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Francis Thompson: The Man and the Poet in Sister Songs

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FRANCIS THOMPSON
THE MAN AND THE POET IN SISTER SONGS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts in Loyola University.

VITA AUCTORIS

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

It is curious but never-the-less true that Francis Thompson, one of the major poets of the nineteenth century, is also one of the least understood and consequently one of the least appreciated by the average reader. That he is too Catholic to be catholic has become a popular paradox with just enough truth in it to be pleasantly false. For the fact remains that even by the ordinary Catholic reader he is neither fully grasped nor justly rated.

The customary charge, and it is a valid one, brought by even the Catholic reader against the poems of Thompson is that they are obscure. Many reasons may be assigned for this obscurity. The poems abound with intricate imagery. They apparently lack sequence of thought. Unusual words and phrases, Latin and archaic English, are found on every line. They deal constantly with the supernatural, and are packed with minute autobiographical references.

It is the purpose of this thesis to prove that, despite the validity of these objections, the poems of Francis Thompson can be read intelligently and appreciatively if the reader possesses a definite knowledge of the events in Thompson's

life and a clear understanding of his poetic theory.

In order to grasp fully the meaning of any lyric poem, it is necessary, from the very nature of this kind of poetry, to possess a definite knowledge of the poet's biography. As Dom Verner Moore in a monograph on Shelley so aptly states:

...The more one studies poets and their lives the more one realizes that their poetry is conditioned by the personal element of their inner experience. Their poetry is a cryptogram to which the biography supplies the key. The two together reveal a human individual in his innermost being....The poetry is written in a code that only those can understand who know the poet. (1)

If this is true in the case of any lyric poet, it is even more certain when the poet under consideration is Francis Thompson. He himself in a letter to Wilfrid Meynell admits that "verse written as I write it is nothing less than a confessional far more intimate than the sacerdotal one." (2) Wilfrid Meynell, in an unpublished letter to the writer of this thesis, dated July 11, 1934, writes, "And of course his poetry is packed with autobiography."

The reason for choosing Thompson's poetic theory as the second major obstacle in the path to an intelligent interpretation of his poems is rather obvious. In the first place, Thompson intersperses most of his longer poems with discourses on the destiny of a true poet, on poetic inspiration, and on the capriciousness of true poetic fancy. And he usually

veils these passages in luxurious imagery destined to baffle the reader who does not possess a previous knowledge of Thompson's poetic theory.

Moreover, in the chapters on Thompson's poetic theory will be grouped answers to many of the charges of obscurity mentioned above, namely, his use of imagination and imagery in a peculiar way, the irregularity of his metre, and the lack of thought sequence.

It is obviously impractical and almost impossible to show the necessity for autobiographical information by analyzing all or even most of his poetry. Some choice must be made. This thesis will discuss thoroughly but one of Thompson's poems, Sister Songs. This poem has been chosen for two reasons. It is one of Thompson's greatest poems, if not the greatest, and it is one of the most obscure. It was shortly after the publication of Sister Songs that Arnold Bennett wrote in the Woman for July 3, 1895:

My belief is that Francis Thompson has a richer natural genius, a finer poetical equipment than any poet save Shakespeare. Show me the divinest glories of Shelley and Keats, even of Tennyson, and I think I can match them all out of this one book. (3)

In the poem itself Thompson writes:

Oh! may this treasure galleon of my verse,
Fraught with its golden passion, oared with
 cadent rhyme,
Set with a towering press of fantasies,
Drop safely down the time. (Pt. 11, 11.587-590)

Thompson also realized the obscurity of Sister Songs. Lines 616-628 in Part 2 read:

Yet wail, my spirits, wail!
So few therein to enter shall prevail.
Scarce fewer could win way, if their desire
A dragon baulked, with involuted spire,
And writhen snout spattered with yeasty fire.
For at the elfin portal hangs a horn
Which none can wind aright
Save the appointed knight
Whose lids the fay-wings brushed when he was born.
All others stray forlorn,
Or glimpsing through the blazoned windows scrolled,
Receding labyrinths lessening tortuously
In half obscurity.

If the poem Sister Songs can be intelligently enjoyed through a knowledge of the facts of Thompson's external and internal life and through an understanding of his poetic theory, then poems less difficult of interpretation can easily be appreciated by means of a similar study.

