infantium, Deus, et lactentium perfecisti laudem'. The poem was inspired on Christmas Day while meditating before the Christmas Crib in the chapel at Pantasaph, and it shows the

1. E Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson. P. 59

daring so characteristic of children and of saints. The poem marks a triumph in its presentation of a child's apprehension of the tremendous truth of those mysterious words, 'And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.'¹ Here surely Thompson catches the child's point of view in all the disarmingly-open little questions that the child addresses to the Infant Jesus.

"Little Jesus, was Thou shy
Once, and just as small as I?
.
Hadst Thou ever any toys,
Like us little girls and boys?
And didst Thou play in Heaven with all
The Angels that were not too tall,
With stars for marbles?
.
Didst Thou kneel at night to pray,
And didst Thou join Thy hands, this way?"

Observe too the superb religious spirit of the concluding verses:

"So a little Child, come down
And hear a child's tongue like Thy own
Take me by the hand and walk,
And listen to my baby-talk.
To Thy Father show my prayer
(He will look, Thou art so fair),
And say: 'O Father, I, Thy Son,
Bring the prayer of a little one.'

And He will smile, that children's tongue
Hast not changed since Thou wast young! "²

1. St. John, I, 14.
2. Francis Thompson, Little Jesus: (selected lines).

Perhaps the best summary of the spirit of this poem is found in Thompson's own comment on Crashaw. After quoting a verse of Crawshaw's 'Nativity', he continues: "Here is seen one note of Crawshaw - the human and lover - like tenderness which informs his sacred poems, differentiating them from the conventional style of English sacred poetry, with its solemn aloofness from celestial things."¹ Francis Thompson too shared this intimacy and familiarity with heavenly things that came from the sincerity and simplicity of his Catholic faith. Poetry never suffers a loss of beauty because it states a truth, and what an immeasurable gain there is in poetic beauty in Thompson's poetry of childhood because it is filled with the truth. We need never describe Thompson's verse as 'pretty but misleading', nor 'clever but untured'. With his work, artistry of conception and phrase are wedded to soundness of dogma in a marriage of love.

There is no note of false sentimentality in Thompson's treatment of children. He loved them intensely as his biographer shows; he was never happier than when in their company; he sympathized with their cares and worries; he fought against their exploitation, but the reason for his concern, his admiration and his reverence was not that the child was close to nature, but that it was close to God. Thompson had learned well the lesson of the Divine Master: "Suffer the little children to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven."² Fortunate indeed for Thompson and the child that he was able to hold out such a promise. Not as 'Mighty Prophet', 'Seer Blessed' or 'Best

1. Francis Thompson, *Crawshaw* (Prose Works), p. 177.

2. St. Mark, Chap. X, 14.

Philosopher^r does the child claim our love and respect, for in very truth, the child is none of these. It is not as a child of nature but as a child of God that its essential grandeur consists.

III.

SHADOWS OF ST. FRANCIS ASSISI

Thompson writing out of a full Catholic mind, and using images largely derived from the ritual of the Catholic Church, reflects in his views of Nature a traditionally Catholic philosophy of life. To what extent this was inherent in his thinking because of his Catholic background, and his years of seminary training for the priesthood, is impossible to say. In his Nature poetry, Thompson did not undergo any great change of thought as Shelley and Wordsworth did. His earliest nature poems and his latest show the same sound attitude. That there is a certain deepening insight in his later work we shall show when we discuss his mystical qualities. From the fact that there is no 'conversion' or change in Thompson's life as a poet, it is not possible to point out the significant influence that brought about such a change. Thompson was always a Catholic, he always thought and wrote in unmistakably Catholic tones, and the great influence on his life and thought was the noble heritage of the Catholic faith.

Certain aspects of his thought in his treatment of Nature, however, have a distinctly Franciscan tone, and I believe it is possible to trace an influence deriving from St. Francis of Assisi's treatment of Nature in Thompson's work. It is true that Thompson's

greatest poetry sprang from his love and contemplation of the Cross and the Passion, from the Blessed Sacrament, from the Bride of Christ, the Blessed Virgin and autobiographical material from his espousal of the Lady Poverty in London streets. But even in his treatment of these essentially Catholic themes there is an evidence of the influence of St. Francis of Assisi.

That such an influence might have arisen is easily seen from the fact that Thompson spent five years of his life, from 1892 to 1897, with the Capuchins at Pantasaph in Wales. As his biographer, Meynell, observes, "the sandalled friars looked after all his wants from boots to dogma."¹ Thompson's first letter from Wales shows the kindness with which he was received: "C'en est fait, as regards the opium... I am very comfortable, thanks to your kindness and forethought. Father Anselm seems to have taken a fancy to me - also he is afraid of my being lonely - and comes to see me every other day. He took me all over the Monastery on Monday, and has just left me after a prolonged discussion of the things which 'none of us know anything about', as Marianus says when he is getting the worst of an argument."²

That there were many such discussions on such matters as 'none of us know anything about' is obvious from the role that Thompson assumed in the Monastery. Of the spirit of understanding that existed between the priests and the poet, Richard de Bary's Franciscan Days of Vigil says: "Francis Thompson was just then (1894) a favourite with the Order, and there were keen discussions about his mystical

1. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, p. 180.

2. E. Meynell, *loc. cit.* p.180

intuitions. In the spirit of the Franciscan *Laudes Domini*, the Breviary Offices of the Seasons, Thompson recalled them, and expounded the phases of asceticism that ran with them in his poem, 'From the Night of Forebeing'.¹ Another excerpt from the same article shows how Thompson was accepted at the Monastery: "The centre of interest in the household was the poet, Francis Thompson, who spent the summer of that year in a neighbouring cottage. Walks in the late evenings did not result in much conversation; but at evening gatherings in my room the poet used often to join the party, and argued with vigour and persuasiveness on favourite topics. The Franciscans had learnt a kind of art of drawing their mystical guest into conversation. The way was to introduce a subtle contradiction to his pet theories, which would in a moment produce a storm of protesting eloquence."²

Apart from our immediate problem of tracing the influence of St. Francis on Thompson's thought and work, it should be mentioned that during his stay at the Franciscan Monastery, a markedly more religious tone came into our poet's writings. In his 'New Poems' written during this period and published in 1897, Thompson expresses regret that his powers had been devoted to singing of less worthy themes. In his poem 'Retrospect', he expresses this thought.

"Therefore I do repent
That with religion vain,
And misconceived pain,
I have my music bent
To waste on bootless things its skiey-
gendered rain;

1. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, p. 182.
2. Ibid. p. 182-183.

Yet shall a wiser day
Fulfill more heavenly way
And approved music clear this slip,
I trust in God most sweet.
Meantime the silent lip,
Meantime the climbing feet."¹

Another source of influence in Thompson's spiritual life was the contact ~~had~~made, through the monks, of Coventry Patmore, who as a member of the Third Order of St. Francis, came to Pantasaph to live in 1894. He owed much to Patmore, especially for his views on human and divine love, and he dedicated his 'New Poems' to him in 1897, a year after Patmore's death. The two had many conversations and a bulky correspondence up to the time of Patmore's death, the burden of which was concerned with the problems of imagery and symbolism that might best represent the burning fires of love that seered the soul of each.

A letter from Patmore to Thompson shows the affinity of their views. "Thank you for your very interesting letter, which shows me how extraordinarily alike are our methods of and experience in contemplation... God bless and help you to bear your crown of thorns and to prosper in the great, though impossibly obscure, career He seems to have marked out for you! My work, such as it is, is done, and I am now only waiting somewhat impatiently for death, and the fulfillment of the promises of God, which include all that we have ever desired here, in perfection beyond all hope."²

1. Francis Thompson, Collected Poems, Vol.2, p. 71.

2. Coventry Patmore (Quoted by W. Meynell in Life of Francis Thompson), p. 197.

That Thompson had caught the spirit of St. Francis's life and teaching is manifest from brief consideration of several of his prose works. First, in his essay, 'Health and Holiness' not only the general theme of the work is derived from St. Francis, but allusions, comparisons and quotations from the writings of the Saint, show the admiration and thorough knowledge the poet had of St. Francis. The sub-title of the essay is 'A Study of the Relations Between Brother Ass, the Body, and his Rider, the Soul' ; this is a literal borrowing of the unique phraseology the Saint used.

The essay is a sane, reasoned exposition of the relation between ascetism and sanctity, and much of it is devoted to showing the dire effects of an excessive use of mortification. As Thompson says: "The whole scheme of history displays the body as 'Creation's and Creator's crowning good'. The aim of all sanctity is the redemption of the body. The consummation of celestial felicity is reunion with the body. All is for the body; and holiness, ascetism itself, rest (next to love of God) on love of the body."¹ The reason for Thompson's views are founded on this point: "The co-operation of the body must be enlisted in the struggle against the body. It is the lusts of the healthy body which are formidable; but to war against them the body (paradoxically) must be kept in health; the soldier must be fed, though not pampered. Without health, no energy; without energies, no struggle."²

1. Francis Thompson, Health and Holiness, Prose Works, p.268

2. Ibid. 269.

Thompson has an unusual but reasonable view of the more severe mortifications imposed by the ancient religious rules. He says: "They are not only obsolete: the whole incidence of them was devised for a sunny clime, a clime of olives, wine and macaroni. Fasts fall plump and frequent in the winter season when in the North they mean unmeditated stress upon the young constitution; while the summer, when fast could be borne, goes almost free of fast."¹

Thompson cites examples from the lives of the Saints to show that many of them felt that they had needlessly crippled their bodies, and so had impaired their efficiency in later life... "Even the merciless Assisian - merciless towards himself, as tender towards all others - confessed on the death-bed of his slave-driven body: 'I have been too hard on Brother Ass'".²

I must not leave the impression that Thompson was merely a negative critic of the practice of ascetism. His whole essay bristles with sanity, soundly-reasoned principles and a sincere Catholic spirit. Aware of the close interplay of body and soul, Thompson tried to show how the lifting of the body could best be performed through the soul's positive action, through Holiness.

In another of his well-known essays, 'In Darkest England' Thompson shows again his admiration and respect and intimate knowledge of the teachings of St. Francis. This essay was occasioned by a book of that name by General Booth in a defence of the Salvation Army.

1. Francis Thompson, Health and Holiness, Prose Works, p. 266-267

2. Ibid. p. 266.

Thompson admires the work of the Salvation Army, but regrets that such a work has been usurped by outsiders, when traditionally it was the role of the monastic orders to look after the poor and the outcast. Thompson calls attention to the methods of the Salvation Army: "May it be that here, too, the Salvation Army has but studied St. Francis? Here, too, has the Assisian left us a weapon which needs but a little practice to adapt it to the necessity of the day?"¹

Thompson's suggestion for Catholic participation in the field of social work is directed to the Third Order of St. Francis. "Sound to the militia of Assisi that the enemy is about them, that they must take the field; sound to the Tertiaries of St. Francis. Yes the Franciscan Tertiaries are this army. They are men and women who live in the world the life of the world - though not a worldly life; who marry, rear their families, attend to their worldly vocations; yet they are a Religious Order, with rule and observance. They include numbers of men and women among the poor. Nay, the resemblance extends to minor matters. Like the Salvationists, they exact from their women plainness of dress; though unlike the Salvationists, and most like their Poet-founder, they do not exact ugliness of dress."²

In a passage filled with religious ardor, Thompson, issues a call to Catholic Action. "What sword have they, but you have a keener? For blood and fire, gentle humility; for the joy of a religious alcoholism, the joy of that peace which surpasses understanding; for the tumults, the depth of the spirit; for the discipline of trumpets,

1. Francis Thompson, In Darkest England, Prose Works, p. 57

2. Ibid. p. 57-58.

the discipline of the Sacraments; for the chiming of tambourines, Mary's name pensile like a bell-tongue in man's resonant souls; for hearts clashed open by a whirlwind, the soft summons of Him Who stands at the door and knocks. If with these you cannot conquer, then you could not with chariots and horsemen."¹

Most directly of all is Thompson's appreciation of the work of St. Francis seen in his short essay 'Sanctity and Song'. This little essay is an estimate of the three canticles commonly assigned to St. Francis. As Thompson points out, the Canticle of the Sun is well known and generally admired, but the other two are less known and appreciated. He makes a good point in stating that, "By the law of Nature, no man can admire, for no man can understand, that of which there is no echo in himself. Such an echo implies and experience kindred, if not equal, to that of the utterer. Now to the majority of men, Sainthood is an uncomprehended word... To most, even to good people, God is a belief. To the saints He is an embrace... They do not believe in Him, for they know Him."² In due place, I shall show that there was indeed a very real 'echo' in the soul of Francis Thompson of the mystical insights that were expressed by the great Saint of Assisi.

In his attitude and descriptions of Nature, Thompson was obviously influenced by St. Francis. In his essay 'Nature's Immortality' his conclusion really is: "Not Shelley, not Wordsworth himself, ever drew so close to the heart of Nature as did the Seraph

1. Francis Thompson, In Darkest England, Prose Works, pp.60-61.

2. Francis Thompson, Sanctity and Song, Prose Works, p. 90.

of Assisi, who was close to the heart of God."¹

Nature as God's daughter and the 'Seraph of Assisi' provide a clue to Thompson's notion of Nature in contrast to that of his contemporaries and to the early Romantics. Wordsworth had spoken of Nature, as Mother; the child at her breast drinks in all noble qualities and owes to Nature the best that is in him. Wordsworth confused Nature and the First Cause and so he ascribed to Nature much that was beyond her. The heresy has persevered, and to-day, we have 'Nature' invoked to justify every erratic twist of human invention. Unfortunately, 'Mother Nature' is not always kind, so Thompson makes no all-embracing claims for her. She is Sister, God's daughter, one of ourselves and capable of imperfection. Thompson reduced Nature to her true level - as a creature of God, and a creature far inferior to man, since it lacks the God-given powers of intellect and will.

The phrase 'sister nature' was an obvious borrowing from St. Francis; less obvious but none the less real is his debt to St. Francis for his attitude in regarding nature as another creature of God like himself in its dependence for existence and continuance on the Providence of God. The sense of fellow-ship with natural things is a feature of Thompson's thought. Nor does this degenerate into maudlin bathos or sentimental juvenality. No poet safeguards the dignity of God and man more carefully than Thompson; no poet more appreciates the intrinsic worth of nature, simply because he regards it for what it is really worth.

"Franciscan familiarity can love nature because it will not worship her."¹ With his usual penetration, G. K. Chesterton has

1. G.K.Chesterton, A Short History of England, J.Lane Co.,N.Y.,1917. p.169

sounded a profound truth with regard to Thompson's attitude. To a poet, like Thompson, with a Catholic view of life and created things, all things assume their proper place. The world of visible nature around us may indeed be loved, for 'here is the finger of God'.¹ They may not be worshipped, for God alone deserves that honour. The essential role of the Catholic poet, then, is to make intelligible through his song the beauties of creation, and as in the 'Benedicite' to voice for unconscious nature the praise it too owes to its Creator. Just as St. Francis makes the sun bear witness to God, Thompson goes further and makes it a symbol of God. When St. Francis speaks of our brother Master Sun, our Sister Water, our Sister Moon and Stars, Thompson adopts the same fraternal attitude towards his fellow creatures. One should note that St. Francis wrote his canticle not to the Sun, but of the Sun. Thompson too shunned all semblance of Pantheism; witness his 'Ode After Easter'². The voice in which the Nature spoke to him was the tongue of strong Catholic faith, reflected in 'The Orient Ode', 'The Fallen Yew', 'Field Flower' and 'The Hound of Heaven' to mention but a few of his poems. St. Augustine stressed this very point in his Confessions when, speaking of the beauties of external nature, he said: "Yea, verily, it speaks unto all, but they only understand it who compare that voice received from without with the truth within."³ This is what Thompson was ever careful to do. With St. Francis as a guide, he was successful.

1. Exodus, Chapter VIII, 19.

2. Francis Thompson, Collected Works, Vol.2, p.32.

3. St. Augustine, Confessions, Bk.X, Chapter VI.

Thompson had a great deal in common with St. Francis of Assisi. Named for him, his life reflected similarly great poverty, gentleness and a burning love of God. The poverty it is true, unlike that of St. Francis, was not a vowed offering, but even later when his needs were amply looked after, he showed a great detachment of earthly riches. All that he left at his death was a tin box of refuse pipes that would not draw, unopened letters, a spirit lamp without wick, pens that would not write, a small abundance that remained merely because he had neglected to throw it away.¹

In 1891, Francis, the youngest son of the Meynell family, was born, and Francis Thompson was asked by the parents to act as godfather. He accepted and later wrote a poem 'To My Godchild', a poem whose spirit rests on supernatural hope. After humbly dismissing his own right to serve as a model or inspiration for his young namesake, he eloquently describes other Francis that may serve. His pointed summary of the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi is given in these two lines:

"The Assisian, who kept plighted faith to three,
To Song, to Sanctitude, and Poverty."²

In these lines as well, Thompson presents his own complete ideal of what a poet should be - he should be holy, he should be poor and he should be a singer. Saint Francis was all of these - holy to a heroic degree, absolutely poor in the perfect observance of evangelical poverty,

1. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, p.286.
2. Francis Thompson, Collected Poems, Vol.I, p.17.

and a singer by virtue of his ecstatic poems of which 'Ode to the Sun' is best known.

The true appreciation of the beauties of nature is a Christian thing, which came to its fullest fruition under the influence of St. Francis of Assisi. The Christian (we may say Catholic, for the Catholic Church is more and more becoming the last refuge of Christ's teaching) attitude towards nature is wholly different from the naturalism of the pagans. It is different in being more noble, more human, more inspiring, and more conducive to the true appreciation of beauty. St. Francis reflected in his nature poetry the same spirit as produced the liturgy; this same liturgical treatment of nature is seen in the poetry of Francis Thompson.