The purpose of the thesis, then, is to show that the meaning of the poems of Francis Thompson can only be unraveled fully by one who understands the autobiographical references in the poems and the poetical theory of the poet. This will be done by examining Sister Songs, explaining the personal references by means of the known facts of the author's life, and clarifying the meaning of the entire poem by an exposition of his poetic theory.

All the autobiographical passages in Sister Songs refer to two important phases of Thompson's life, his relations with the Meynell family, and his experiences as an outcast on

the London streets. These two divisions will form the second and third chapters of the thesis.

The fourth chapter will contain Thompson's views on poetry mentioned in Sister Songs, namely, the poet a dedicated spirit, the alliance of pain and poetry, and the inspiration of the poet. The fifth chapter will be a continuation of the discussion of poetic theory, treating mainly imagery, imagination, form, and metre.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

- 1) Moore, Thomas Verner, Percy Bysshe Shelley, p. 5.
- 2) Meynell, Everard, The Life Of Francis Thompson, p. 103.
Any quotations from this biography will refer to the first edition.
- 3) ibid., p. 149-150

CHAPTER TWO

THOMPSON AND THE MEYNELL FAMILY

Sister Songs; an Offering to Two Sisters was written in a penny exercise book in 1891. The original title of the poem was Amphicypellon, Wrought and Upbrimmed for Two Sisters, with an Inscription. (1) At the instigation of Mr. Meynell the title was changed twice and finally assumed its present form. The poem is an expression of Thompson's love for the two Meynell girls, Sylvia and Monica, and was presented to these two sisters in 1895 as a Christmas gift. (2)

Since this chapter purposes to examine excerpts from the poem that have reference to Thompson's relations with the Meynell family, it will contain both a brief summary of Thompson's life and a minute explanation of those portions which treat of his friendship with the Meynells.

Born in 1859 at Preston in Lancashire, Francis Thompson entered St. Cuthberts in Ushaw with the intention of studying for the priesthood, but after seven years was advised to leave. Shortly afterwards he entered the medical school of Owens College in Manchester. After acquiring the habit of taking drugs he left Manchester in 1884 without a degree, quarrelled with his father, and ran away to London. For three years he lived there as a tramp, half crazed with drug,

writing bits of prose and poetry on odd scraps of paper. In 1889 he contributed a poem to Wilfrid Meynell's Merry England. Recognizing the genius of the contributor, Meynell got in touch with Thompson, sent him first to a private hospital in London, then to a Premonstratensian Priory at Storrington to recover his drug shattered health. In 1890 Thompson, returning to London, lived constantly under the influence of the Meynells. Two years later he retired to the intensely Catholic atmosphere of the Capuchin monastery at Pantasaph, Wales. Four years later he returned to London, contracted consumption, and died after a long illness on Nov. 13, 1907.

Thompson, then, owed a great debt to the Meynell family, and especially to Wilfrid Meynell, for discovering and nurturing his poetic talent. One way in which he paid that debt was by writing Sister Songs in praise of two of the Meynell children. Yet in this very payment he contracted another debt, for the Meynell children were providing the inspiration for both this and other great lyrics. Three poems were dedicated to Monica, "The Poppy", "To Monica Thought Dying", and "To Monica after Nine Years". "The Making of Viola" was written to commemorate the birth of the fifth Meynell child; "To My Godchild" honored Francis, the youngest of the Meynell children; and the seventh child offered the inspiration for "To Olivia".

For the children of one family to have inspired directly such a wealth of poetry would seem enough to justify the lavish praise recurring throughout Sister Songs. But to Thompson the children meant more than this. They were the mediate inspiration for almost all of his poetry. In the first part of Sister Songs, he writes of Sylvia:

This tiny, well-beloved maid!
To whom the gate of my heart's fortalice,
With all which in it is,
And the shy self who doth therein immew him,
'Gainst what loud leaguerers battailously woo him,
I, bribed traitor to him,
Set open for one kiss. (ll. 257-263)

Lest this protestation that the shy Thompson opened his heart completely to a small girl seem a mere poetic effusion, let the reader recall when and under what circumstances Thompson first met Sylvia Meynell. Before coming to Storrington Thompson had never experienced true peace. At Ushaw he strove to lead a life for which he was totally unfit. At medical school his depressed spirits craved happiness and found it only in laudanum. On the London streets he met only sin and squalor and the brusque city life. Then in the short space of a year he was removed from shattered dreams, from uncongenial employments, from a world he could not understand, from the squalor he loathed and the sin he despised, and placed between virgin hills and the southward dreaming sea and in the company of innocent children. No wonder, then, that he revered these

children and their childish ways. No wonder that this innocent atmosphere warmed and brought to fruition the budding genius within him. No wonder he makes such lavish protestations of devotion to these children.