IV

'OF NATURE: LAUD AND PLAINT'

AN EPITOME OF THOMPSON'S TEACHING ON NATURE

Francis Thompson was not content merely to be correct in his views on nature; he wished others to be correct too. Now although Thompson's main poetic themes were subjects closely connected with religion, he left no stone unturned in his efforts to remove from the minds of the readers the errors they might have gleaned from the writings of previous poets. I think that Thompson was concerned about the future poets who might treat of nature, and he is careful to point out the pitfalls to be avoided. Our poet nowhere suggests that every poet should see in nature the same symbolic things that he saw. He

did ask that other writers and thinkers avoid the many dangers of false philosophies that rise from mistaking the true and essential role that visible nature has. Thompson is strong and clear in his denunciations of error even though enduring reputations had been built on these errors. This is what we would expect from Thompson who had a keen appreciation of the apostolate of Truth.

'Of Nature: Laud and Plaint' is the poem that best sums up Thompson's teachings. In this poem he seems determined to clear away the misconceptions, the false theories and the utter non-sense that marked much of the poetry of the nineteenth century. In other poems, his philosophy of life and nature is clear and emphatic; in this poem, he sets out to show exactly what false philosophies are to be shunned. As we examine this poem, Thompson's positive doctrine, and the errors he exposes will be dealt with.

The very first two lines:

"Lo, here stand I and Nature, gaze to gaze,
And I the greater."¹

contain a truth that most of the romantic poets failed to perceive, viz. that man with an immortal soul is of greater intrinsic worth than any inanimate natural beauty, no matter how ravishingly appealing it may be. How this belittling of the worth of the human personality arose, we have pointed out in the introduction to this study. Thompson saw to what extremes the error had been carried by the Romantics, and at the outset

1. Francis Thompson, Of Nature: Laud and Plaint, lines 1 - 2.

of his poem he is careful to lay the essential basis of all true appreciation of Nature.

The second point that Thompson makes is put in these lines:

" I am not thy fools
Who goddess thee with impious flatteries sweet,
Stolen from the little schools
Which cheeped when that great mouth of Rydal ceased."¹

Thompson emphasizes the same point and deliberately veers away from idolatrous utterance in the prelude to his 'Ode to the Setting Sun'

" O deceived,
If thou hear in these thoughtless harmonies
A pious phantom of adorings reaved,
And echo of fair ancient flatteries!"²

'The impious flatteries sweet' of the Nature-worshippers of the nineteenth century were in many ways, only a revival of 'the fair ancient flatteries of paganism'. Thompson is in no way crying out against the use of figurative language or ordinary Personifications regarding nature; what he opposes is the real or implied Pantheism or Naturalism which fails to make any distinction between the Creator and creature. The doctrine of Pantheism has always been a special snare for poets. Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley and, to some extent, Tennyson, fell under its influence. These men, lacking the security of a sound

1. Francis Thompson, Of Nature: Laud and Complaint, lines 4-7.

2. Francis Thompson, Ode to the Setting Sun, lines 13-16.

philosophy of life, failed to distinguish between the marvellous and beautiful creations of God, and the infinitely more marvellous God Who created them. "Western Pantheism dates from Plotinus, though it had been prepared for a long time by the monism of the Eleatics, and the idealism of Plato. All pantheism rests on a highly systematized concept of emanation. In the visions of Plotinus, the created perfections served as an indispensable ladder by which the soul might rise towards a union with God. Spinoza, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, the metaphysics of all these men coincides with the bold dream of certain so-called mystics - 'eritis sicut dii'."¹

Historically, no poet has been content with a purely materialistic concept of life. The rational soul insists on finding some sort of unity with God, no matter how pale and fragile that union may be. Even though God be degraded to the beauty of the sunset, even though human life and experience lose all its identity in being one with the Divine, many poets embraced at least a practical pantheism for their solution of the enigmas of their art. The fundamental error of the pantheist apart from his misconceptions of the transcendency of God, is that his union with the Divine is effected through his own unaided powers. There is nothing in the doctrine that takes the place of the Catholic concept of grace. Even the most egotistical soul is bound to realize his limitations. If not humility, then humiliation must make him suspect the limit of his power. The inevitable result

1. Joseph Maréchal, Mysticism, Burns, Oates, Washburne, London, 1927.
(Translated by Thorold), p.300.

then is that, positing the longing for such a union, God must be brought down to a level sufficiently low to make contact with Him possible.

Thompson saw the error of preceding Nature-poets, and pointed out the basic impiety of ascribing Divine attributes to Nature. His use of the word 'impious' is with design I think, and shows his appreciation of the traditional Catholic concept of piety.¹ Thompson was jealous of the honour and reverence that belong to God alone, and he was indignant to see others ascribing to the creature -Nature - what strictly belonged to the creator-God.

Throughout his poem, 'Of Nature: Laud and Plaint', Thompson obviously had Wordsworth in mind when he wrote certain passages. The second verse opens:

"Behold, the child
With Nature needs not to be recognized."²

For Thompson, the child is born 'in nescientness'³, ignorant of a previous existence and unquestioningly accepting this one. The child does not ask if Nature has surrounded it with love, nor why she has blessed it with gifts which as yet it does not even know as gifts. The child, in so far as it is capable of anything, takes its life and surroundings absolutely for granted. We come into the world 'in nescientness' knowing neither the significance of our birth nor anything else.

1. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pars IIa, Qu. CXXI, A.1.
2. Francis Thompson, *Of Nature: Laud and Plaint*, lines 13 et sqq.
3. Francis Thompson, *An Anthem of Earth*, line 1.

Thompson seems to have in mind the lines of Wordsworth:

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
The Soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath elsewhere had its setting,

But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God who is our home."¹

Notice the vast difference between the sentiments of the two passages. Thompson, with the surety and truth born of his Catholic faith, brings man into the world in utter 'nescientness', making his soul obsequious to the body's powers, while Wordsworth's lines are a poetical presentation of the Pythagorean doctrine of the transmigration of souls. Whether Wordsworth was intellectually convinced of the doctrine or merely exploiting its poetic possibilities, in either case he shows a distrust of the purely mechanical concept of human life and is striving to give some divine spark to the human personality. To Thompson, such a recourse to an ancient, effete, pagan doctrine was most reprehensible. For a pagan, without the light of faith, pantheism would be a step forward; to a Christian or to one sharing the Christian tradition, pantheism would indicate, as it did for Wordsworth and 'the little schools which cheeped'² after him, a very definite step backward.

Holbrook Jackson in his work, *The Eighteen Nineties*, speaks of Thompson's kinship with Shelley in a common Pantheism, and goes on to say that "such earth-love is pagan rather than Christian, yet it was not foreign to the Christianity of Francis Thompson, whose

1. William Wordsworth, *Intimations of Immortality*, lines 58-65.
2. Francis Thompson, *Of Nature: Laud and Plaint*, lines 7-8.

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."¹ It is amazing how a critic could read the work of Thompson and Shelley and conclude that they were saying the same thing.

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. Had Thompson worshipped these things as a Pantheist, 'The Hound of Heaven', 'The Orient Ode' and many other of his poems, would have been pure pose. Throughout his poetry Thompson shows most clearly that nature-worship of any sort is wholly inadequate to satisfy the needs of the human soul. Thompson's own criticism of Shelley's Pantheism shows how far he was from sharing it, and the hopelessness into which it led. "One thing prevents Adonais from being ideally perfect: its lack of Christian hope. Yet we remember well the writer of a 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 the loveliness
Which once he made more lovely, etc.

What utter consolation 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

1. Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties. Cape, New York, p. 213

it that finds consolation in this immortality; an immortality which thrusts you into death, the maw of Nature, that your dissolved elements may circulate through her veins?"¹ Surely this passage of Thompson is a complete and final refutation of Jackson's misconception of our poet's dallying with Pantheism.

In equally unmistakable terms, Thompson continues in the same essay: "Yet such, the poet tells me, is the sole balm for the hurts of life. I am as the vocal breath floating from an organ, I too shall fade on the winds, a cadence soon forgotten. So I dissolve and die, and am lost in the ears of men: the particles of my being twine in newer melodies, and from my one death arise a hundred lives. Why through the thin partition of this consolation Pantheism can hear the groans of its neighbour, Pessimism. Better almost the black resignation which the fatalist draws from his own helplessness, from the fierce kisses of misery that hiss against his tears."²

Continuing in the poem, Thompson stresses again the inability of Nature to help one:

"Hope not of Nature: she nor gives nor teaches;
She suffers thee to take
But what thine own hand reaches...
.
Ah hope not her to heal
The ills she cannot feel..."³

The following twenty lines are an amplification of this same point that Nature is without heart, without feeling, without concern for

1. Francis Thompson, Shelley, Prose Works, pp. 28-29.
2. Ibid. p. 29
3. Francis Thompson, Of Nature: Laud and Plaint, lines 102 et sqq.

human distresses."It is interesting and refreshing to contrast this mature view of nature with passages of childish nonsense found in the poetry of the nature-worshippers of Thompson's day."¹

Thompson detected the dangers caused by poets through their unjust praises of nature, and issues a warning:

"Take back, O poets, your praises little wise,
Nor fool weak hearts to their unshunned distress,
Who deem that even after your device
They shall lie down in Nature's holiness:
For it was never so."²

The denial of Nature's powers to aid fallen man is clear and emphatic.

The poet continues:

"She has no hands to bless.
Her pontiff thou; she looks to thee,
O man; she has no use, nor asks not for thy knee,
Which but bewilders her,
Poor child; nor seeks thy fealty
And those divinities thou would'st confer."³

Nature does not seek any honour from man, and being unconscious can not accept it or repay it. It is man who must make intelligible the mute chorus of inanimate nature's praise. Like St. Francis of Assisi who discerned through the Lamp Beauty the Light of God, man must be careful not to confuse the Lamp and the Light - Nature and the God of Nature.

"Man does not belong to Nature, but following the proper method, he may make nature his own. Thompson did not say as Wordsworth:

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1. T.L. Connolly, Poems of Francis Thompson, p.538
 2. Francis Thompson, Of Nature: Laud and Plaint, lines 116-120
 3. Ibid. lines 121-126.

" By Grace divine,
Not otherwise, Oh Nature! are we thine."

but rather that by Divine Grace Nature may be Man's, that he can go through to his desire. Shut the gates of it and it is a cruel and obdurate abundance of clay, of earthworks."¹

Thompson admits that he overblames Nature. He abuses her because the Pantheists deifies her:

"For ah, this Lady I have much miscalled;
Nor fault in her, but in thy wooing is."²

The poet voiced a similar thought in, "a favourite employment of men is the venting of shallow libels on Nature."³ Thompson inserts this thought near the conclusion of his poem to assure us that in spite of his harsh statements about Nature's futility, he really does love and admire her beauty. In countless passages of his poems, that love and admiration is given eloquent expression. Here, in this poem, since he is pre-occupied with exposing error, he apparently belittles Nature, but he is really belittling those who are in error about Nature.

In concluding the poem, Thompson urges us to knock at the door of nature if we would win through to her secrets. The thought and the phrasing are reminiscent of Sacred Scripture, wherein we are urged to knock and it shall be opened to us, by our Divine Lord in His Sermon on the Mount.⁴ Thompson herein suggests that it is through

1. E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, page 205.

2. Francis Thompson, Of Nature: Laud and Complaint, lines 147-148.

3. Francis Thompson, Health and Holiness, Prose Works, p. 273.

4. St. Matthew, VII, 7.

faith that we are able to penetrate to the secrets of Nature as to all other secrets. When Nature is divorced from God, and man regards himself as a self-sufficient being, nothing but chaos and cruel illusion can result.

The concluding lines of the poem sum up many of the varied threads that comprise the skein of Thompson's view of Nature.

"This Lady is God's daughter, and she lends
Her hand but to His friends,
But to her Father's friends the hand which thou would'st win;
Then enter in,
And here is that which shall for all make mends."¹

Here in brief is Thompson's teaching: Nature is a creature of God; man can only fully appreciate her by reaching her through God. As Thompson said in prose, "Not Shelley, not Wordsworth himself, ever drew so close to that heart of Nature as did the Seraph of Assisi, who was close to the heart of God."²

V.

THE HEALING POWER OF NATURE

We may gain a fuller notion of Thompson's concept of Nature by contrasting his views of the restorative powers of Nature with those of other poets. Thompson openly confesses his moral crisis in 'The Hound of Heaven' and in that poem he states most emphatically the insufficiency of Nature to remove his sore distress. Shelley and

1. Francis Thompson, Of Nature:Laud and Plaint, lines 168-172.
2. Francis Thompson, Nature's Immortality, Prose Works, p. 82

Tennyson will be used to contrast with Thompson, and Wordsworth's view (as that of the pioneer Romantic) will be referred to bring out more clearly the relative positions of the others.

Thompson's moral crisis was in the domain of the will. After his abortive efforts in the study of medicine, he left home at the age of twenty-six and for three years he was lost in the slums of London. Here he virtually duplicated De Quincey's experiences, leading a roving, starving life, picking up odd jobs, even boot-blackening, selling matches and holding horses. Still in love with letters, he frequented the public library, until he was forbidden entrance because of his unkempt, ragged condition. Even in his beggared life, the outcast said his prayers at night, nor ever, either then or in later life, lost his reverence for the things of God or his passionate attachment to his Catholic faith. The laudanum habit which Thompson had contracted earlier was the chief source of his eccentric, degrading existence. The 'good angel' that ultimately drew him from these pitiful surroundings was Wilfrid Meynell.

Tennyson's crisis was an affair of the spirit -heavy and oppressive doubts about the immortality of the soul and the general worth of living. His crisis was occasioned by the unhappy drowning of Arthur Hallam, a school companion and the affianced of his sister. 'In Memoriam' is Tennyson's elegiac tribute to Hallam, and at the same time it is a commentary on the influences at work in Tennyson's mind, which finally restored some internal conviction.

Shelley's whole life was really a moral crisis which he never settled. His life and poetry is a seething mass of contradictions:

a life of generous and noble impulses, and foolish and despicable actions; poetry of sublimity and gorgeous music marred by numerous shortcomings and disfigured by crazy theories and meaningless rhapsodies. Shelley was a restless spirit, ever perturbed, darkened by sad memories, unlightened by fair prospects, and most tragic of all, bereft of the consolations of belief in Almighty God. Shelley was not naturally an atheist, but he was an avowed one nevertheless. His moving passion for human liberty made him hate all existing forms of tyranny and among these he included all official forms of religion.

Unfortunately, Shelley started with the assumption that Christianity was wrong; unfortunately too, his life was cut short so that the only form of Christianity he knew was an effete Protestantism, which, held alike by ambitious politicians and careless ecclesiastics, served but to disgust him. He was always fond of dissociating Christ from the current type of Christianity, and at heart he was really athirst for faith in spite of his open and flagrant and violent agnosticism.

Though the poetry of the two -Shelley and Thompson - is widely different in content, some obvious analogies can be pointed out. Oddly enough, Thompson was Shelley's greatest admirer and defender. Thompson was able to detect the questing of a sincere mind, and though the struggle on Shelley's part did not attain to Divine Reality, his struggle upward is not the less admirable; for sincere human struggle is never contemptible. Between the soundly Catholic Thompson and the avowedly atheistic Shelley, there are parallels, although the former wrote from the depths of his Catholic faith, and the latter voiced the anguished outcries of his despair. As nature

poets, neither Shelley nor Thompson were of "the portrait school". Fidelity to external detail did not concern them generally. To Thompson, external nature suggested and was clothed in the symbolism of the Catholic ritual. To Shelley, nature became the mirror of his own feelings, the creature of his own mood.

Shelley derived little aid from Nature in helping him in his moral crisis, for the simple reason that for Shelley, Nature was nothing more than he assumed her to be at this or that moment. Intellectually, he rejected pantheism, the resort of many poets, and so lost even that basis on which to distinguish himself from the universe about him. The lack of a definite belief in any permanent reality influenced all his thought, and made nature inept to aid him in his distress. Thompson too, found nature useless in his moral crisis, but for a different reason as we shall see later. Shelley's mood changed constantly and at times he was as accurate as a scientist in his portrayal of nature. In 'The Cloud' for example, he completely abstracts from all human associations. His description of the cloud is as it might have been a million years before man came on earth. It is a wholly elemental treatment and wholly incapable of having any influence on Shelley, for it is too impersonal, too remote, too disinterested to have the slightest concern with man.

In his contemplation of a concrete natural thing, Shelley never long considered it in itself. He gave the laws of causality no attention; he never ascended from creature to Creator, for he never focussed his attention for long on the thing itself. It instantly fired his imagination away from a direct sight of the thing into the

sight of a multitude of images suggested by the thing. He was interested in the indefinite and the ~~change~~ful, and no man can draw consolation or strength from such sources, when the human soul craves something permanent to cling to. Shelley may have derived some fleeting personal justification from 'The West Wind', but he did not derive any stable or real healing influence.

Tennyson, in his treatment of nature, differs from Thompson, Shelley and Wordsworth. He is definitely a landscape painter, combining a clear, eye-on-the-object, precision of detail with fluent grace of line. Tennyson more than the others was content to regard the beauties of nature as they are in themselves without associating himself with them; or have them suggest anything of the Divine. In this, he differed from Thompson who invariably saw something sacramental in Nature; from Shelley, who longed to identify his spiritual moods with Nature; and from Wordsworth, to whom Nature was:

"The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being."¹

To Tennyson, as to Thompson, this view of Wordsworth seemed puerile and inadequate. Tennyson does not confuse the beauties of Nature with a sense of the benevolence of Nature. Only once did I find, in the poem 'The Two Voices', any linking of the external beauties of nature and the soul of man.

1. William Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey, lines 107-111.

"And forth into the field I went,
And Nature's living motion lent
The pulse of hope to discontent."¹

Ordinarily Tennyson was not able to deduce any First Cause from the contemplation of the universe. Tennyson could not find God in Nature.

"I found Him not in world or sun,
Or eagle's wing, or insect's eye;
Nor thro' the questions men may try,
The petty cobwebs we have spun."²

Tennyson denied the possibility of deducing an intelligible First Cause from the phenomena of the Universe.³ The Council of Trent affirms the possibility.⁴ Cardinal Newman says of it: "Life is not long enough for a religion of inferences; we shall never have done beginning, if we determine to begin with proof... If we insist on proofs for everything, we shall never come to action; to act you must assume, and that assumption is faith."⁵ With Tennyson too, that assumption is faith, a wavering uncertain faith, founded on need rather than on conviction. Tennyson did not find in Nature any adequate force to console him in his anguish. Regarding the fate of his friend Hallam, he was careful to distinguish the parts of his dead friend which are mixed with nature (the material universe) and those which are mixed with God (the spiritual being who guaranteed personal immortality).⁶ The con-

1. Alfred Tennyson, The Two Voices, lines 448-450.

2. Alfred Tennyson, In Memoriam, LV.

3. Hallam Tennyson, Tennyson, A Memoir, (Two Volumes), London, 1897. V.I.44.

4. Catechism of the Council of Trent. (Translated by McHugh & Callan), Wagner, New York, 1923, p.16.

5. Cardinal Newman, Discussions and Arguments on Various Subjects, London, 1918, pp.298-299.

6. J.J. Beach, The Concept of Nature in the 19th Century, N.Y., 1936.p.410.

trast with Shelley's tribute to the dead Keats should be noted.

"He is made one with Nature; there is heard
His voice in all her music...
He is a presence to be felt and known."¹

Note also,

"He is a portion of that loveliness
Which once he made more lovely."²

Tennyson was interested in the scientific theories of his day, but it is far from certain that he embraced the **theory** of Evolution. His son said: "Tennyson thought that evolution in a modified form was partially true."³ Perhaps it was a belief that things are always working out for the better -the myth of Progress- that prompted such kindred concepts as that expressed in 'The old order changeth, yielding place to new', rather than any firm conviction of the truth of the evolutionary process.

At times, Tennyson leaned toward a pantheistic concept of the visible universe, in which he envisioned God as the World-Soul and the only real existence, with all other things inanimate, and humans as mere drops in an ocean. However, the poet was too firmly convinced of the reality of the individual personality as well as that of the personality of God to follow pantheism fully.⁴ In his poem 'The Higher Pantheism' Tennyson opens with the question:

1. P.B. Shelley, Adonais, XLIII.

2. Ibid. XLIII.

3. Hallam Tennyson, Op.cit., Vol.2, p.167.

4. MR.M. Alden, Tennyson, Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, 1917, p.338.

"The sun, the moon, the stars, the seas, the hills and the plains-
Are not these, O Soul, the Vision of Him who reigns?
Is not the Vision He? tho' He be not that which He seems?"¹

On one occasion he said to Frederick Locker-Lampson, as they stood gazing upon an Alpine view: "Perhaps this earth, and all that is on it - storms, mountains, cataracts, the sun and the skies- are the Almighty: in fact, that such is our petty nature, we can not see Him, but we see His shadow, as it were, a distorted shadow."² In his poetry Tennyson was not content to settle life's problems with such an anaemic compromise. Evolution as a theory explaining the origin of man's mind was equally inadequate to Tennyson. "No evolutionist is able to explain the mind of man or how any physiological change of tissue can produce conscious thought."³

Regarding Tennyson's debt to Nature, no matter what concept he held of Nature during the various stages of his poetic career, he never fully trusted it and derived no real assistance from it during his moral crisis.

Wordsworth was the most definite Nature-worshipper of all poets. In his 'Prelude' and 'Tintern Abbey'Ode' he outlines his early passion for Nature, his faith in the essential goodness of man, his disillusionment when France invaded Switzerland and then turned to Napoleon and his 'salvation' from despair through new contact with Nature. Wordsworth withdrew from man and society in order to be com-

1. Alfred Tennyson, The Higher Pantheism, lines 1-3.
2. R.M. Allen, Op.cit. (quoted), p.338.
3. Hallam Tennyson, Op.cit. Vol.1, p.323.

forted by communion with nature, a withdrawal which Thompson considered to be unnatural since man is essentially a social animal. As Maritain points out, "The solitary life is not human; it is above or beneath man."¹ Thompson pointed out the unresponsiveness of Nature in his essay on 'Nature's Immortality'.² He indicates that the nature-worshipper finds in nature what he wishes to find: a victim of his own wishful-thinking, he has duped himself into believing that Nature loves and can heal. Wordsworth thought he was 'saved' by losing himself in Nature in which is God; thompson is 'saved' by losing himself in God of whom nature is but a manifestation. Thompson saw the basic error of those who believe in the Nature myth: that they confused an earthly state such as existed in the Garden of Eden with a dream of a perfect world. "For within this life of ache and dread, like the greenness in the rain, like the solace in the tear, we may have each of us a dreamful Sicily."³

Thompson most carefully avoided the error into which Wordsworth had fallen by insisting on the fact that Nature was merely a creature of God, totally devoid of feeling and impotent to help us. He points out effectively that, while in a melancholy mood there is a danger of feeling that Nature is in sympathy with his mood, but avoids the pathetic fallacy and concludes: "My human sadness was a higher and deeper and wider thing than all. O Titan Nature! a petty race, which has dwarfed its spirit in dwellings, and bounded it in selfish shallows

1. Jacques Maritain, Three Reformers, Sheed & Ward, London, 1936, p.120.
2. Francis Thompson, Nature's Immortality. p. 80.
3. Ibid. pp.81-82.

of art, may find you too vast, may shrink from you into its earths:but though you be a very large thing, and my heart a very little thing, yet Titan as you are, my heart is too great for you."¹

In brief, Thompson rejected any healing influence in Nature because he knew that Nature was not God, and that man is in serious error when he expects Nature to do what God alone can do. Man must lose himself in God, and in thus losing himself, he will find himself in sympathy with and in his proper relation to Nature. Only by this apparently circuitous pathway can man reach a true love and appreciation of the beauties of God's amazing world.

Turning to Thompson's autobiographical poem 'The Hound of Heaven' we may see illustrated fully our poet's attitude toward the futility of Nature.

"I in their delicate fellowship was one -
Drew the bolt of Nature's secrecies.
I knew all the swift importings
Of the wilful face of skies;
I knew how the clouds arise
Spumed of the wild sea-snortings;
And all that's born or dies
Rose and drooped with; made them shapers
Of my own moods, or wailful or divine;
With them joyed and was bereaven.
I was heavy with the even,
When she lit her glimmering tapers
Round the day's dead sanctities.
I laughed in the morning's eyes.
I triumphed and I saddened with all weather,
Heaven and I wept together,
And its sweet tears were salt with mortal mine;
Against the red throb of its sunset-heart
I laid my own to beat,
And share commingling heat;
But not by that, by that, was eased my human smart

1. Francis Thompson, Nature's Immortality, pp.81-82.

In vain my tears were wet on Heaven's grey cheek.
For ah! we know not what each other says,
 These things are I; in sound I speak -
Their sound is but their stir, they speak by silences.
Nature, poor stepdame, cannot slake my drouth;
 Let her, if she would owe me,
Drop yon blue bosom-veil of sky and show me
 The breasts of her tenderness:
Never did any milk of hers once bless
 My thirsting mouth."¹

In this portrayal of a human soul's quest for God, Thompson shows how he sought solace in Nature. Like many an other groper after God, Thompson tried to win warmth for his heart from Nature and nature-study futilely. "The cult of nature in lieu of religion has been prominent of late, because in most religions there has been an adequate destruction of all true notions of the supernatural. Emotionalism is taken for religion; and we all know that while nature's beauties can awaken powerful emotions in any soul that is not utterly crass, such fleeting phases of feeling are not satisfying food for an immortal soul. Naturism is a poor substitute."²

The recognition of nature's futility is seen in the line:

"But not by that, by that, was eased my human smart"³

There is increased pathos and a sense of cruel misgiving in the repetition of the words: 'not by that, by that'. It seems to show at once that the poet's quest of solace in Nature was a sincere and protracted

1. Francis Thompson, The Hound of Heaven, lines 74-104

2. F.P. LeBuffe, The Hound of Heaven, Macmillan, NyY., 1923, p.68.

3. Francis Thompson, The Hound of Heaven, line 94.

one, and that his sense of emptiness is all the more acute. There is finality in the thought thus expressed.

The entire passage quoted is in reality a repetition in verse of the prose version already noted.² When the love of Nature is substituted for the love of God, nothing but frustration can result, as was said of Shelley... "a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain."³ Not only is Nature powerless to help us, she does not even know that we need help, for she is inanimate, unintelligent, unfeeling and unresponsive.⁴ Truly, Thompson dismissed Nature completely as a healing power.⁵

VI

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS:

NATURE, SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Even though Thompson's medical studies were undertaken with the greatest reluctance and indifference, it is a safe assumption that he was brought into contact with the best scientific thought and discovery of his day. For six years, he at least made the gesture of studying medicine at Owens College, and during that time he must inevitably have caught at least the spirit of the scientific thought of his day in so far as it was reflected in the medical schools. Thompson

2. Francis Thompson, Nature's Immortality, Prose Works, pp. 81-82.

3. Brother Leo, English Literature. Ginn & Company, New York, 1928, (Quoting Matthew Arnold) p. 397.

4. Francis Thompson, Nature's Immortality. p. 80

5. Francis Thompson, The Hound of Heaven. lines 103-104.

gives us his reaction to his studies: "I hated my scientific and medical studies, and learned them badly. Now even that bad and reluctant knowledge has grown priceless to me."¹ So he wrote in later life.

We must keep in mind that the nineteenth century was an age remarkable for invention and scientific advancement. In medicine, the figures of Pasteur, Lister, Paget, and Koch stand out; in the field of natural science, those of Charles Darwin, T.H. Huxley, Herbert Spencer, Mill and Tyndall. In communication and transportation came the greatest advance in material progress: the building of railroads, communication by telephone, telegraph and the wireless, and late in the century, the beginning of the automobile and of transportation by air. The industry was revolutionized by the application of machinery, steam and electricity. The art of photography was developed. And yet, in spite of all the aspects of scientific progress, very little was accomplished in ameliorating the sordid industrial slavery of men, women and children. This last point was the concern of men like Dickens who dedicated their art to the social problems of the day.

Thompson expressed a very significant judgment of the century in 'Moestitiae Encomium'. "Alas for the nineteenth century, with so much pleasure, and so little joy; so much learning, and so little wisdom; so much effort, and so little fruition; so many philosophers, and so little philosophy; so many seers, and such little vision; so many prophets, and such little foresight; so many teachers and such

1. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, p. 36

an infinite wild vortex of doubt! the one divine thing left to us is Sadness. Even our virtues take her stamp; the intimacy of our loves is born of despair; our very gentleness to our children is because we know how short their time. 'Eat', we say, 'eat, drink and be merry; for tomorrow ye are men.'¹

As a substitute for Religion, Thompson saw that Science was as inadequate as Nature. Fully aware of the unicity of Truth, he knew that there could never be any basic conflict between the findings of scientific investigation and the truth as revealed by God. It is not with Science, as such, that Thompson is in opposition, but rather with the exaggerated claims made for her for over-zealous and irreligious devotees.

Thompson was aware of the ultimate triumph of goodness and truth in spite of temporary reversals. "Vain is the belief that man can convert to permanent evil that which is in itself good. It has been sought to do so with science; and some of us have been seriously frightened at science. Folly. Certain temporary evil has been wrought through it in the present, which seems very great because it is present. That will pass, the good will remain; and men will wonder how they with whom was truth could ever have feared science. Scientists, those eyeless worms who loosen the soil for the crops of God, have declared that they are proving miracles false, because they are contrary to the laws of Nature. I can see in fifty years' time they will have proved miracles true, because they are based on the laws of Nature. So much good,

1. Francis Thompson, Moestitiae Encomium. Prose Works, p. 111.

at least, will come from the researches of Nancy and the Charité, of the followers of Bernheim and the followers of Charcot. If any, being evil, offer to us good things, I say: Take; for ours must be the ultimate harvest from them. Good steel wins in the hands that can wield it longest; and these hands are ours."¹

In his poem 'The Nineteenth Century', Thompson develops this same thought and gives a complete enumeration of the scientific developments that have been made during the era. Speed and ease in travel, the development of the telephone, the miner's safety lamp, chemistry, astronomy, the telescope, bacteriology, the microscope, etc., are discussed and praised in so far as they have helped to improve the health and happiness of man.² A genuine admiration shines through his lines for true science, and a real contempt for those scientists who are carried away by the magnitude of their experimentation into regarding science as a substitute for the service of God. That there need be no conflict between Science and Religion Thompson appreciated; that there was often a conflict between pseudo-scientists and Religion, he also appreciated, and if, at times, he speaks disparagingly of science, it is only to restore the balance. Thompson was justly annoyed by the undue prominence given to science, a word which now means one branch of knowledge, and which in his day meant all worth-while knowledge.

Thompson, ever jealous of the glory of God, learned from the scientific theories of the day a fuller knowledge of the glories of God.

1. Francis Thompson, In Darkest England, pp.63-64.

2. Francis Thompson, The Nineteenth Century, lines 35-103.

"In a little sight, in a little sight,
We learn from what in thee is credible
The incredible, with bloody clutch and feet
Clinging the painful juts of jagged faith.
Science, old noser in its prideful straw,
That with anatomising scalpel tents
Its three-inch of thy skin, and brags 'All's bare'-
The eyeless worm, that, boring, works the soil,
Making it capable for the crops of God;
Against its own dull will
Ministers poppies to our troublous thought."¹

In these lines: "Thompson does not scorn science, but only the pseudo-scientific determinist,"² while at the same time he clothes in magnificent symbolism the mystical realities from which real scientific investigation and discovery lift, as it were, a corner of the veil.

'A little sight', mentioned in the first line of the poetic quotation above, is really the spiritual insight of faith which enables man to pass from the credible things of earth to the naturally credible things of the spirit. In the light of this illumination Thompson spiritualizes the findings of modern science. Science, probing the mysteries of material things has lighted upon the law of order beneath apparent chaos. It has discovered in death the occasion of renewed life. In asserting that the elements liberated at death are taken up again in other forms of life, it has but proved anew the ancient scholastic dictum: "Corruptio unius est generatio alterius." So is it ever; there can be no conflict in the seamless robe of truth. The theory that death is not really the end of life in the natural order is to Thompson

1. Francis Thompson, An Anthem of Earth, lines 198-208.

2. R.L. Megroz, Francis Thompson, Scribner's, New York, 1927, p.158.

a figure or analogy of the basic doctrine of immortality in the supernatural order. Thus, although many pseudo-scientists set out to belittle the supernatural order of things and ridicule faith and religion, Thompson sees them in spite of themselves ministering to the cause of revealed Truth.

Science, attempting to explain all things in terms of influx and reflux, declares death to be but a stage in the process of being. According to Thompson, it accounts 'the sepulchre the seminary of being', 'extinction the Ceres of existence', it discovers 'life in putridity', 'vigour in decay' and 'admirable the manner of our corruption as of our health'.¹ To an eye illumined by Faith the facts of science point to a Supreme Designer behind the complexity of things, Who out of broken arc fashions a perfect round, and out of bewildering discords educes an overruling harmony. So too in human life Thompson comes to recognize the symbolic meaning of the findings of researches and to discern in pain and death a Divine recompense.

Thompson often used this same thought of the grandeur of death:

"The fairest things in life are Death and Birth,
And of these two the fairer thing is Death."²

and applying the thought:

"The fall doth pass the rise in worth
For birth hath in itself the germ of death,
But death hath in itself the germ of birth."

1. Francis Thompson, An Anthem of Earth, lines 212-219
2. Francis Thompson, Ode to the Setting Sun, lines 3-4.

It is the falling acorn buds the tree,
The falling rain that bears the greenery,
The fern-plants moulder when the ferns arise.
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."¹

Thompson used the scientifically verified fact to symbolize the role of human existence. I think he would have endorsed the following application of his thought: "Unless there is a Good Friday in our lives, there will never be an Easter Sunday; unless there is a cross, there never will be an empty tomb; unless there is the torn flesh, there never will be the glorified body. The crown of thorns is the condition of the halo of light, and every resurrection presupposes a death, as every death is the antecedent of resurrection. Unless we die to the world, we shall never live to Christ; unless we lose our life, we shall never save it."² Thompson goes on from the epitome of Death to justify his philosophy of mortification as we shall show in a subsequent section of this chapter.

On one occasion at least, in a rejected Preface to 'New Poems', Thompson belittles the scientist for his lack of true vision. "And of the other poems some are as much science as mysticism! but it is the science of the future, not the science of the scientist. And since the science of the future is the science of the past, the outlook on the universe of 'The Orient Ode', for instance, is nearer the

1. Francis Thompson, Ode to the Setting Sun, lines 227-238

2. Fulton Sheen, The Life of All Living, Sheed & Ward, N.Y., p.148

of these planetary electrons is just equal to the net positive charge of the nucleus. This atom is like a planetary system with the nucleus replacing the sun and the electrons replacing the planets."¹

Thompson also shows his familiarity with the theory of inter-planetary forces in 'The Orient Ode'.