Following the lines quoted above is a short description of Thompson's days in London. This autobiographical reference will be explained in Chapter Three. At the end of the description he reverts to the influence of Sylvia and her kiss which awakened in him sleeping memories and forced him to fashion these memories in song.

Therefore I kissed in thee
Her, child, and innocency,
And spring, and all things that have gone from me,
And that shall never be;
All vanished hopes, and all most hopeless bliss,
Came with thee to my kiss. (Pt.1, ll. 302-307)

And among these vanished hopes that returned to him must be included the hope, later realized, of being the poet of the return to God; and included in the hopeless bliss must be the bliss of literary ambitions fulfilled.

Thompson himself was afraid that the reader might imagine these lines to be exaggerated poetic outpourings. To make his point certain, he adds:

Then, that thy little kiss
Should be to me all this,
Let workaday wisdom blink sage lids thereat;
Which towers a flight three hedgerows high, poorbat!
And straightway charts me out the empyreal air.
Its chart I wing not by, its canon of worth
Scorn not, nor reck though mine should breed it mirth:

And howso thou and I may be disjoint,
Yet still my falcon spirit makes her point
Over the covert where
Thou, sweetest quarry, hast put in from her!
(Pt.1, ll.323-333)

Those three passages, in particular, from Part One of the poem may fail to move the reader and may even confuse him, unless he understands and fully appreciates the strong bond of love that tied together the young girl and the convalescent poet. In the beginning of the second part of the poem there occur nine lines that have undoubtedly baffled many unwary readers. They contain an occult reference to a turning point in the career of Francis Thompson. The passage reads:

Like one who sweats before a despot's gate,
Summoned by some presaging scroll of fate,
And knows not whether kiss or dagger wait;
And all so sickened is his countenance,
The courtiers buzz, "Lo, doomed!" and look
at him askance:-
Even so stood I, I ken,
Even so stood I, between a joy and fear,
And said to mine own heart, "Now if the end be here."
(Pt.2, ll.169-177)

The courtier standing timorously at the gate of the despot was Francis Thompson; the arbiter of his fate, Wilfrid Meynell; and the end mentioned was the end of Thompson's vagabond life.

From November, 1885, until February, 1887, Thompson had wandered about the streets of London, doing odd jobs, reading voluminously in libraries until his ragged appearance barred him, and writing bits of prose and poetry on uninviting scraps

of salvaged paper. Little need be said here of his sufferings during that time. They will be treated fully in the following chapter. Suffice it to say that at the end of two years Thompson had almost reached the end of his physical and mental endurance. In February, 1887, he began "to decipher and put together the half obliterated manuscript of Paganism." (3)

He sent it, together with several poems, to the editor of Merrie England, adding in a letter, "Kindly address your rejection to the Charing Cross Post Office." (4) He spent his last halfpenny on two boxes of matches, and "began the struggle for life." (5)

The editor of Merrie England was Wilfrid Meynell. He had founded it in 1883 for the purpose of "reviving in our hearts and in the hearts of others, the enthusiasm of the Christian faith." (6) Let it be said at this point that Meynell and his Merrie England accomplished nothing greater during the twelve years of its existence than the discovery, inspiration, and direction of the poetic genius of Francis Thompson. In the years to come, when the Pen, the Weekly Register, and Merrie England are no longer mentioned in literary histories of the 19th century, Wilfrid Meynell will be remembered and blessed as the discoverer and literary patron of Francis Thompson.

But February, 1887, was not the date of this discovery. Thompson's untidy manuscript reached the editor but was pigeon-

holed for six months. Once read, however, it was recognized as the work of one in whom genius rested. All attempts to get in touch with the author failed. In desperation, Meynell published "The Passion of Mary", one of the poems included with the essay, as the best means of bringing a response from the author. A letter came from Thompson giving a chemist's shop in Drury Lane as his address. After a few days a messenger located Thompson and invited him to visit the editor of Merrie England.