"Thou as a lion roar'st O Sun,
Upon thy satellites' vexed heels;
Before thy terrible hunt thy planets run;
Each in his frightened orbit wheels,
Each flies through inassuageable chase,
Since the hunt of the world begun,
The puissant approaches of thy face,
And yet thy radiant leash he feels."²

While the poem does not pretend to be a scientific treatise, the familiarity with the more advanced theories of his time indicates that Thompson did not blindly condemn Science, but as a sound thinker used what he found applicable to his poetry. In the same Ode he again restates his denunciation of his century's substitution of science for faith, in the lines:

"If I too shall adore,
Be it accounted unto me
A bright sciential idolatry"³

In conclusion, then, it is clear that Thompson's attitude toward science was in keeping with his sound Catholic view of life. According as true scientific discoveries showed forth the hidden secrets of order in the universe, Thompson rejoiced in this new proof of the omnipotence and

1. A.W. Smith, Elements of Physics. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1932, p.577.
2. Francis Thompson, Orient Ode, lines 59-66.
3. Francis Thompson, ibid., lines 133-135.

intelligence of God. According as false scientists over-emphasized their findings and tried to show that they were making it impossible for an intelligent man to give credence to the supernatural, Thompson vigorously opposed them. The findings of science were exploited by Thompson to re-inforce his religious convictions. He was in no way carried away by the enthusiasm of those who saw in science a panacea for all ills. As the mysteries of Nature were unfolded by Scientists, Thompson saw all the more clearly the One, Great, Mystery,.. God Himself, underlying and sustaining the whole.

VII.

HAPPINESS AND SUFFERING:

NOT NATURE BUT PAIN TURNS MAN TO GOD

Seldom, if ever, did a poet endure the privations, the miseries and the despairing loneliness that fell to the lot of Francis Thompson. Of all men he had the most right, if right it be, to be embittered, cynical and depressed. True it is that most of his sufferings were brought on by himself through the drug habit, but perhaps self-inflicted sufferings are more apt to engender despair because they already imply a weakened will.

Thompson was usually reticent about his degradation in the slums of London, but it seems certain that a passage in his essay 'In Darkest England' reflects the fearful experiences of his outcast days. "Misery cried out to me from the kerb-stone, despair passes me

by in the ways; I discern limbs laden with fetters impalpable, but not imponderable; I hear the shaking of invisible lashes, I see men dabbled with their own oozing life... From the claws of the sphinx my eyes have risen to her countenance which no eyes read. Because, therefore, I have these thoughts; and because also I have knowledge, not indeed great or wide, but within certain narrow limits more intimate than most men's, of this life which is not a life; to which food is as the fuel of hunger; sleep our common sleep, precious, costly and fallible, as water in a wilderness; in which men rob and women vend themselves - for fourpence."¹

Father McNabb who had direct knowledge of our poet's misfortunes sums them up this way: "Now that the poet had decided definitely that song was his vocation, the Muses gave him a long novitiate, not by 'Genesareth but Thames'. Before the solemn wooing closed with full wedlock he, like another seer, had to serve long years. It gives us such different eyes upon the city streets to know that this novice of Poetry took upon himself if not the vow heroic at least the life heroic of what our forefathers called wilfull poverty. He starved. He went without food, until Brother Ass, his body, never strong and never cherished, took the seeds of that disease which was to be his death. Often he knew not what it was to lay his head under any roof but the dull glare of a London sky. He slept like a vagrant on some friendly seat on Thames Embankment. He worked almost as a burden ox, for a bookseller, and bore upon his shoulders heavy sacks of his beloved books."²

1. Francis Thompson, In Darkest England, Prose Works, p. 52-53.

2. Vincent McNabb, Francis Thompson and Other Essays, op.cit., p. 8.

In later years Thompson, looking back on the misery that he knew said: "The very streets weigh upon me. Those horrible streets, with their gangrenous multitude blackening ever into lower mortifications of humanity. These lads who have almost lost the faculty of human speech: these girls whose very utterance is a hideous blasphemy... We lament the smoke of London; - it were nothing without the fumes of congregated evils."¹

In all his references to the sordidness and squalor of the London slums, it is usual for Thompson to stress the fact of spiritual degradation rather than dwell on the purely material and physical aspects of bodily suffering. In his works, Thompson shows his sound Catholic faith, for to a Catholic there is an evil much worse than suffering; it is sin. Nay more, to a Catholic, suffering can and must become something holy and desirable, for in the patient endurance of it man may grow to share in the sufferings of Jesus Christ. Suffering, pain, misery and misfortune are not necessarily evil. A thing is evil if it hinders a being from attaining the purpose for which it exists.² In the strict sense, then, only that is evil for man which makes it more difficult for him to save his soul, and since mortification is necessary for man to save his soul, the Catholic sees its place in the scheme of things.

Pain is not the great tragedy of life; blindly resisted pain may be. Thompson, unlike Wordsworth and the Romantics, thought there was a value in suffering. He saw that it could strengthen and

1. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, p. 77

2. F. J. Sheed, A Map of Life. Sheed and Ward, New York, 1939, p. 102.

produce a new and noble heart within the victim. As Thompson said:
"The purifying power of suffering was known even to the heathen. In the Egyptian obsequies, the removal of the most perishable parts of the body, the preservation of the rest by steeping and burning nitre, signified the cleansing of the human being by pain; and the symbolism was emphasized by the words spoken over the embalmed corpse: 'Thou art pure, Osiris, thou art pure.'"¹

Without such a philosophy, Thompson would have degenerated badly. Had he believed, with Wordsworth, that nature was responsible for all man's goodness, and that only through following the unthwarted impulses of Nature can we be happy, he would have lost all sense of mental struggle and moral responsibility. Thompson in no way succumbed to this idea, rather he stressed the sacramental character of suffering. "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 a child shuddering on the verge of the water, and crying: 'It is so 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; his human weakness accuses himself of rashness in provoking it, even while his soul demands more pain, if it be necessary for more love. So he revealed to one of his companions that the pain of his stigmata was agonizing, but was accompanied by a sweetness

1. Francis Thompson, Sanctity and Song, Prose Works, p.91.

so intense as made it ecstatic to him. Such is the preaching of his words and example to an age which understands it not. Pain is. 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."¹

Thompson was even able to display a cheerful resignation to pain in the temporal order. Apart from his acceptance of his sufferings as a purifying influence for his soul, he relished the suffering he underwent since it was the means of him coming in contact with the Meynell family.

"Let after-livers who may love my name,
And gauge the price I paid for dear-bought fame,
Know that at end,
Pain was well paid, Sweet Friend,
Pain was well paid which brought me to your sight."²

Just as pain is the pre-requisite to sanctity, so too are pain and suffering the necessary apprenticeship of the poet. Such is Thompson's view in 'Laus Amara Doloris'. The theme of 'The Hound of Heaven' is the human soul's quest for true happiness. Night and day, year after year, it is grasping for happiness. The hours of suffering and pain are spent in watching and waiting for the agony to pass, so that happiness may come. It looks for it in every creature, in the earth, in the sea, in the air. The soul bends all its energies to find happiness in creatures, but is always unsatisfied, since 'Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until

1. Francis Thompson (quoted) in W. Meynell's Life of Francis Thompson, pp.295-296.

2. Francis Thompson, Of My Friend, lines 18-22.

they rest in Thee.'¹ Not in Nature does man find God. He finds Him rather because of the inability of Nature to soothe him. This constant quest for perfection drives man from the temporal to the eternal. The 'deliberate speed' and 'imperturbed pace' of the Divine lover pursuing the soul finally overtake it when it foregoes its pursuit of the transitory pleasures of life.

Thompson's treatment of the theme of pain, "more decisively than anything else sets him apart from his age and from our own, - from Wilde, with his sadistic pleasure in pain and from Hardy and Housman with their brooding, blasphemous bitterness about it."² There is no bitterness in Thompson's poetry. He might have blamed the misfortunes of his life on lack of opportunity or ascribed them to the fact that he was never understood at home. Far from this, he assumed the full responsibility for the fact that -

"In the rash lustihood of my young powers,
I shook the pillaring hours
And pulled my life upon me; grimed with smears"³

The true worth and nobility of suffering and mortification is put eloquently by Thompson in 'The Mistress of Vision', the poem in which he reaches the loftiest stages of mystical expression.

"Pierce thy heart to find the key;
With thee take
Only what none else would keep;

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1. St. Augustine, Confessions, Book I, chap.1
 2. Theodore Maynard, The Freeman, June 20,1923, quoted by Connolly, op.cit., p.514.
 3. Francis Thompson, The Hound of Heaven, lines 117-119.

Learn to dream when thou dost wake,
Learn to wake when thou dost sleep;
Learn to water joy with tears,
Learn from fears to vanquish fears,
To hope, for thou dar'st not despair,
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."¹

Herein Thompson shows the exact role of suffering and mortification in the Catholic scheme of life. Not only is pain and suffering not condemned, but it is rather welcomed as the vital, purifying agent in turning men's hearts and minds away from transitory things. Not in pandering to the calls of nature, not in fulfilling every natural desire, does man reach greatness. Rather must he die to self in order to live to Christ.

Wordsworth and the extreme Romanticists believed that the peasant and the child, living close to Nature, were naturally good. To them, pain and suffering were caused solely by man's departure from his natural instincts; to regain happiness it was but necessary to regain one's natural goodness. They had lost complete sight of the fact that ours is a fallen nature; to the Romantics there was no such notion as that of original sin; to them, Nature took the place of grace. Thompson, on the other hand, knew through the light of faith and experience that ours is a fallen nature, and that life is a constant struggle between our lower nature and our higher nature, and that full and complete happiness can be achieved only if we triumph over our natural,

1. Francis Thompson, The Mistress of Vision, lines 125 -137

animal instincts. To accomplish this God's grace is needed, for 'of ourselves we can do nothing'. For Thompson, pain has a real role in the process of turning man to God. It is not an end in itself to Thompson who was no sadist. Its role is a purgative one, and its design is to wean men from their attachment to the pleasures of this world, and in so doing to turn men's minds and hearts to God. If we are ever to attain the joys of heaven, our road thither must be along the road indicated by Christ in His ascent to Calvary.

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

Of reaped joys thou art the heavy sheaf
Which must be lifted, though the reaper groan;
Yea, we may cry till Heaven's great ear be deaf,
But we must bear thee, and must bear alone."¹

This is Thompson's attitude toward pain and suffering: its symbol is the Cross of Christ; its yoke is inevitable and must be borne; it and not Nature turns man to God.

VIII THOMPSON'S INTELLECTUAL APPROACH TO NATURE

To teach how the Crucifix may be,
Carven from the laurel tree.

We have seen several aspects of Thompson's attitude toward Nature, and we turn, in this section, to a consideration of just

1. Francis Thompson, Ode to the Setting Sun, lines 5-12.

what our poet's approach to nature really was: what use he made of nature's scenic beauties, his knowledge of natural lore and how he embodied this in his poetry. In describing Thompson's technique, it may be noted that there are two general classifications of poetry: that type which illuminates facts, and that type which makes facts illuminate an otherwise inapprehensible inner reality. Now neither of these classifications are essentially Catholic; each may or may not be, according to the background and philosophy of the poet. Nor is each always applicable to a particular poet's work. At one time, he may be more objective and primarily concerned with depicting external reality; at another time, he may be more 'introverted' and primarily concerned with just those appearances of nature which will serve as the symbolic clothing of some inner conviction.

Thompson had little of the botanist in him. An example of this is shown in a reference by Wilfrid Blunt: "When we all went out after luncheon to the woods, I found him ignorant of the names of the commonest trees, even the elm, which he must have seen every day in London. I pointed one out to him, and he said, 'I think, a maple'. On the whole, however, I liked him for he was quite simple and straightforward."¹

The little sketch does not call up an image of a man who was a nature-poet, at least of a man who lived physically close to the earth. We must remember though that Thompson was a poet and not an illustrator of seed catalogues. He himself claimed an intimacy with nature... "But I sometimes wonder whether the best of you Lon-

1. Quoted by R.L.Megroz, Francis Thompson, op.cit., pp.177-178.

doners do not regard nature as a fine piece of the Newlyn school, kindly lent by the Almighty for public exhibition. Few seem to realize that she is alive, has almost as many ways as woman, and is to be lived with, not merely looked at. People are just as bad here for that matter. I am sick of being told to go here and go there, because I shall have 'a splendid view'. I protest against nature being regarded as on view. If a man told me to take a three-quarter view of the woman I loved because I should find her a fine composition, I fear I should incline to kick him extremely, and ask whether he thought her five feet odd of canvas. Having companioned nature in her bed-chamber no less than her presence-room, what I write of her is not lightly to be altered."¹

Meynell points out that on one occasion at least, Thompson slept a night in the woods in Wales... "One night means much for such as hold eternity in an hour. For Francis, any single sunrise opened a day of Creation, and any sunset awoke in him a comprehension of finality and death, of re-birth and infinity."² Somehow there is conveyed by Thompson's poetry the fact that any single sunrise or sunset was capable of suggesting many hidden vistas. Thompson does not convey the impression that it is a particular sunset that he is describing; in other words, he was only interested in objective details of nature in so far as they strengthened and enlarged some inner and hidden reality he wished to convey.

I used the word 'intellectual' in describing Thompson's approach to nature, not because it is entirely apt, but because it most

1. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, p. 131.

2. E. Meynell, Ibid. p. 131.

carefully distinguishes his approach from those who were chiefly interested in the sensory. Tennyson, for example, could be sufficiently interested in sensory experience to imitate nature in verse: but

"The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees,

did not engage Thompson's mind enough to make him translate such sounds for their own sake. Tennyson's 'In Memoriam' too, though a tribute to his dead friend Hallam, is filled with beautiful pictures faithfully copied from the English country-side. "Thompson would not have written so faithfully as Tennyson of actual flowers, except accidentally, when he described the poppy as a yawn of fire... He was at once too passionate and too abstracted to be so interested in isolated objects."¹ When Thompson does concern himself with a concrete bit of natural scenery he does not achieve any pointed photographic brevity, but a rather complicated elaboration.

I also used the word 'intellectual' in describing Thompson's treatment of natural scenery to distinguish it from the anti-intellectual attitude of such men as Wordsworth who was -

" well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being."²

1. R. L. Megroz, Francis Thompson . Op.cit., pp.179-180.
2. William Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey Ode . lines 107-111

This view is most remote from Thompson's . Though he was not a profound analytical thinker who moved up a chain of causality to the existence of God every time he saw a created effect, he nevertheless always saw that in such effects. He was a man of such keen sensibilities, such vehement feelings that he had always to refer things to their ultimate source. Coventry Patmore said of him: "He is, of all men I have known most naturally a Catholic. My Catholicism was acquired, his inherent."¹ In general, Thompson avoids the two extremes of nature poetry: prosaic, scientific slavery to detail and vague, incoherent fancy. This last, the resort of those who think that intellectual confusion is the best approach to the otherwise inexpressible.

Thompson's use of nature flowed from his essentially Catholic philosophy of life which is summed up well in his poem 'Any Saint'. Briefly, this poem is a Catholic poet's presentation of man's greatness and littleness. There is none of the false glorification of man through the higher faculties of his soul, such as we find in Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', nor is there any stooping to the level of sheer carnal love that satisfies the body while it starves the soul, - the love that Keats sings in the 'Ode to Psyche'. In his portrayal of man, Thompson raises him above Keats' level, by portraying him as a creature the object of whose love must satisfy the longing of his soul as well as the craving of his body. Moreover, he does not make Shelley's mistake of thinking that man's soul can be satisfied by anything natural - however lofty it may be.

1. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, p.200.

Centuries ago, Saint Augustine said: "Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."¹ In his poem 'Any Saint' Thompson amplifies and intensifies this same strain. This conviction was paramount in Thompson's thinking, and so it was natural for him to see in Nature nothing satisfying for man's soul. Under the unity that is solid Catholic philosophy of life provided, Thompson was able to ransack all sources, pagan or Christian, to lend colour to his canvas, and at the same time preserve an essentially Catholic and often truly mystical tone to his poetry.

Thompson's deep spiritual insight enabled him to see in all external things a manifestation of the presence of God. He would have subscribed to the view of Monsignor Fulton Sheen who wrote: "The universe is a great sacrament. A sacrament, in the strict sense of the word, is a material sign used as a means of conferring grace, and instituted by Christ. In the broad sense of the term, everything in the world is a sacrament inasmuch as it is a material thing used as a means of spiritual sanctification. Everything is and should be a stepping stone to God: sunsets should be the means of reminding us of God's beauty as a snowflake should remind us of God's purity. Flowers, birds, beasts, men, women, children, beauty, love, truth, all these earthly possessions are not an end in themselves, they are only a means to an end. The temporal world is a nursery to the eternal world, and the mansions of this earth a figure of the Father's heavenly mansions. The world is just a scaffolding up which souls climb to the kingdom of Heaven, and when

1. St. Augustine, Confessions, Book I, chapter 1.

the last souls shall have climbed through that scaffolding, then it shall be torn down and burnt with fervent fire, not because it is base, but simply because it has done its work.

"Man therefore partly works out his salvation by sacramentalizing the universe; man sins by refusing to sacramentalize it, or in other words, by using creatures as selfish ends rather than Godward means. Manichaeism is wrong because it considers matter as an evil instead of a 'sacrament'. Epicureanism is wrong because it considers pleasure a God instead of as a means to God. Sacramentalizing the universe ennobles the universe, for it bestows upon it a kind of transparency which permits the vision of the spiritual behind the material. Poets are masters in sacramentalizing creation for they never take anything in its mere material expression; for them things are symbols of the divine."¹

I inserted the quotation at length because it is such a masterly summary of Thompson's attitude. For him, the material world was ever symbolic of the divine, not in any sentimental, pantheistic way but clear and lucid as supernatural faith. To Thompson, all things, from the simple field flower to the setting sun, are singing a hymn to their Creator, a hymn beautiful and many-versed, ever inspiring and uplifting to those with the light of Faith.

In the concluding lines of the 'Orient Ode' Thompson gives us an insight into his creed.

1. Fulton J. Sheen, The Life of All Living. Sheed and Ward, New York, pp. 214-216.

"When men shall say to thee: Lo! Christ is here,
When men shall say to thee: Lo! Christ is there,
Believe them: yea and this - then art thou seer,
When all thy crying clear
Is but: Lo here! lo there! - ah me, lo everywhere!"¹

The theological foundation on which these lines rest is sound and sure; it is the immanence and omnipresence of God by which He is present in all things and yet not, as Pantheism teaches, identified with them. With the sure instinct of a Catholic poet, Thompson sings always in complete harmony with Catholic dogma. God, to be sure, is far above us and distinct from us, yet He is immanent within us and within things. He is veiled from us and invisible to our bodily gaze and yet with the eyes of faith we pierce the veil and see Him. That is the chief function of the beauties of external Nature - to remind us of the presence of God. To Thompson's sensitive soul, the smallest of God's creatures was sufficient to evoke the loftiest insight.

"I do not need the skies'
Pomp, when I would be wise;
.
One grass-blade in its veins
Wisdom's whole flood contains:
Thereon my floundering mind
Odyssean fate can find."²

To eyes sensitized by Faith and Humility, one of the least things in the hierarchy of creation can produce a profoundly penetrating insight. Without that Faith and Humility no true insight is possible. Far from confining his efforts as a Nature Poet, Thompson's

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1. Francis Thompson, Orient Ode, lines 207-211
2. Francis Thompson, All Flesh, lines 1-8.

Catholic Faith was the very means of his greatness. With surety and confidence he referred all things to God their source; he selected from the beauties of earth those that he wanted to embellish his visions of heaven; he voiced for unintelligent Nature the hymns of praise that it owed to its Creator.

IX.

LOVE - NATURAL AND DIVINE

THOMPSON'S VIEWS ON LOVE,

A VIRTUAL COMMENTARY ON HIS VIEWS ON NATURE

A fuller grasp may be had of Thompson's attitude towards Nature by considering his attitude toward human and Divine love. A striking parallel exists in Thompson's treatment of these two themes. As we have seen, Thompson was wont to regard the beauty of external nature as suggestive of spiritual reality, so too he regarded human love as but a prelude and a foretaste of Divine love which men should seek. And even as the contemplation of external nature and a realization of its inadequacy to soothe and sustain man turned men to God, so too, Thompson thought that the essential purpose of human love was to awaken an ardor which it could not satisfy and in this way to turn men to God.

Once again, in his prose works, Thompson has left us a substantial treatment of this subject, and by gathering together the scattered thoughts on this subject of love we can piece together a com-

plete concept of his views. Thompson knew the tremendous change that the promulgation of Christian thought had on the idea of love and in his essay 'Paganism Old and New' he discusses this.

"But after all, the most beautiful thing in love-poetry is Love. Now Love is the last thing any scholar will look for in ancient erotic poetry. Body differs not more from soul than the Amor of Catullus or Ovid differs from the Love of Dante or Shelley; and the root of this difference is the root of the whole difference between this class of poetry in antique and contemporary periods. The rite of marriage was to the Pagan the goal and attainment of Love-Love, which he regarded as a transitory and perishable passion, born of the body and decaying with the body. On the wings of Christianity came the great truth that Love is of the soul, and with the soul coeval."¹

The last statement is the very heart of Thompson's doctrine and he shows that it derived solely from Christianity. "It was just and natural, therefore, that from the Christian poets should come the full development of this truth. To Dante and the followers of Dante we must go for its ripe announcement. Not in marriage, they proclaim, is the fulfillment of Love, though its earthly and temporal fulfillment may be therein; for how can Love which is the desire of soul for soul, attain satisfaction in the conjunction of body with body? 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

1. Francis Thompson, Paganism Old and New. Prose Works, pp.47-48

him, that Love in this world is a pilgrim and a wandered, 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."¹

Thompson stresses the fact that earthly and human love is unsatisfactory in itself unless it is related to the Love of God. The very fact that it is unsatisfactory is at once its weakness and its strength; its weakness, in that it cannot satisfy the desires of the soul, and its strength and greatness, in that it thereby should turn man's mind and heart above to the One Good that can completely fulfill all his desires. Our poet is careful to insist that such a notion never came to the Pagan writers... "The distance between Catullus and the Vita Nuova, between Ovid and the House of Life, can be measured only by Christianity. And the lover of poetry owes a double gratitude to his Creator, Who, not content with giving us salvation on the Cross, gave us also, at the marriage in Cana of Galilee, Love. For there Love was consecrated, and declared the child of Jehovah, not of Jove; there virtually was inaugurated the whole successive order of those love-poets who have 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 sum of all colours."²

Earlier in the same essay Thompson indicates how he associates Nature and Love, and shows the enormous change that Chris-

1. Francis Thompson, Paganism Old and New, Prose Works, p. 48

2. Francis Thompson, Ibid., pp. 48-49.

tian thought made in the treatment of each. "If there are two things on which the larger portion of our finest modern verse may be said to hinge, they are surely Nature and Love. Yet it would be the merest platitude to say that neither the one nor the other, as glorified by our great modern poets, was known to the singers of old. Their insensibility to landscape was accompanied and perhaps conditioned by an insensibility to all the subtler and more spiritual qualities of beauty; so that it would be hardly more than a pardonable exaggeration to call Christianity (in so far as it has influenced the arts) the religion of beauty, and Paganism the religion of form and sense. Perhaps it is incorrect to say that the ancients were indifferent to landscape: rather they were indifferent to Nature. Cicero luxuriates in his 'country', Horace in his Socrate and fitful glimpses of scenery; but both merely as factors in the composition of enjoyment: the bees, the doves of Virgil are mere ministers to luxury and sleep. 'The fool', says Blake in a most pregnant aphorism, 'The fool sees not the same tree as a wise man sees.' And assuredly no heathen ever saw the same tree as Wordsworth. For it is a noteworthy fact that the intellect of man seems unable to seize the divine beauty of Nature, until moving beyond that outward beauty it gazes on the spirit of Nature: even as the mind seems unable to appreciate the beautiful face of woman until it has learned to appreciate the more beautiful beauty of her soul."¹

Thompson points out that the poetry inherent in Paganism

1. Francis Thompson, Paganism Old and New, Prose Works, pp.43-44

was never fully appreciated or exploited by the pagans themselves... "The gods of Homer are braggarts and gluttons; the gods of Virgil are cold and unreal... there was little halo around Latmos' top till it was thrown around it by Keats. No pagan eye ever visioned the nymphs of Shelley... To the pagan mind its divinities were graceful, handsome and noble gods; powerful, and therefore to be propitiated with worship; cold in their sublime selfishness, and therefore unlovable. No pagan ever loved his god. Love he might, perhaps, some humble or domestic deity, - but no Olympian. Whereas, in the Christian religion, the Madonna, and a greater than the Madonna, were at once high enough for worship and low enough for love. Now without love no poetry can be beautiful; for all beautiful poetry comes from the heart. With love it was that Wordsworth and Shelley purchased the right to sing sweetly of Nature. Keats wrote lovingly of his pagan hierarchy, because he wrote about what he loved. Hence for no antique poet was it possible to make, or even conceive, a Pagan Paradise. We, who love the gods, do not worship them. The ancients, who worshipped the gods, did not love them."¹

Thompson's poem 'A Narrow Vessel' was inspired by a slight love-affair of the poet's days at Pantasaph. It is chiefly allegorical, and I mention it here to call attention to Thompson's lengthy explanation of his method and ideals.² "All human love was to me a symbol of divine love; nay, all human love was in my eyes a piteous failure unless as an image of the supreme Love which gave meaning and reality to its seeming insanity."³

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1. Francis Thompson, Paganism Old and New, Prose Works, pp. 40-41.
 2. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, pp. 230-232.
 3. E. Meynell, Ibid., p. 230.

In his comments on the Canticles of St. Francis, Thompson points out that the second Canticle, "emphasizes the fire and torments of that Love which the Saint has rashly tempted to find, alas! that the gates of the beatific Love are guarded by the purgatorial Love."¹

Thompson's intensely spiritual attitude towards and treatment of the theme of Love is but a natural outgrowth of his intensely spiritual nature and the fact that he never experienced the lasting love of a wife. The few small love-affairs that marked his life were transitory and ephemeral, and by their very nature served but to convince our poet that human love in itself could not satisfy the needs and cravings of the human heart. Thompson does not make little of the nobility of married love, but he shows even here the need of sublimation. In his poem 'Ad Castitatem' he shows that virginal love approaches nearer the Divine than any other kind of human love. Addressed to Chastity, note the following verses:

"To tread the floor of lofty souls,
With the Love mingles aureoles;
Who walk his mountain-peak
Thy sister-hand must seek."²

"Where, that the soul of either spouse
Securelier clasp in either's house,
They never breach at all
Their walls corporeal."³

According to Thompson, the natural, human love of paganism which was precursive of the divine, must become the supernatural

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1. Francis Thompson, Sanctity and Song, p.92
 2. Francis Thompson, Ad Castitatem, lines 13-16
 3. Francis Thompson, Ibid., lines 21-24.

human love of Christianity.¹ Though Thompson is here speaking of the Ideal of Christianity, his whole treatment in the poem suggests that only one creature, Mary, has fully realized this ideal. It was perfectly normal that Thompson, a celibate, should have found his ideal and model in the Blessed Virgin of whom he sang so beautifully and with such mystical penetration. For Thompson, Mary was the Moon that reflected perfectly the light of God. She is indeed the gateway to an intimate knowledge and love of God. Her human nature reflected so perfectly the fullness of God's grace within her that she is truly our Human model of love.²

Thus with Love as with Nature, Thompson is never content with merely depicting the human and the material aspects. He alludes but briefly and with the greatest reserve to any personal love he experienced, and the same thing is true of his descriptions of nature; they are rarely concrete and particularized. With both Nature and Love Thompson was wont to emphasize the symbolic spiritual meaning rather than dwell on a careful delineation of physical attributes. To Thompson, both external nature and carnal love were things empty and inadequate. The real nobility of each was to awaken in the soul of man a desire that they could not fulfill, and in this way, to turn the soul of man to God.

1. Francis Thompson, The After Woman.
2. Francis Thompson, The Mistress of Vision.

X.

THOMPSON'S VIEW OF THE ARTIST'S ROLE

As we have already seen, Thompson had a lofty notion of the poet's work. It is a truism to say that all poets take themselves seriously, but few took themselves and their work as seriously as did Francis Thompson. We have noted how he identified Sanctity and Song, and we shall see how he was wont to regard poetic creation as a parallel, if a faint one, of the vast creative force of God.

"In the beginning", Thompson wrote, "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; confessing by manifold tokens, its twofold parentage, quickened with intellectual light, and freshened with 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 of 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."¹

L. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, p^e 310

Elsewhere, Thompson is careful to distinguish between the creative act of God and man: "The Supreme Spirit, creating, reveals his conceptions to man in the forms of Nature. There is no necessity here for any intermediate process, because nobody obstructs the free passage of conception into expression. An ideal awakes in the Omnipotent Painter; and straightway over the eternal dykes rush forth the flooding tides of night, the blue of heaven ripples with stars; Nature from Alp to Alpine flower, rises lovely with the betrayal of the Divine Thought. An ideal wakes in the Omnipotent Poet; and there chimes the rhythm of an ordered universe. An ideal wakes in the Omnipotent Musician; and Creation vibrates with the harmony, from the palpitating throat of the bird to the surges of His thunder as they burst in fire along the roaring strand of heaven."¹

In his poem, 'Carmen Genesis' Thompson gives poetic utterance to these same thoughts:

"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."²

Thompson is conscious of his status as a 'maker', and aware of the fact, through faith, that he is himself made in the image and likeness of God, greater point is given to his idea of the artist's role. It is for him a co-operation with the Divine plan whereby he

1. Francis Thompson, Nature's Immortality, p. 86
2. Francis Thompson, Carmen Genesis. Lines 55-60.

may lead men to see the truth or to see it more clearly. In his comparisons of the poet's role and the work of God as Creator, Thompson is well aware of the vast difference between the two. In a footnote to his statements in 'Nature's Immortality', already mentioned, he goes on to say: "Be it observed that I am not trying to explain anything, metaphysically or otherwise, and consequently my language is not to be taken metaphysically. I am merely endeavouring analogically to suggest an idea. And the whole thing is put forward as a fantasy, which the writer likes to think may be a dim shadowing of truth."¹

Thompson's faith was so sincere, and his concept of his work so elevated that it was but natural that he looked for analogies between God's creative work and his own. As a poet Thompson actually if not verbally dedicated himself to God's honour and glory. Sanctity and Song were ever closely united for him. In the opening paragraphs of his essay on Shelley, he bemoans the fact that the two have become divorced: "The Church, which was once the mother of poets no less than of saints, during the last two centuries has relinquished to aliens the chief glories of poetry, if the chief glories of holiness she has preserved for her own. The palm and the laurel, Dominic and Dante, sanctity and song, grew together in her soil: she has retained the palm but foregone the laurel. Poetry in its widest sense (that is to say, taken as the general animating spirit of the Fine Arts), and when not professedly irreligious, has been too much and too long either misprised or distrusted; too much and too generally the feeling has

1. Francis Thompson, Nature's Immortality, p. 86.

been that it is at best superfluous, at worst pernicious, most often dangerous. Once poetry was, as she should be, the lesser sister and helpmate of the Church; the minister to the mind; as the Church to the soul.. But poetry sinned, poetry fell; and, in place of lovingly reclaiming her, Catholicism cast her from the door to follow the feet of her pagan seducer. The separation has been ill for poetry; it has not been well for religion."¹

Later, in the same essay, Thompson eloquently defends the true value of poetry: "Poetry is the preacher to men of the earthly as you of the Heavenly Fairness; of that earthly fairness which God has fashioned to His own image and likeness. You proclaim the day which the Lord has made, and she exults and rejoices in it. You praise the Creator for His works, and she shows you that they are very good. Beware how you misprize this potent ally, for hers is the art of Giotto and Dante: beware how you misprize this insidious foe, for hers is the art of modern France and of Byron. Her value, if you know not, God knows, and know the enemies of God. If you have no room for her beneath the wings of the Holy One, there is a place for her beneath the webs of the Evil One: whom you discard, he embraces: whom you cast down from an honourable seat, he will advance to a haughty throne; the brows you dislaurel of a just respect, he will bind with baleful splendours; the stone which you builders reject, he will make his head of the corner."²

1. Francis Thompson, Shelley. Prose Works, p.1

2. Francis Thompson, Ibid., pp.-263

Thompson had no mistaken illusions about poetry being a substitute for Religion. "Eye her", he wrote, "not askance if she seldom sing directly of religion: the bird gives glory to God though it sings only of its innocent loves. Suspicion creates its own cause; distrust begets reason for distrust. This beautiful, wild, feline poetry, wild because left to range the wilds, restore to the hearth of your charity, shelter under the rafter of your Faith; discipline her to the sweet restraints of your household, feed her with the meat from your table, soften her with the amity of your children; tame her, fondle her, cherish her - you will no longer then need to flee her. Suffer her to wanton, suffer her to play, so she play round the foot of the Cross."¹

In a splendid passage in the same essay, Thompson describes the imaginative flights that the poet must take in order to gain material for his verse. The faculty of song is, as he says: "the child's faculty of make-believe raised to the Nth power... The universe is his box of toys. He dabbles his fingers in the day-fall. He is gold-dusty with tumbling amid the stars. He makes bright mischief with the moon. The meteors nuzzle their noses in his hands. He teases into growling the kennelled thunder, and laughs at the shaking of its fiery chain. He dances in and out of the gates of heaven; its floor is littered with his broken fancies. He runs wild over the fields of ether. He chases the rolling world. He gets between the feet of the horses of

1. Francis Thompson', Shelley, Prose Works, p.3.

the sun. He stands in the lap of patient Nature, and twines her loosened tresses after a hundred wilful fashions, to see how she will look nicest in his song."¹ Though Thompson is describing the technique of Shelley, it is really his own technique that he is depicting. Both by word and example, he fought against cold perfection of style which removes all vitality and naturalness from poetry.