Thus was the stage set for the dramatic entrance of Francis Thompson into the literary life of "fin de siecle" England. This entrance Thompson compares, in the lines quoted above, to the entrance of a subject into the throne room of a regal despot, knowing not "whether kiss or dagger wait", standing torn "between a joy and a fear", and gasping, "now if the end be here". What immediately followed this situation is related thus in the biography:

Then the door opened, and a strange hand was thrust in. The door closed, but Thompson had not entered. Again it opened, again it shut. At the third attempt a waif of a man came in. No such figure had been looked for; more ragged and unkempt than the average beggar, with no shirt beneath his coat and bare feet in broken shoes, he found my father at a loss for words.(7)

The drama was well on its way; a drama that was to last some twenty years, involving as principal characters, an editor, kind, persuasive, critical, encouraging, and aflame with a

desire to revive in all hearts a knowledge and love of the Christian faith, and a poet, shy, sensitive, gifted with a keen literary sense but unequal to the exacting demands of a weekly press, his feet on the streets of London, his spirit in the clouds, lonely in the midst of company, reclusive but lovable. The scene shifted from the London streets to a private hospital, to a monastery, then back again to London; the editor always persuasive, buoyant, cheerful, and thoughtful; the poet at times discouraged, at others resolute, at first brimming over with poetry, then exhausting the magic cup. And the curtain closes with the poet on his death bed clasping the editor's hand, "chaffing and patting it, as if to make a last farewell." (8)

Those nine lines are Sister Songs' only direct reference to the influence of Wilfrid Meynell on Thompson, but into that passage is packed for the enjoyment of the careful reader the devotion and worship and love of a childlike spirit for a man who was more than father to him. Thompson, with his deep spiritual outlook, sums up his gratitude in a few lines written to Meynell, when he says simply, "May God be as kind to you as you have ever been to me." (9) It may seem that Thompson received much and gave little in that friendship. But after Thompson's death Meynell wrote:

Devoted friends, lament him no less for himself than for his singing. But let none be named the benefactor of him who gave to all more than any

could give to him. He made all men his debtors, leaving to those who loved him the memory of his personality, and to English poetry an imperishable name. (10)

Since Sister Songs is primarily a hymn of praise for Sylvia and Monica Meynell, Thompson, immediately after describing his emotions as he stood before the editorial office of Merrie England, writes of his first meeting with Monica. He had been taken to the hospital by Wilfrid Meynell.

But whileas on such dubious bed I lay,
One unforgett'n day,
As a sick child waking sees
Wide-eyed daisies
Gazing on it from its hand,
Slipped there for its dear amazes;
So between thy father's knees
I saw thee stand,
And through my hazes
Of pain and fear thine eyes' young wonder shone.
Then, as flies scatter from a carrion,
Or rooks in spreading gyres like broken smoke
Wheel, when some sound their quietude had broke,
Fled, at thy countenance, all that doubting spawn:
The heart which I had questioned spoke,
A cry impetuous from its depth was drawn,--
"I take this omen of the face of dawn."
(Pt.2, ll.184-201)

Earlier in this chapter when part one of the poem was being discussed, and the influence of Sylvia on Thompson was noted, the reasons for this influence were fully explained. Consequently it is not necessary to repeat that biographical information. It is sufficient to note, in elucidation of the reason for the fulsome praise accorded to Monica in these passages, that Monica, as Sylvia, by her innocent ways and artless friendship, drew the shy Thompson out of the shell

of his timidity, and silently encouraged him to begin writing poetry. Also, by her childish love, she inspired him throughout his life to develop assiduously his poetic genius. The stanza quoted above refers to his decision, made under the light of Monica's eyes, to devote his life to poetry. The following lines show that throughout his life Monica was a continuous source of inspiration to him.

And with this omen to my heart cam'st thou.
 Even with a spray of tears
 That one light draft was fixed there for the years.
 And now? --
 The hours I tread ooze memories of thee, sweet,
 Beneath my casual feet.
 With rainfall as the lea
 The day is drenched with thee;
 In little exquisite surprises
 Bubbling deliciousness of thee arises
 From sudden places,
 Under the common traces
 Of my most lethargied and customed paces.
 (Pt.2,11.201-213)

Some lines later Thompson sums up the influence of Monica on his work.

In all I work my hand includeth thine;

 Thou swing'st the hammers of my forge;
 As the innocent moon, that nothing does but shine,
 Moves all the labouring surges of the world.
 (Pt.2,11.256-262)

To appreciate the highly emotional praise contained in almost all of these lines it must be remembered that Thompson's love for the children was not a mere passing fancy, momentarily intensified by contrast with his former loveless state. Years later when the fire of his poetic genius had died somewhat, and

the children were no longer children, he wrote to Monica of "The Poppy" and of Sister Songs a congratulatory note on her forthcoming marriage. It is dated 1903.

Extend to him, if he will allow me, the affection which you once -- so long since -- purchased with a poppy in that Friston field. "Keep it," you said, (though you have doubtless forgotten what you said) "as long as you live." I have kept it and with it I keep you, my dearest. I do not say or show much for I am an old man compared with you, and no companion for your young life. But never, my dear, doubt I love you. And if I have the chance to show it I will do so. I am ill at saying all I doubtless should say to a young girl on her engagement. I have no experience in it, my Monica. I can only say I love you; and if there is any kind and tender thing I should have said, believe it is in my heart, though it be not here. My dear, your true friend...
(11)

For some 220 lines following the passages praising the innocence of Monica, Thompson discusses in detail poetry and the poet. These lines will be examined in Chapter Four of this thesis under Sections C and D. However, in four different places throughout these lines Thompson reverts to his relations with Monica Meynell. These passages do not merely repeat his protestations of love for the child. They add the prophecy that Monica will some day be a poet and introduce to the poem, for the first time, Alice Meynell, Wilfrid's gifted and gracious wife. Monica, a "princess of the Blood of Song", will sing in verse because she is the daughter of Alice.

The precious streams which through thy young lips roll
Shall leave their lovely delta in thy soul.
Where sprites of so essential kind
Set their paces,
Surely they shall leave behind

The green traces
Of their sportance in the mind;
And thou shalt, ere we well may know it,
Turn that daintiness, a poet, --
Elfin-ring
Where sweet fancies foot and sing.
So it may be, so it shall be, --
Oh, take the prophecy from me! (Pt.2,11.446-458)

Thy nescient lips repeat maternal strains.
Memnonian lips!
Smitten with singing from thy mother's East,
And murmurous with music not their own.
(Pt.2,11.363-366)

And thou, bright girl, not long shall thou repeat
Idly the music from thy mother caught.
(Pt.2,11.436-437)

Thou, in thy mother's right,
Descendant of Castalian-chrismed kings --
O Princess of the Blood of Song!
(Pt.2,11.483-485)

It may seem strange that Thompson should so boldly prophesy future poetic genius for a young child. But Thompson not only admired deeply the poems of the child's mother, but also respected her critical opinion. Monica had all the literary advantages possible in life, and though the prophecy was never fulfilled it was more than a wild guess. It was a compliment to the powers of Alice Meynell. A book of poems by this gifted woman had crystalized the confidence instilled in Thompson by Wilfrid Meynell. Mr. Meynell narrates the incident thus:

I remember the first occasion on which he came to our house in the evening. I gave him Mrs. Meynell's little volume of poems. He took it away to his lodgings, and when he came back he told us how he sat up reading it that night, and finally had thrown it down in his excitement, and said aloud: "Then I too am a poet!" He found she had

said things he wanted to say, and it came to him as a revelation that they were sayable. (12)

Though sure of his ability to write, Thompson continually showed deference to Alice Meynell's critical opinion on literary matters. Part of one of his many letters requesting her judgment is quoted here.

...the long poem, "The Anthem of Earth", was written only as an exercise in blank verse... So it is solely for your judgment on the metre that I send it. (13)

Since Thompson had such complete faith in Alice Meynell's literary judgment and technical skill, and since he greatly admired Wilfrid Meynell's editorial achievements, he could in good faith prophesy the gift of poesy for Monica, the daughter of the brilliant editor and the gifted poetess to who he was indebted "for what it has been given to me to accomplish in poetry." (14)

The final lines of Sister Songs repeat in poetic flights of fancy Thompson's undying love for and devotion to Sylvia and Monica Meynell. Many of these images will be examined in Chapter Five. Concerning the matter of this chapter only one new element is introduced by the poet, namely, the deep humility of his love. Lines 521-525 give one example.