Against the Aesthetes of his age he wrote: "Over the whole contemporary mind is the trail of this serpent perfection. It even affects the realm of colour, where it begets cloying, enervating harmonies, destitute of those stimulating contrasts by which the great colourists threw into relief the general agreement of their hues. It leads in poetry to the love of miniature finish, and that in turn (because minute finish is most completely attainable in short poems) leads to the tyranny of the sonnet, ballade, rondeau, triolet and their kind. The principle leads again to aestheticism; which is simply the aspiration for a hot-house seclusion of beauty in a world which Nature has tempered by bracing gusts of ugliness."² In poetic style Thompson is anything but a perfectionist, and the consequent gain in vigour and strength is noteworthy. In defence of his own theory and practice Thompson wrote: "Hence arises the dominant belief that mannerism is vicious; and accordingly critics have erected the ideal of a style stripped of everything special or peculiar, a style which should be to thought what light is to the sun. Now this pure white light of style is as impossible as undesirable; it must be splintered into

1. Francis Thompson, Shelley, Prose Works, p.18

2. Francis Thompson, The Way of Imperfection, Prose Works, p.98

colour by the refracting media of the individual mind, and humanity will always prefer the colour. Theoretically we ought to have no mannerisms; practically we cannot help having them, and without them style would be flavourless 'faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null'. Men will not drink distilled water; it is entirely pure and entirely insipid. The object of writing is to communicate individuality."¹

In describing the technique or psychological genesis of artistic creation, Thompson shows penetrating and lucid thought. Though he is speaking of Creative Art, as distinguished from mere photographic representation, he considers it "one in essence with Poetry and Music."² In the process, "there is first the ideal, secondly the mental image of the ideal, thirdly the external or objective reproduction of the mental image in material form and colour, in pigments. Now of these three stages, which is the most perfect creation, and is therefore the most beautiful? They lessen in perfection as they become material; the ideal is the most perfect; the mental image less perfect; the objective image, the painting, least perfect... The reality of the artist's ideal is not the reality of, e.g., a star; for one is man's creation, the other directly from God. Nor is the reality of the artist's ideal the same in kind as the reality of its objective image. The one exists externally, and the senses are cognizant of it; the other within the spirit, and the senses take no account of it. Yet both are real, actual... But were the artist omniscient, so that he could hold all things in perpetual and simultaneous contemplation, the ideal would have an existence as

1. Francis Thompson, The Way of Imperfection, Prose Works, p.102.

2. Francis Thompson, Nature's Immortality, Prose Works, p. 84.

unintermittent as that of the painting, and unlike that of the painting, coeval with the artist's soul."¹

Here is the sharp contrast between the work of the Divine Artist and that of human artists. With God, the Divine Idea, the omnipotent and flawless creation and sustaining providence are all perfect. Thought and execution are indissolubly wedded, and effortlessly perfect. For the human artist (or 'maker', as Thompson likes to call him) there are many obstacles: imperfect concepts of reality, wavering mental images, and difficulty in putting into objective form a faithful representation of the mental notion. Thompson sings of the problem and its consequent misery to the poet:

"Within her eyes' profound arcane
Resides the glory of her dreams;
Behind her secret cloud of hair.
She sees the Is beyond the Seems."²

The 'Is beyond the Seems' is a superb summary of the whole quest of the true creative artist... to see behind and within the external things of nature, to catch the semblance of the Divine Idea in things, and to reproduce in his art his findings for the inspiration of his fellow-man. In the last verse of the same poem, Thompson touches beautifully the pathos and the nostalgia of the artist's life and work. In an adaptation of the lamentation of the Chosen People for the promised land, Thompson tells poignantly of the artist who is alienated from his eternal home:

1. Francis Thompson, Nature's Immortality, Prose Works, pp. 84-85.
2. Francis Thompson, The Singer Saith of His Song, lines 5-8.

"Her heart sole-towered in her steep spirit,
Somewhat sweet is she, somewhat wan;
And she sings the songs of Sion
By the streams of Babylon."¹

Thompson wrote much about poetry. One of his great sentences was "that with many the religion of beauty must always be a passion and a power, that it is only evil when divorced from the primal beauty."² In Catholic poetry it can never be so divorced; in the poetry of Francis Thompson, it is not divorced but wedded as in the richness of the liturgy of the Church or in the souls of the saints.

For Thompson poetry was his great means of drawing men to God: "For poetry is the teacher of beauty; and without beauty men would soon lose the conception of a God, and exchange God for the devil: as indeed happens at this day among many savages where the worship of ugliness and of the devil flourish together. Whence it was, doubtless, that poetry and religion were of old so united, as is seen in the prophetic books of the Bible. When men are not kept in mind of beauty they become lower than the beasts."³ This is the familiar recurring note of Thompson's thought - the identity of Sanctity and Song. For this poet, God, in the highest and most intense moments of union was the solely satisfying experience. The abundant beauty of nature, the exquisiteness of childhood, the desire for human love, all of these caught the heart of our poet, but none of them held it. They were as fleeting glimpses of Reality, and served but to drive his yearning soul onward and upward.

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1. Francis Thompson, The Singer Saith of His Song, lines 9-12
 2. Francis Thompson, Great Catholics, op.cit., p. 414
 3. Francis Thompson, A Renegade Poet on the Poet, Prose Works, p.106

While Thompson was a failure in his longing to become a priest, his apostolic zeal coloured his vocation as an artist. To restore to the maternal care and dogmatic guidance of the Catholic faith the art of poetry which had wandered far from the Father's house was his avowed purpose as a poet. The beauty of his prayerful and poetic soul housed in the ruined tenement of his body is beautifully suggested in this concluding quotation: "The sweet bell never jangled out of tune and harsh, but the wheel was broken and the rope was frayed. The mellow tone that might still be calling the world to prayer was silenced because the frame had decayed through opium and disease."¹

XI. THE CATHOLICITY OF THOMPSON'S NATURE IMAGERY.

In previous pages we have noted the general philosophical principles of Thompson's work and its true Catholic spirit and expression. This section will be concerned with showing the use that Thompson made of our Catholic traditional doctrines in enriching his expression. To Thompson, "Ritual is poetry addressed to the eye."² It was but natural then, for him to see in the ritual of the Catholic Church the great source of his imagery and adornment.

The opening lines of 'The Orient Ode' illustrate admirably Thompson's skill in describing the beauties of nature and asso-

1. Richard Rowe, The Philosophy of Francis Thompson, The Philosopher, April-June 1930.

2. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, p.215.

ciating them with liturgical significance.

"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 orb'd 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."¹

In the passage there are at least sixteen direct references to liturgical associations. Thompson likens the career of the sun to the Blessed Sacrament in the beautiful Catholic devotion of Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. In this service, the priest vested in cope, surplice and stole, and accompanied by acolytes, enters the sanctuary, kneels for a moment, and then ascends the steps that lead to the altar. There he opens the tabernacle, removes the Sacred Host and places it in the golden monstrance for the veneration of the faithful.

The various elements of the analogy drawn in these opening lines of the 'Orient Ode' are sustained with beautiful effect by Thompson. The East is the sanctuary, Day is the vested priest, the Sun is the Sacred Host, the progress of the sun across the sky is the Eucharistic procession, the West is the monstrance and Twilight is the

1. Francis Thompson, Orient Ode, lines 1-15.

acolyte who assists the high priest Day to unvest. "In this new mystical poetry which Thompson made peculiarly his own, 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."¹

Worship is the keynote of Thompson's poetry. The entire universe is the garden of God, the wheeling planets set up a nine-fold wall of magic singing about it, and the golden smoke of adoration lightly ascends from the censer swung by the Mistress of Vision. The solar system is a cathedral receiving the power of the sun, who is worshipped with alternate hymns of death and birth. The sun is but an image of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and the cathedral of nature is a figure of the Catholic Church.

Thompson was equally skilled in exploiting the richness of a single liturgical image. In the 'Hound of Heaven' he has this allusion:

"Quaffing, as you taintless way is
From the chalice
Lucent-weeping out of the dayspring."²

Wright points out the significance of the passage. "The eager straining of the spirit to drink, as from a sacramental cup, along with Nature and all her forces, of the Light of the primal fountain. The fullness of the eternal light is conceived as distilling, one by one, its light-charged drops, like tears into the cup which

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1. Edmund Gardner, The Poetry of Francis Thompson, The Month (London) February, 1898.
 2. Francis Thompson, The Hound of Heaven, lines 70-72

gives delight to all nature: but at the same time it is not obscurely intimated that all which Nature drinks from her chalice is a very small part of the infinite reality, a very few drops from the dayspring."¹⁰ Thompson has pictured Nature, as queen and mother, 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 this place are Nature's children - rain, clouds, trees, plants, and flowers, all banqueting and drinking from the chalices filled with the pure light spilled abroad by the sun at daybreak. The entire passage is borrowed from the idea of the Catholic communicants drawing near to the Sacred Banquet to fill their souls with overflowing graces of Holy Communion, for even as the rising sun vitalizes all the things of nature, so too the graces received in Holy Communion may vitalize the Catholic's life.

Another illustration of Thompson's exploitation of a religious image is seen later in 'The Hound of Heaven'.

"When she lit her glimmering tapers
Round the day's dead sanctities."¹¹

The thought is a familiar one in Thompson's work; everything in nature is sacramental, that is, a sensible sign of some hidden, mysterious power. In this image, Thompson likens evening to a servitor in some dark cathedral going about the building in the deepening dusk, lighting taper after taper. He uses the same image conversely in the 'Fallen Yew', when Doom is likened to a servitor in a vast church, going

1. Francis Thompson, The Hound of Heaven, lines 85-86.

10. Rev. T.H. Wright, Francis Thompson and His Poetry, Harrap & Co., London, p. 52.

about the darkened world on the last day, when man's brief hour of service here is done, 'puffing out' with his breath, one star after another until the whole heaven is dark and still and cold.¹

Thompson shows an astonishing knowledge and insight into the liturgical significance of things in such allusions as this: "The passing showers that rainbows maniple"² The maniple is the ecclesiastical vestment that is worn on the priest's left arm during the celebration of Holy Mass. As has been pointed out, "this line is a manifestation of Thompson's power of observation exercised, it may be among the hills of Sussex. When a rainbow is seen from an elevation that overlooks a great sweep of country, not infrequently a shower in the distance will seem to hang from it like a maniple from the arm of a priest. The real meaning however, of this line is to be found not in external appearances but in the mystical significance interpreted in the spirit of the church's liturgy. The spirit may be best gathered from the prayer said by the priest as he puts the maniple on his arm: "May I be worthy to bear the maniple of weeping and sorrow, that with exaltation I may receive the reward of labour." The symbolic meaning of the maniple is probably based on the circumstance that originally it served the celebrant to wipe off tears and perspiration during the celebration of the Mass, but principally it sprang from a passage in the Psalms, in which the word 'manipulus' is mentioned in the sense of a sheaf of wheat: 'They that now sow in tears shall reap in joy. Going they went and wept, casting their seed; but coming they shall come with joyfulness

1. Francis Thompson, The Fallen Yew, line 13

2. Francis Thompson, The Ode to the Setting Sun, line 10

carrying their sheaves (manipulos suos)'. Consequently, the maniple symbolizes, on the one hand, penitential tears and grief, the toil and hardships of sowing, the suffering and the combating, the works and labours of this perishable life; on the other hand, 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. (The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, Rev. Nicholas Gehr, page 285). From the context it is clear that Thompson uses the maniple as a symbol of the joys of the harvest and the exultation of reward, rather than of the tears and sorrows of sowing."¹

I inserted the foregoing quotation at length for two reasons: first, because of its content and the penetrating interpretation it affords to the line, and secondly, because it illustrates admirably that Thompson's knowledge and adaptation of liturgical symbols was at once profound and filled with significance. Thompson did not content himself with vague and general references to biblical and devotional images; his imagery shows a deep and learned spiritual insight into realities. More admirable still, his familiarity with divine things shows a tender devotion and sincere love.

One of Thompson's most beautiful and effective passages concludes the 'Ode to the Setting Sun'; in it he compares the setting sun to Christ, crucified on Calvary:

1. Terence Connolly, Poems of Francis Thompson, op.cit., p.376.

"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 veil like thine tonight,
Yet lift once more Its light,
And, risen, again departed from our ball,
And when It set on earth arose in Heaven.
Thus hath He unto death His beauty given:
And so of all which form inheriteth
The fall doth pass the rise in worth;
For birth hath in itself the germ of death,
But death hath in itself the germ of birth."¹

Not only is the setting sun a symbol of Christ's death, but also of His Resurrection, the real proof of His Divinity. For just as Christ died to live again, so too with the sun. It does not rise to set, but rather it sets in order to rise again. From Christ's triumph over death, Thompson deduces his conclusion that of the two great mysteries of man's life, Birth and Death, "of these two the fairer thing is Death." The various aspects of Nature reminded Thompson of some supernatural truth, and he clothed his utterances frequently in images drawn from the Church.

In his 'Form and Formalism' Thompson gives us his appreciation of the Church which gave such surety to his utterance and security to his spiritual life. "The Church is like man's body: which grows to completion altering or adding a little in superficialities. and details of figure, but unchanging in essential line and structure. Each bone, muscle, nerve and blood-vessel, though it have increase, is in form, position and constitution immutable. And with the Church, also, which is Christ's body, you may add in non-essentials, you may

1. Francis Thompson, Ode to the Setting Sun, lines 219-230

develop in essentials; but you shall not alter in essentials by so much as a clause of its dogmatic theology."¹ Thompson appreciated the solidity as well as the Divinity of the Catholic Church. To him it was the one stable thing in a universe of variables. In it he sought his security; from its teachings he gained all the essentials of his philosophy; from its ritual he drew the embellishment his imagination needed to clothe his ideas. As we said before, Thompson thought that ritual was poetry addressed to the eye, To him, too, poetry was an affair of ritual and images, The Catholic Church has always realized the importance of stimulating the senses and imagination of her followers, and her solemn ceremonies are elaborated with the greatest care to awaken the spiritual life of man. While her concern is to lead men to God, and while she is preoccupied with the souls of men, the wisdom of the ages makes her realize the importance of using all man's sensible powers to draw him closer to God. "Many think in the head; but it is the thinking in the heart that is most wanted. Theology and philosophy are the soul of truth; but they must be clothed with flesh, to create an organism which can come down and live among men. Therefore Christ became incarnate, to create Christianity. Be it spoken with reverence, a great poet, for example who is likewise a great thinker, does for truth what Christ did for God, the Supreme Truth. And though the world may be loath to admit it, the saint does for truth even more; for he gives to truth his own flesh. What of the man who - like the illustrious

1. Francis Thompson, Form and Formalism, Prose Works, p.75

English Canon of Loreto - should be poet and saint? Ah, 'hard and rarest union' indeed! for he is a twofold incarnation of truth. He gives to it one body which has the life of man, another which has the life of humanity and the diuturnal hills."¹ It must be admitted that Thompson devoted all his artistic talents to the cause of truth, and that he gave eloquent utterance to it, clothing much of it in the orthodox and beautiful garb of dogmatic imagery.

Thompson's poetry sprang from his love of God, from his devotion of the Cross and the Passion, from his reverence for the Blessed Sacrament and the Bride of Christ, from his earnest devotion to the Blessed Virgin, and not from the inspirations of drugs and intoxicants that spurred Coleridge to his frenzied creations. "Thompson was fortunate in utterly believing in all the ramifications of Christian doctrine as expounded by the most astute and subtle Catholic minds, and that in the ritual of the Catholic Church with its tremendous accretions of symbolism, he found infinite riches of imagery. His definite faith supplied his poetry always with a strong underlying framework and the oscillating needle of his sensitive reasoning always returned to what for him was true North. Added to this was his mystical recognition of the validity of the poetic imagination which did not disdain the imaginatively scientific."²

It would be sadly unjust to conclude this section with the implication that Thompson owes all the beauties and splendours of

1. Francis Thompson, *Form and Formalism*, p. 71.

2. C. Williamson, Francis Thompson (in *Great Catholics*), p. 417.

his verse to borrowings from the Catholic masters of phrase. To imply that Thompson did nothing more than dress in pretty Catholic phrases the traditional body of the Catholic Church's dogma, would be a complete error. Thompson drew from the great poetic writings of all time as well. He ranged over all sources, Christian and Pagan for inspiration to bulwark the cause of truth. Most gracefully and effectively he handled the ideas and images drawn from his first love - the Church that is the mystical Body of Christ.

XII. FRANCIS THOMPSON - OUR LADY'S MINSTREL

Since Thompson was a sincere and devoted Catholic, we should naturally expect to find that he had a special reverence for the Blessed Virgin. A few illustrations of just what Mary meant to Thompson will be inserted here, and that, for two reasons. First, to serve as demonstration of the fact that Thompson was a Catholic poet as the title of this study avows, and since devotion to Our Blessed Lady is such a distinctly Catholic doctrine, Thompson's Catholicity may be judged to some extent by evaluating the influence that Mary exercised on his life and thought. Secondly, it is fitting to speak of Thompson's attitude towards Mary for, as we shall see, she was the true 'Mistress of Vision' that guided his mystic yearnings.

To Thompson, devotion to Mary was no more routine thing, accepted as a loyal Catholic since it was a part of the Church's dogmatic tradition. In fact, there seems to be nothing routine in Thompson's attitude toward any aspects of the Church's teaching; this is most true with regards to Mary. The Motto and Invocation to his volume of prose works, after a request for the saints' assistance, reaches this exquisitely perfect little prayer:

"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!"¹

Here surely is no mere lip service, a thing of routine, inserted through an insincere sense of duty. Rather is it the prayerful eloquence of a sincere and devoted client of Mary's, begging her, the Seat of Wisdom, to vitalize and make dynamic the message that Thompson wishes to give to the world.. The lines quoted are additionally significant in that, according to Mrs. Meynell, they were 'the last of his making'² and they reveal the spirit of the poet that endured till the end. Looking backward from the portals of death which he must have known would soon open to relieve his weary, pain-wracked body, Thompson thought of Mary and left his works to posterity under her maternal care. Thompson always wore a medal of the Blessed Virgin around his neck, and he makes a reference to this in one of his poems:

1. Francis Thompson, "Motto and Invocation", lines 14-19.
2. Rev. T. Connolly, Poems of Francis Thompson, p. 557.

"Where, neighboured on my heart with those pure lines
In amity of kindred pureness, lies
Image of Her conceived Immaculate."¹

The coupling of his human love and his love for Mary is frequent in Thompson's poetry. This poem, 'Orison-Tryst', was published after his death, and in an accompanying note to the lines above, Mrs. Meynell said: "This line refers to a medal the poet, during all the years of his London life, wore round his neck. In his last illness, when he was being medically examined, he raised his frail hand to prevent its being temporarily removed; and it went with him to the grave."² The incident is eloquent of the love and veneration that Thompson had for his heavenly Mother. Though it seems to have always existed, solidity must have been given to his devotion to Mary, by the pious practices of his Ushaw school days. A priest, who was Thompson's schoolfellow describes the May Devotions as follows: "No Ushaw man need be told how eagerly all, both young and old, hailed the coming of the 1st of May. For that day, in the seminary, was erected a colossal altar at the end of the ambulacrum nearest the belfry, fitted and adorned with 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 practised with great care, was sung in alternate

1. Francis Thompson, Orison-Tryst, lines 22-24.

2. Rev. T. Connolly, op.cit., p.415.

verses by the choir in harmony, and the whole house in unison. 'Dignare me laudare, te, Virgo Sacrata,' was intoned by the Cantor; 'Da mihi virtutem contra hostes tuos' thundered back the whole congregation; and the priest already robed for Benediction, sang the prayer 'Concede Misericors Deus, etc.' Singing Our Lady's Magnificat, we filed into St. Cuthbert's, and then, as in the Seminary, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament followed. For thirty-one days, excepting Sundays and holidays, this inspiring ceremonial took place - its memory can never be effaced."¹

A careful study of the allusion to the Blessed Mother in Thompson's poetry shows instantly that this early, school-day practice remained deeply rooted in his heart. The following poems, to name only the most obvious, all either rest or contain allusions to some Marian doctrine: 'The Making of Viola', 'Little Jesus', 'Sister Songs', 'Assumpta Maria', 'The Passion of Mary', 'Orison-Tryst', 'The Mistress of Vision'.