And since my love drags this poor shadow, me,
And one without the other may not be,
From both I guard thee free.
It still is much, yes, it is much,
Only -- my dream! -- to love my love of thee.

His humility here takes the form of fear, fear that he, soiled by contact with sin and squalor for years, may by too impetuous a love tarnish the beautiful souls of the children.

His humility was also practical. It could stand the ultimate test of scorn. He knew that the children in their present undeveloped state could not appreciate his love. Perhaps when they grew older and wiser they would ridicule the love of this incongruous vagabond. He was prepared even for that. Flaunting his undying devotion for them in the face of the world's scorn, he cries in the final lines of the poem:

Now pass your ways, fair bird, and pass your ways,
If you will;
I have you through the days!
And flit or hold you still,
And perch you where you list
On what wrist, --
You are mine through the times!
I have caught you fast forever in a tangle
of sweet rhymes.
And in your young maiden morn
You may scorn
But you must be
Bound and sociate with me;
With this thread from out the tomb my dead hand
shall tether thee! (Pt.2, ll.746-758)

It would be difficult to pick out one member of the Meynell family and say that he or she was primarily responsible for the flourishing of Francis Thompson's poetic genius. I prefer to think of them as a group, each one in his own way influencing the poet: Wilfrid Meynell by his discovery and encouragement, Alice Meynell by the deep spirituality of her character and by her keen critical acumen, the children by

their artless, innocent simplicity. As George Meredith remarked after Thompson's death, "What we have of him is mainly due to the Meynell family." (15)

Is it any wonder, then, that the poems of Francis Thompson are brimming over with love for the Meynells and deep gratitude for their kindness? The history of literature will sin grievously if it does not inseparably and eternally link together the names of Thompson and Meynell.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

- 1) For an interesting explanation of this title confer Life of Francis Thompson, pp. 105-106.
- 2) Sylvia, for whom Part One of Sister Songs was written, is Madeline Meynell, the younger of the two sisters. As Thompson refers to her in the poem as Sylvia, she will be called Sylvia in this thesis in order to avoid confusion.
- 3) Meynell, Everard, op. cit., p.85.
- 4) Ibid., p.86.
- 5) Ibid.
- 6) De La Gorce, Agnes, Francis Thompson, p.61.
- 7) Op. Cit., p.89.
- 8) Ibid., p.350.
- 9) Ibid., p.338.
- 10) Ibid., p.351.
- 11) Quoted in Life of Francis Thompson, p.340.
- 12) Megroz, Rodolphe L., Francis Thompson, the Poet of Earth in Heaven, p.28.
- 13) Meynell, Everard, op.cit., p.177. For other letters showing Thompson's complete faith in Alice Meynell's literary judgment and technical skill in prosody confer pp.297, 300, 130-131, 133, and 159 of the same work.
- 14) Ibid., p.128.
- 15) Ibid., p.247.

CHAPTER THREE

THOMPSON'S OUTCAST DAYS IN LONDON

One passage in Sister Songs, as self-revealing as any Thompson ever wrote, describes such an important phase in his life that it merits a chapter by itself. Containing but sixty lines, it is a swift musical lament on the three years he spent wandering about the streets of London. How these three years of suffering influenced the quality of Thompson's poetry will be dealt with in Part B of Chapter Four. This chapter will confine itself to an explication of the passage by means of biographical study.

The part of the poem under discussion is patently a bit of autobiography. Yet the exact interpretation of it is difficult. Upon the publication of Sister Songs critics carped at the vagueness of this passage. Wilfrid Meynell admits the validity of these charges in his introduction to Poems, but contends that the difficulty is not insurmountable. The solution lies in an intimate knowledge of the facts of the poet's life.

The charge of obscurity was apt; for who did not know his days -- and his nights -- in the London streets could follow such a poignant piece of autobiography as this.... (1)

The experiences of Thompson in London related in this portion of the poem are readily divided into two parts: his sufferings, physical and spiritual, and his encounter with the street-girl Ann.

As explained in the last chapter the lines just preceding this passage picture the poet protesting his love for Sylvia and opening his heart to her for a kiss. This kiss breaks through the crust of his "shy self" and wrings from him the memories of his sufferings of the past three years.