Among the doctrinal aspects of Mariology, Thompson treated of her Assumption, Immaculate Conception, Divine Maternity, Seven Sorrows, not to mention her intercessory power and maternal guidance of men. To Thompson, Mary was the model of womanhood and the Mother of fair love. The countless references to Mary in Thompson's work, grew out of his conviction, I think, that the restoration of devotion to Mary would draw souls closer to God. For, even as the so-called Reformers of the sixteenth century, tore apart the seamless robe of Catholic teaching, and belittled the role of the Mother of God

1. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, p. 31.

so too to restore the unity of Revealed Truth, Mary must be restored to her proper place in the temple of God. In his essay, 'Form and Formalism', speaking of the federation of the world, Thompson said: "Yet when it comes (as come I believe it will), it can only be a federation in both government and religion of plenary and ordered dominance. I see only two religions constant enough to effect this: each based on the past - which is stability; each growing to an interior law - which is strength. Paganism and Christianity; the religion of the queen of heaven who is Astarte, and on the queen of heaven who is Mary."¹

The central and vital role that Mary has in Catholic living was obviously appreciated by Thompson, and as Mary's troubadour he was anxious to draw men to God through Mary, even as God had come to men through her.

Without making too much of the point, there is grounds for assuming that Mary exercised her motherly care over Thompson during his outcast days. Assembling details from Meynell we find, "that on the third Sunday of September, 1885, Father Richardson of St, Mary's, Ashton-under-Lyne, delivered a sermon on 'Our Lady of Sorrows', which, Thompson hearing, was the subject of his meditation and two years later, of his poem, 'The Passion of Mary'. It is thought he did not take any notes on the sermon in church, but in the drawing room at home in Stamford Street he made use that same night of pencil and paper."² It was two months after this incident that Thompson left home

1. Francis Thompson, Form and Formalism, Prose Works, p.76.
2. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, p. 46 (footnote)

for the streets of London, and the poem was written, in part at least, during his outcast days. At any rate the manuscript was dropped into the letter-box of Merry England towards the end of February, 1887. The manuscript, most uninviting and repulsive in outward aspect, was at first pigeon-holed by a busy editor, but later rediscovered, and when all attempts to contact Thompson failed, Meynell printed it in Merry England as a possible means of getting in touch with the author.

While it is true that the ultimate meeting of Thompson and the Meynells was the result of letters and some coaxing on Meynell's part, one likes to believe that the real reason of Thompson's 'salvation' from a life of obscurity and degradation was the intercession of the Mother of God in whose honour Thompson's first published poem was written, and to whom he always had the tenderest devotion.

His poem, 'Assumpta Maria', is derived largely from the Office of Our Lady; he had no notion of concealing its origin, but deliberately pointed it out. The prayer to Mary is an admission of his debt,

"Remember me, poor Thief of Song"¹

In a note accompanying an enclosure of poems, including the 'Assumpta Maria', Thompson wrote: "They are almost entirely taken from the Office of the Assumption, some from the Canticle, a few images from the heathen mythology. Some very beautiful images are from a hymn by St. Nerses the Armenian, rendered in Carmina Mariana. You will perceive therefore the reason of the motto from Cowley: 'Thou needst not make new songs,

1. Francis Thompson, Assumpta Maria, line 100

but say the old."¹

Mary did much to inspire Thompson; her image haunts much of his finer verse. He regarded her as the Ideal Woman, and his love for her and her Divine Son were the only satisfying things in his grief erudite heart. Thompson essayed to bring the unbelieving world back to faith and spirituality and God; he knew the role that Mary had in the Divine dispensation, and he invoked her maternal patronage on all his works. "Remember me, poor Thief of Song" is marvellously eloquent of the faith, humility and devotion that filled Thompson's soul.

XIII. FROM NATURE TO SUPER-NATURE VIA GOD'S GRACE

FRANCIS THOMPSON'S MYSTICISM

"Wisdom is easily seen by them that love her,
and is found by them that seek her.
To think therefore upon her is perfect
understanding." (Wisdom, VI)

This is the text with which Thompson introduces his series of poems called 'Sight and Insight'. This wisdom is the thing that Thompson attempts to describe in his 'Mistress of Vision'; As the poet shows, this wisdom comes through prayer, leads us to God through a constant struggle of conforming our lives to that model exemplified by Christ and preserved for us by the Catholic Church.

1. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, p. 173

The active and efficient cause of this union with God is grace, for the end attained far surpasses the reach of purely human means:

"Wisdom's gifts are buried deeper
Than the arm of man can go."¹

"Sometimes, mysticism is indeed but the garment of Thompson's poetry, as in many poems of Love in Dian's Lap. At other times mysticism is the soul of his poetry, or rather its disembodied spirit flying meteorlike to God. Oftenest (as in the sequence that follows) poetry and mysticism are so combined, so lose themselves in one another, that separation means annihilation."² Thompson himself suspected the word 'Mysticism' and his poems, 'Sight and Insight' were issued under that title instead of 'Mystical Poems' as was first contemplated. "The word mystical was abandoned. As Catholic and thinker, he feared association with a label which means anything from mystification to refined and luxurious indolence. Unlike Thompson, the modern mystic shirks the rigid necessities of mental deportment. Like the swimmer who discards half his nimble faculties with his tweeds, and lies, without swiftness or horizon, beating the water with heels shaped for boots and the road, the modern mystic fancies himself a better man out of his element than in it."³

"The mysticism that Thompson sought to avoid was obscur-
ration, a thickening of the mental atmosphere by stray gleams, like

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1. Francis Thompson, Laus Amara Doloris. lines 66-67.
 2. T.J. Hehir, Francis Thompson, Mystic. The Irish Monthly, Aug. 1918.
 3. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, p. 198.

thickening of the air in a dusty room into which a sun-ray slants obliquely. The mysteries offer an excuse for confused thinking; the men and women who discover the doctrine of unity are lost in the jungle of its simplicity. The name of God, and the titles of His attributes must set the generations groping somewhat blindly if they carry no lantern of authority, or if the names of God and His attributes are too often taken into the babbling languages of empirics, or too anxiously coned... For Thompson, religion was never confusion; his mysteries blurred none of the common issues; they were packed as carefully as another man's title deeds; they were, he could have claimed, tied with red tape, cut from the cloth of the College of Cardinals."¹

Thompson too insisted on this clarity of thought and carried the demand for it to great lengths. "A little common sense, he once wrote at a time of a slight misunderstanding, is the best remedy, and I at least mean to have it... There is something wanting in genius when it does not show a clear and strong vein of common-sense... Dante, indeed is a perfect rebuke to those who suppose that mystical genius, at any rate, must be dissociated from common-sense. Every such poet should be able to give a clear and logical prose résumé of his teaching, as terse as a page of scholastic philosophy."²

With the bulwark of the Church's teaching behind him, the Catholic mystic is able to avoid the welter of confusion into which the non-Catholic may fall. He does not confuse the vague with the

1. E. Meynell, *The Life of Francis Thompson*, pp.199-200.
2. Francis Thompson, (In Meynell, *op.cit.*, p.200).

mysterious, the secret with the obscure, and the infinite with the indefinite. He has at once the solidity of Catholic dogmatic teaching to guide his thought, and the centuries of Catholic tradition to rein in his exuberance. More important still, he has available through the sacraments the Grace of God, without which no true mysticism can be present. The Catholic's whole background and environment brings him into contact with the spiritual realities for which the soul thirsts. As long as the Catholic poet can remember, he has been privileged to be present at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, which is the very apotheosis of mysticism. Ralph Adams Cram has spoken eloquently of the manner in which the Catholic Church has utilized the various arts to turn men's minds above. Speaking of the solemn celebration of Mass in a gorgeous cathedral..."within whose walls is passing the ordered pageantry unnumbered generations have built up in beauty, and through the seven arts, to do honour and reverence to the Creator and Redeemer of the world, there present in the Holy Sacrament of the altar. Into it enters every art raised now to the highest point of achievement, and as architecture, painting, and sculpture assemble for the building of the tabernacle itself, so do music, poetry, the drama and ceremonial gather into another great work of art, that prefigures the infinite wonder of heaven itself."¹

In a previous study, 'The Failure of Wordsworth's Mysticism'², I discussed at some length the features of a true, Catholic mysticism. Briefly, here, I will set down the essential features so

1. Ralph Adams Cram, The Heart of Europe. (Quoted by Connolly, op.cit., p. 428.)

2. Master's Thesis, submitted to the University of Ottawa, May 1942.

that we may judge Thompson's poetry in the light of these principles.

First, there is the essential feature of a direct, conscious contact of the soul with God. Each word is significant, and this is the basic claim of all mystics, the immediate, intuitive attainment of God in an active, non-symbolic presentation.¹

Secondly, the contact that the soul makes is with a transcendent God. This too is significant, and for true mysticism the contact must be made with the God of Christian Revelation. The gap between the infinite God and the creatures whom His free act called out of nothing is vastly different from the gap between the First Mover of Aristotle, and the very last thing moved, or between the One of Plotinus and the most insignificant of its emanations. There is nothing particularly distinctive or unique about a direct, personal contact with God as presented in Greek philosophy, but the union of a creature with the Christian God is indeed a transforming experience. For true mysticism, this union must be with God, not a sentimental attraction for His creatures. In fact, the created effects of God must be put aside if the soul is to reach the heights of union. "The soul must of necessity, if it would attain to the divine union with God, pass through the dark night of mortification of the desires and self-denial in all things. The reason is this: all the love we bestow on creatures is in the eyes of God, mere darkness, and while we are involved therein, the soul is incapable of being enlightened and possessed by the pure and simple light of God, unless we first cast that love away. He who loves creatures be-

1. Joseph Maréchal, Mysticism, Burns, Oates, Washburne, London, 1927, (Translated by Thorold), p. 199.

comes vile as that creature itself, and in one sense even viler, for love not only levels, but subjects also the lover to the object of his love."¹

It must be noted that the Catholic mystic's experiences are not regarded as the supreme proof of the existence of God... an error that has blighted the religion of our day, when the intuitions of individuals are set up as the strongest testimony of Reality. On the contrary, the Catholic Church has ever refused to base any dogma or any practice of religion on the private revelations made to them without holding them up to the most rigid examination. Too, if the purported private intuitions of Divine Reality in any way conflict with the accepted norms of faith, they are branded as spurious, and condemned as dangerous. This is at once the safeguard and the strength of the Catholic mystic. He knows when he is wrong; he has a clearly defined pathway to the Truth.

A third characteristic of Christian mysticism which is readily seen from the discussion of the second point above, is the withdrawal from the senses. This too stands in sharp contrast to the experiences of the so-called 'nature-mystics', who maintained that a certain sensuous ravishment was the prelude to vision. The fact is that "not only is sensible knowledge left behind, but even the ordinary processes of the mind are left in abeyance, so that the culmination of the mystical experience is supra-intentional, i.e., direct, and not by means of a representative idea."²

1. St. John of the Cross, The Living Flame of Love, Canto XV, 5.

2. C. Butler, Western Mysticism, Dutton, New York, 1927, p. LXVII.

A fourth and final feature of all true mysticism in the Christian tradition, and one that is a necessary preamble to reaching the loftiest mystical states, is asceticism. "According to the saints, the soul which for the love of God, labours to strip itself of all that is not God, is soon penetrated with light, and so united to God that it becomes like Him and enters into the possession of all His goods."¹ This ascetical note is but an echo of St. Paul's: "I chastize ~~my~~ body and bring it into subjection,"² and can be seen in varying degrees of intensity in the lives of all the saints down through the centuries. As long as the soul is enmeshed with creatures, it cannot soar to God.

Recapitulating then, the mystical union is beyond the natural powers of the human soul, and it is supernatural both regarding its object and its method. Before knowledge can result there must be a proportion between object and faculty, between the thing known and the knower. Now the human intellect is a faculty of the soul united to the body, and its object cannot be pure ideas, but must be ob-jective concepts abstracted from matter. It follows then that God cannot be the natural object of our intellect because He is not a body. The human intellect may know the existence of God by its unaided powers in a negative way only. It may reach a knowledge too of some of His attributes, but the direct, positive knowledge of the essence of God is entirely outside its natural range. The power that can lift man's soul to God is grace.³

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1. Garrigou-Lagrange, R. Christian Perfection and Contemplation.
B. Herder, St. Louis, 1937, p.23.
 2. St. Paul, First Corinthians, IX, 27.
 3. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Pars Prima, Q.84, A.7.

It is in the light of these principles that Thompson's poetry must be evaluated before we can apply to him the much misused term 'mystical'. That his poems 'Sight and Insight' can stand such a test has been asserted. "It is this Catholic mysticism that permeated the poetical utterances of Thompson in Sight and Insight, whether his theme is external nature, life, love, prayer, or God Himself. His vision is clear with the clarity of the illuminative way that has been attained by the purgative in the free choice of Calvary and the rejection of chaos; his love is pure with the purity of refined silver from which the fire of suffering has burned the least trace of sin's alloy until the silver, symbol of man's life, reflects the clear image of God."¹

It is in 'The Mistress of Vision' that Thompson reaches the height of his mystical expression. There is a parallel between this poem and 'The Hound of Heaven' as has been pointed out. "Do you wish to fly from God? cried St. Augustine, then fly to Him! This idea which filled the most splendid of Thompson's poems, The Hound of Heaven, was presented in converse in The Mistress of Vision. There God is no longer the open pursuer, as in one of the poems of St. John of the Cross, the quarry that the eagle, the soul follows upon remorseless wings. In that audacious flight, the soul, according to Thompson, as to all Christian mystics, is borne up by pain."²

1. J.T. Connolly, The Poems of Francis Thompson. op.cit., p.428.

2. E. Meynell, The Freeman, June 20, 1923.

"From the fall precipitant
These dim snatches of her chant
Only have remained mine; -
That from spear and thorn alone
 May be grown
For the front of saint or singer any divinizing twine."¹

After his fall to earth from the realms of ecstatic contemplation only these dim snatches of the chant sung by the Mistress of Vision remained with him. Through life's sufferings alone, borne in the spirit of Christ, can either saint or poet rise to the heights of his vocation. That Thompson's life was marked by a cheerful acceptance of pain and suffering has already been shown; that these were the purgative preludes to his vision would but show that he was following the traditional way of Catholic saints. The treatment of pain with Thompson, as we have seen, was central in his theory of life. Both his poetry and prose show his insistence on the necessity of sacrifice for the salvation of the individual soul as well as for the regeneration of the world and of poetry.

Thompson does not make the mistake of confusing nature and God. As we have seen, his treatment of the various aspects of life and thought were coloured by his sound Catholic philosophy. Even in such poems as the 'Orient Ode' which is religiously adapted to the glory of God, Thompson senses the danger of misconstruction and misinterpretation on the part of some and recants what he calls 'his bright sciential idolatry'. "What profiteth it a man, he asks in effect,

1. Francis Thompson, The Mistress of Vision, lines 107-112

if he gain the whole sun but lose the true Orient - Christ?"¹

Never does Thompson imply that purely sensory or even intellectual effort is sufficient for the loftiest attainments of mystical knowledge. He does use the data of natural lore and of science to heighten his comparisons, as when he speaks of the quiet that suffuses the soul in contemplation:

"No hill can idler be than I;
No stone its inter-particled vibration
Investeth with a stiller lie;
No heaven with a more urgent rest betrays
The eyes that on it gaze."
.
To human things he grows a desolation,
.
He scarcely frets the atmosphere
With breathing, and his body shares
The immobility of focks;
His heart's a drop-well of tranquility."²

In spite of the apparent inactivity of all his powers, Thompson is careful to emphasize the vitalizing activity that goes on within his soul. Unlike the oriental mystic whose ideal was to achieve the cessation of all activity, Thompson, with the Catholic mystics states that:

"He round the solemn centre of his soul
Wheels like a dervish, while his being is
Streamed out with the set of the world's harmonies,
In the long draft of whatsoever sphere
He lists the sweet and clear
Clangor of his high orbit on to roll,
So gracious is his heavenly grace."³

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1. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, p. 201.
 2. Francis Thompson, Contemplation, lines 30-64.
 3. Francis Thompson, Contemplation, lines 68-74

This passage seems to indicate the presence of the mystical state called the prayer of quiet. "As the name implies, the prayer of quiet is that in which the soul experiences an extraordinary peace and rest, accompanied by delight or pleasure in contemplating God as present."¹ In other words, Thompson seems to have reached the goal of all saintly souls - a direct, intuitive attainment of God.