Once, bright Sylviola, in days not far,
 Once, in that nightmare time which still doth haunt
 My dreams, a grim, unbidden visitant,
 Forlorn and faint and stark,
 I had endured through watches of the dark
 The abashless inquisition of each star,
 Yea, was the outcast mark
 Of all those heavenly passers' scrutiny;
 Stood bound and helplessly
 For time to shoot his barbed minutes at me;
 Suffered the trampling hoof of every hour
 In night's slow wheeled car;
 Until the tardy dawn dragged me at length
 From under those dread wheels; and, bled of strength,
 I waited the inevitable last. (Pt.1, ll.274-288)

Thompson, during this period, was often in need of the necessities of life. Everard Meynell in his biography says, "I know that Thompson suffered hunger; so much he told me." (2) The reason for this is simple. Some months after he left home his allowance was stopped. Entirely unfitted for such small jobs as came his way -- running errands for a shoemaker, holding horses, blacking boots, and selling papers and matches -- he was too proud to make a business of begging. Since he spent the

few pennies he could gather together on laudanum, he was often "forlorn, and faint, and stark."

The pangs of hunger, however, were slight in comparison to his mental sufferings. Two of these he mentions specifically. One, reserved for sensitive, imaginative spirits, was the reproach of the stars. He was "the outcast mark of all those heavenly passers' scrutiny." Standing in the midst of sin and filth, he saw the crystal stars in a clean, fresh atmosphere high above him, sternly reproving him. The other annoyance, one reserved for abstracted individuals who daily walk through busy streets, was the constant threat of danger from wheeling traffic. In the poem Thompson changes this danger into a figure of speech and combines it with the suffering he endured whiling away the depressing hours of the night:

Suffered the trampling hoof of every hour
In night's slow-wheeled car. (Pt.1, ll.284-285)

In these lines:

Stood bound and helplessly
For time to shoot his barbed minutes at me.
(Pt.1, ll.282-283)

Shane Leslie sees a suggestion of the arrow-shaped hands in the clock of Covent Garden and an allusion to the slow martyrdom of St. Sebastian; but to me they are but a repetition of the lines quoted above, with a change of figure. To Thompson, who had nothing in life to look forward to, the passage of time was at first monotonous and then painfully slow.

Despite these explicit references to physical and mental sufferings, Thompson's greatest torments were his spiritual sufferings. A highly sensitive person may suffer physically more than others, it is true; but if, like Thompson, he has a deeply spiritual outlook on life, he knows the narrow limits of physical suffering. Thompson could see Jacob's ladder pitched between Heaven and Charing Cross, and Christ walking on the waters of the Thames. (3) To him hunger and cold were annoyances, but spiritual aridity -- to be bound to the corpse of sin and long for the fresh waters of innocence -- was excruciating agony. On the streets of London spring flowers were withered and innocence was vitiated. In "Paganism, Old and New," written during his days in London, Thompson says:

...In our capitals the very heavens have lost
their innocence. Aurora may rise over our cities,
but she has forgotten how to blush.... (4)

This living helplessly in the midst of squalor and sin was to Thompson anguish. He touches upon it lightly in this poignant passage:

And, ah! so long myself had strayed afar
From child, and woman, and the boon earth's green,
And all wherewith life's face is fair beseen;
Journeying its journey bare
Five suns, except of the all-kissing sun
Unkissed of one;
Almost I had forgot
The healing harms,
And whitest witchery, a-lurk in that
Authentic cestus of two girdling arms: (5)
And I remembered not
The subtle sanctities which dart

From childish lips unvalued precious brush,
Nor how it makes the sudden lilies push
Between the loosening fibres of the heart.
(Pt.1, ll.308-322)

Thus does the poet of love, human and divine, the poet of children and innocence and nature, record his sufferings as an outcast on the London streets. He was separated not only from his home and his relations, but from innocence and love; and he considered himself, though he probably was not, an outcast from God.

One experience during those three years must have given Thompson no small consolation. The kiss of Sylvia brought back to him memories of his sufferings in London, but it also brought back to him memories of his one friendship during that time, his friendship with the street-girl Ann. He describes her in these words:

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.
(Pt.1, ll.289-293)

The description is delicate, sympathetic, and restrained. But his judgment of her is just. She was a child, a spring flower. She was brave, tender, and loving. None the less she was a flower fallen and blown withering through the streets. In three swift lines he sums up his relations with her:

And of her own scant pittance did she give,
That I might eat and live;
Then fled, a swift and trackless fugitive.
(Pt.1, ll.294-296)

Everard Meynell in his biography has such an enlightening and sympathetic passage on this incident that it is worth quoting in full.