Tracing the poet's spiritual autobiography, we come upon a most significant passage in the poem placed immediately following 'Contemplation', This poem, 'The Dread of Height', reveals the soul's dread of the heights of spiritual illumination. Aware of his potential cousinship with mire, Thompson contrasts this with the lofty graces granted by God which enables him to reach such heights; he is aware that the grace of God has lifted him; he appreciates this gift; and he realizes that it is a gift. Without it he would be mire; and having been granted this divine privilege, he realizes how terrible would be his fall...

"For low they fall whose fall is from the sky"²

We must not construe this as despair on Thompson's part. It is but an appreciation of the words of the Imitation: "I have never found any so religious and devout, that he had not sometimes a withdrawal of grace. There was never a Saint so highly rapt and illuminated, who before or after was not tempted. For he is not worthy of high con-

1. A. Devine, Vol 12 of Encyclopaedia Catholic, p. 608, 1911.
2. Francis Thompson, The Dread of Height, line 57.

temptation of God who has not been troubled with some tribulations for God's sake."¹

While in some parts of the poem Thompson stresses the spiritual strength and consolations gained in his visions, in other parts he stresses the desolation resulting from temptation. In this he shows his balance. The visions of the true mystics may be fleeting, however real they be. They do not confirm a soul in glory; they merely whet the soul's appetite for it. All the more, they compel the realization of the enormity of sin and the constant danger of falling from grace. Thompson seemed to have anticipated the modern world's disregard of hell, and even from the heights, called striking attention to it. Nowadays, with that convenient forgetfulness which leaves on one side all troublesome, unmanageable evidence, many persons attempt to reduce Christian teaching to an amiable flood of indefinite urbanity, in word if not always in deed. Setting aside all the warning and denunciation of the Gospels, they proclaim the impossibility, the unthinkable-ness of Divine punishment. Not so Thompson, who insisted on man's obligation to repent, openly, avowedly and to some purpose. In an agony of apprehension, he confesses that eventually he may find himself:

"Thrust down by how much I aspire."²

There follows the re-emphasized thought:

"And ever with victorious toil
When I have made
Of the deific peaks dim escalade,

1. The Imitation of Christ, Book II, Ch.IX, 7.

2. Francis Thompson, The Dread of Height, line 64.

My soul with anguish and recoil
Doth like a city in an earthquake rock,
As at my feet the abyss is cloven then,
With deeper menace than for other men,
Of my potential cousinship with mire."¹

Herein can be seen the reason of Thompson's so-called gloominess and pessimism. If such be, surely they are a gloom and pessimism of submission and fear, not of revolt. In truth, are they not the sound realism of a balanced soul who realizes the full possibilities of human life, and is not enamoured of the attractive aspects only? The tragic tone that pervades much of the world's greatest literature inevitably follows the visions. The things of nature must indeed seem insignificant to one who has glimpsed even fleetingly the eternally unfading beauties of God. Having breathed the pure air of mystic regions, the common things of life lose their savour, Haunted and sustained by secret memories, such a soul inevitably keeps a lonely habitation. Of such a kind is Thompson's alleged pessimism and morbidity. It is a commonplace of the mystics that contemplation is painful. St. John of the Cross's warning is one of many.

'The Dread of Height' is in reality a commentary on the last lines of St. Bernard's prayer to Our Lady in Dante's behalf, a prayer spoken at the supreme moment of vision:

"This also I entreat of thee, O Queen!
Who canst do what thou wilt! that in him thou
Wouldst after he hath beheld, preserve
Affections sound and human passions quell."

(Paradiso, Canto XXXIII).

1. G. Hodgson, Criticism At a Venture, Erskine MacDonald, London, pp. 81-82.

Gardner points this out and adds: "no prose commentary upon these lines has ever excelled in value and insight Thompson's 'The Dread of Height', an ode for which students of Dante cannot be sufficiently grateful."¹

Without disproportionately treating of this aspect of Thompson's poetry, it does reflect the essential features of Catholic mysticism. There is the direct contact with a transcendent God; there is complete withdrawal from the senses; there is complete reliance on God's grace; there is a constant and consistent spirit of mortification. Surest of all marks there is humility and a beautiful child-like spirit of simplicity.

A poem found among our poet's remains is noteworthy as the last and at the same time one of the most characteristic of his works. Bearing the double title, 'In No Strange Land', and 'The Kingdom of God Is Within You', this unfinished poem holds in retrospect, as Meynell puts it, "the days and nights of human dereliction which the poet spent beside London's river, and in the shadow - but all radiance to him - of Charing Cross."²

Though this little poem lacks the finish of some of the polished masterpieces, it shows the same daring of conception and the same insight to be discerned by eyesight that is spiritual. The same audacity which symbolizes God as the pursuing Hound, depicts Jacob's ladder pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross, and Christ walking on the water not of Gennesareth but Thames. It is in dealing with his favourite subject of the intimacy of God, that our poet whose heart

1. E. Gardner, The Poetry of Francis Thompson, The Month, February 1898.
2. E. Meynell, The Works of Francis Thompson, Poems, Vol.2, p.227.

was warmed by the Divine presence as he sold matches in the streets, displays his greatest charms. Racked as he was by constant pain, he stood true to his visions with enduring patience. His was indeed the martyrdom of living: to deliver his message he prolonged his life to the uttermost. That he lived so long was due to his unconquerable mind and his indomitable will to live - to live and sanctify the bodily suffering of his later years.

In all his days of desolation he was sustained by the light within, feasting his gaze on the world invisible and proclaiming to all the world the high things that lie below the lowly:

"O World invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!
.
Not where the wheeling systems darken,
And our benumbed conceiving soars! -
The drift of pinions, would we hearken,
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors."

The whole hierarchy of Creation bespeaks of God, if men could but see the touches of His hand:

"The angels keep their ancient places;-
Turn but a stone and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,
That miss the many-splendoured thing."

Physical suffering, mental distress, life amid the most sordid surroundings, none of these need cloud the vision:

"But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry; - and upon thy sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched betwixt heaven and Charing Cross."

Unpromising may be the setting, bleak may be the surrounding, sharp may be the contrast between the ugly, polluted waters of London's river of commerce, and the clear, blue waters of the Sea of Galilee, but the spirit of God is no slave to time or place, but is ever present to lend an encouraging and sustaining hand.

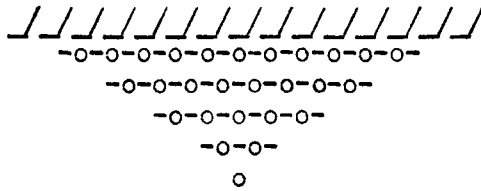
"Yes, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,
Cry, - clinging Heaven by the hems;
And lo, Christ walking on the water
Not of Gennesareth, but Thames."¹

A beautiful and at the same time penetrating commentary on this poem is given in a description of the poet. "In memory, I see him one miserable November afternoon communing with the Seraphim, and frolicking with the younger Cherubim in Chancery Lane. The roads were ankle-deep in slush; a thin, icy rain was falling; the yellow fog enveloped the pedestrians squelching down the lane, and, going through them in a narrow path, I saw Francis Thompson, wet and mud-spattered. But he was not unhappy. What is a day of unpleasant weather to one who lives in eternity? His lips were moving, his head was raised, his eyes were humid with emotion, for above the roof of the Chancery Lane Safe Deposit Company, in the murk of fog, he saw beatific visions. They were his reality, not the visible world."²

This is the real Thompson that I have come more and more to appreciate as this study has progressed. One must avoid the danger of drawing unwarranted conclusions beyond the scope of this study, but I

1. Francis Thompson, In No Strange Land, (selected verses).
2. E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, p. 255.

feel obliged to insert the personal conviction that Francis Thompson was a soul specially favoured by God, and that he reached consistently the lofty regions of spiritual truth. All the external features of his life bespeak a detachment from the things of this world. At the same time the spirit and content of his poetry speak eloquently of his attachment to the things of God.



C H A P T E R S I X

C O N C L U S I O N

A Catholic view of life is fixed on essentials, and flexible on incidentals. That is, it is firm and immobile on matters of dogma and morals, and at the same time, it is not bound to any political, economic or social system as long as certain fundamental principles of morality are upheld. So too in the realm of literature, the Catholic writer, as long as he preserves the true principles of morality, may write what and how he chooses.

In evaluating the Catholicity of a given writer, it is not sufficient to take a few isolated examples of his work and show that they conform to the traditional views of the Church. Such examples of orthodoxy might be gleaned in the work of one who has little knowledge of and less sympathy for our Catholic heritage. It is rather from the whole temper and content of a writer's work that we may safely judge his consistency as a Catholic thinker. What may have been a truth, expressed at one moment of a writer's life, may have been a chance discovery, something overheard, a borrowing from an admired master or, simply, sound reason at work. It is improbable, though, that a writer could consistently express a Catholic philosophy and not at the same time sympathetically hold to the Church's teachings.

Catholic thought everywhere colours Francis Thompson's work. Both in content and imagery, his is evidently a Catholic mind.

Whether he writes of external nature, the child, suffering, grace, the mysteries of religion, the Blessed Virgin or God Himself, he reflects a profound understanding and intelligent insight into the doctrines of the Catholic Church. In a negative way too, the works of Thompson show an absence of any dubious doctrines or questionable emphasis or unsympathetic treatment of traditional Catholic teaching. Since his early education was designed to prepare him for the priesthood, Thompson had the benefit of a sound schooling; the correctness and penetration of his thought illustrate how effective that schooling must have been. However, our purpose here is to summarize and not to canonize, and rather than restate all the various aspects of Thompson's nature philosophy, a general recapitulation of its spirit and content will be given.

Thompson began his literary career at a time when the English poets had generally lost their feeling for the supernatural. This loss was no sudden departure, but rather the slow growth of a hundred years of naturalistic philosophy. Stemming from Rousseau, and introduced into the main stream of English letters by Wordsworth, a hybrid concept of God and Nature filled the minds and the works of successive poets. Each shade of error held sway at one time or another. Gradually the attributes applicable to God were divorced from Him and ascribed to Nature, and ultimately, as the scientific theories of the last half of the nineteenth century asserted the cruelty and tyranny encased in Nature, this was lost as a substitute for religion, and complete skepticism or cynicism reigned in the minds of poets. The idea of Divine Providence had been previously supplanted by the idea of a Purposeful

Nature, and when this latter concept was diluted or denied there was little left for the human mind to cling to. An unjust burden and unfair role had been assigned to Nature by the Romantic poets, and Nature was crushed beneath a weight that she was never intended to bear. Far from being a compliment, this false glorification of Nature proved a detriment. Where excessive praises had been heaped on Nature in the beginning of the century, excessive blame was her fate at the end. Each error was equally absurd, for since nature is an impersonal thing she is oblivious alike to eulogy or invective.

This insistence on the absolute unresponsiveness of Nature was a fundamental point in Thompson's philosophy. He based his entire scheme of nature~~s~~ thought on the tenet that nature was a creature of God, fashioned through His divine mercy and reflecting His wisdom in all its myriad wonders. Nature was designed intelligently, and operated according to fixed laws. Devoid of all qualities except those God gave her, nature neither sought, was aware of, nor reciprocated man's importunities. Purely illusory was any response that man derived from nature.

From this basic point of nature's unresponsiveness, Thompson developed the ideas of nature's and man's dependence on God. The new life which Christ brought into the world affects not only man, but, in a way, the whole of nature. The liturgical prayer read on Holy Saturday illustrates this: "May the whole world experience and see that what was cast down is raised up; that which is grown old is made new; that all things may return to a perfect state through Him for whom they received their beginning, Our Lord Jesus Christ, Thy Son." 1

1. Prayer prior to Third Prophecy read on Holy Saturday.

Since the equilibrium of nature was disturbed through the entrance of sin into the world (at least by its misuse on the part of man), the terrestrial universe also awaited the restoration of all things through Christ. In making common bread and wine to participate in the Sacrament of His Body and Blood, Christ elevated inanimate Nature to a new plane of nobility. This same sense of the 'sacramental' character of nature constantly dominated Thompson's thought. There is no nature-heresy, no uncertainty, no tinge of pantheism in his philosophy but the clear and consistent realization that nature, fresh from the hand of God, is a perpetual reminder of God's over-flowing generosity. Nature was to Thompson an effect of God, and no sane suitor lavishes on the servant the praises reserved for the King.

Thompson found in the doctrine of the Mystical Body the unity that the Romantic poets thirsted for, and this saved him from the shallows of materialism and the disillusionment of pantheism. The one possible unifying principle of all things was Christ and His teachings which Thompson found in the bosom of the Catholic Church. External nature partook of this unity in so far as it symbolized the universal reign of Christ. The 'Orient Ode' for example, is sung not to the sun but to Christ, Who is the true Orient. And just as the rising sun symbolized the benedictions of Christ on the world, so too the setting sun is a reminder of the Crucified Christ hanging on the glorious rood of the western sky. And the sunset too, an apparent death, is only the prelude to Resurrection.

All things in nature seemed to Thompson to be sacerdotal, i.e. instruments of holiness, and in his use of Catholic imagery and

epithet in describing external nature, he must be classed as one of the first and foremost of the poets of the Liturgical Revival.

An age like our own that has been indifferent or hostile to the things of the spirit has failed to take Francis Thompson to its heart. His 'Hound of Heaven' enjoyed a vogue, but to most, if not totally unknown, Thompson remains a man of one poem, and his significance as a nature poet is not appreciated. It may be of course, that time will remedy this for there are many poets, whom the verdict of time has placed among the immortals, who were slow of recognition. Coleridge, Keats, and to a greater extent Wordsworth, may be cited as examples of poets whose works remained enshrined for many years in the breasts of comparatively few readers. It need occasion no special surprise then, that Thompson's poetry, although hailed with delight by the discerning, has not attained the range that its merits deserve. Poetry like his, meant to enlarge and elevate the mind, rather than to tickle the vanity or follow the fashions of the age, must needs await the years that will sift away the chaff and leave what is permanent and worthwhile.

Poetry that is to endure must possess certain essentials: melody of rhythm, fertility of ideas, beauty of sentiment, skilful blending of words and the faculty of seeing what is dark to others. To say That Francis Thompson had a wonderful and fascinating melody of rhythm, a profusion of the noblest ideas, a deep, reverent and ever-present sense of the beauty in this world, extraordinary range of subject and a complete mastery over many kinds of versification, is not to exceed but to fall below the pronouncements of many great authorities.¹ But over and above this richness and profusion of essentials

L. Francis Doogan, The Catholicity of Francis Thompson. (Pamphlet 383)
The Australian Catholic Truth Society, Melbourne, p. 7.

Thompson possesses a surer portent of immortality - a sublimity of Truth and a loftiness of insight that will withstand the ravages of time. While glowing pictures, striking flashes of imagination and finished touches of loveliness abound in Thompson's poetry, it is on the fundamental core of truth that his claim to fame must rest. Faith illuminating his poetic insight with the evidence of things not seen, will be the means of bringing his name into an honoured place among a generation of readers that will more appreciate the things of God. As long as the Church of Christ endures, and that will be forever, the name of Thompson will be treasured at least by the discerning few, for no one has sung more zealously or with a purer intention of the glories of Christ's spouse.

Thompson was indifferent to the plaudits of the world. What he did desire was the love of his friends, and this he had in unstinted abundance. He sang not necessarily to please men, but rather to instruct and inspire them, and to direct their thoughts and ideals to the Truth. The fact that his message was taken to heart by only a few in no way discouraged him, and as I indicated earlier, Thompson's so-called morbidity derived solely from his humble consciousness of the heinousness of sin.

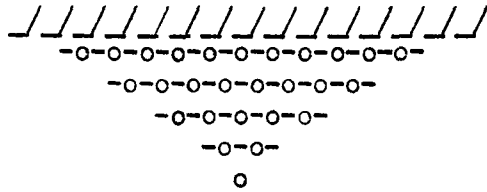
Francis Thompson never was, nor do I think he ever will be, a popular poet in the sense that everyone will read him. He is much too difficult for that. His is no more the poetry for an idle man looking for some light reading than is Browning's. He takes an idea and develops it, adding layer on layer of thought with the insight of the seer and the enthusiasm of the mystic on fire in his consciousness

of the supernatural. He roams heaven and earth, the pagan classics and Sacred Scriptures, mythology and modernity in quest for comparisons to illustrate his thought. The wonder is that, being so heavily weighted with thought and symbol, he should proceed so smoothly. But lucidity and clarity of thought shine through the accumulated wealth of phrase and image, and Thompson's mysticism is never merely mist.

A most remarkable feature of Thompson's thought is its unwavering certainty. While poets like Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning speak of their spiritual experiences in a more or less confused and uncertain way, the spiritual experiences of Thompson are as real as the physical. He stated his stark doctrine of renunciation most emphatically, and his life of heroic abnegation and self-denial showed that he practiced what he taught. The total lack of ostentation and the absence of any strains of self-pity indicate the sincerity of his convictions; the noble reserve that marks his personal allusions remove any taint of hypocrisy.

In some characteristics, Francis Thompson stands apart from and above any other English poet. In the qualities that are peculiarly his own - the combination of insensuous passion and spiritual fervour, courtly love and saintly reserve, ecclesiastical pageantry and liturgical splendour, and in the loftiest reaches of Catholic mystical theology, he is unique. From the Catholic point of view, no English poet excelled Thompson in the dedication of his talents to singing of Eternal Truth. The richness of Sacred liturgy found eloquent expression in Thompson's poetry, and the Catholic has an enormous advantage in appreciating the grandeur of his verse, for he sings in accents that are part of our tradition.

We need have no fear of Thompson's future. His name will not be forgotten, for he sings too fervently of those things which are to be with us all days, even to the consummation of the world.



Octave of the Epiphany, 1944.

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