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 marveling that there were joys for them to unbury and share....

Her sacrifice was to fly from him: learning he had found 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 not understand our friendship," she said, and then, "I always knew you were a genius." And so she strangled the opportunity; she had killed again 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. (6)

Like De Quincey's Ann, this girl lives on in the pages of literature, but lives nameless. However, as Thompson says, "To be nameless in worthy deeds exceeds an infamous history. The Canaanitish woman lives more happily without a name than Herodias with one." (7)

Thus with swift pen does Thompson give us a fleeting glimpse of his purgation of almost three years. It was a time

of keenest suffering, physical, mental, and spiritual, lightened only by a passing street-girl's friendship. To one who understands the author and his life, this obscure passage in Sister Songs is a blood-ruby among pearls. It is Thompson's heart set to burn and bleed within the delicate imagery of Sister Songs.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

- 1) Connolly, Terrence L., S.J., Poems of Francis Thompson, p. 322.
- 2) Meynell, Everard, op.cit., p.77.
- 3) See "The Kingdom of God," 1.20 and 11.23-24.
- 4) Thompson, Francis, "Paganism, Old and New," p.49.
- 5) "Almost I had forgot...two girdling arms." Fr. Connolly in his notes on Sister Songs takes these lines to be a reference to Thompson's friendship with Ann. Everard Meynell in the first edition of his biography quotes these lines, then begins the following paragraph with, "This girl gave out of her scant pittance..." (p.81) So it would seem that he took these lines to be an interjection by the author, who suddenly thought of Ann, mollifying the words, "unkissed of one." According to their interpretation a prose rendition of the passage would read: "Except for the all-kissing sun, I was unkissed. Oh, I almost forgot to mention this one girl, her healing harms, etc."

While there is nothing intrinsically repugnant in this interpretation, it is never-the-less forced. To me it seems that the sentences, "Almost I had forgot" and "And I remembered not" are in parallel construction. Yet no one could possibly construe this last sentence as a reference to Ann. Again, the past perfect construction of "had forgot" seems to refer to the time of his experiences in London and not to the time of writing, as Fr. Connolly and Mr. Meynell wish. If it referred to the time of writing, the simple past or perfect would have been used. According to my interpretation the sentence refers to his days in London, and a prose rendition would read: "Except of the all kissing sun I was unkissed; I had almost forgotten during that time the healing harms and the whitest witchery of a woman's love, and I remembered not etc."

There is only one serious objection against this interpretation. While Thompson might brand the embrace of a street girl harmful, why should he refer to licit human love as alive with whitest witchery and healing harms, as he does according to my interpretation? Wilfrid Meynell in an unpublished letter to the writer, dated July 11, 1934, gives a plausible answer to this objection when he says,

"One little point might escape observation. He (Thompson) lived at a time when in many Catholic hearts woman was regarded as a temptation. When he came into our family and talked with Patmore about human love as the image of the divine, great was the change." And Thompson did not meet Patmore until four years after he wrote Sister Songs.

In the light of this the reader may understand why I have included these lines to illustrate Thompson's sufferings instead of placing them in that part of the thesis where Thompson's relations with Ann are treated.

- 6) Meynell, Everard, op.cit.,pp.81-83.
- 7) Ibid. p.84.

CHAPTER FOUR

POETIC THEORY OF FRANCIS THOMPSON

The last two chapters have been concerned with elucidating Sister Songs by reference to specific autobiographical data, and have shown, indirectly, that the obscurity of Thompson's poems may be cleared up in no small degree by a knowledge of the details of the author's life. The next two chapters will deal with the second of the two ways mentioned in the introduction of clarifying the poetry of Francis Thompson, namely, by an appreciation of his poetic theory and practice. This second means, though it treats of no one actual period in the author's life, is, never-the-less, closely connected with the first. For a poet's style is the individualistic expression of himself, and he, in his inner self, is largely the result of the life which he has led.

These two chapters are divided into five parts. The subjects of the first three parts, forming Chapter Four, The Poet a Dedicated Spirit, Thompson's Theory of Suffering and Poetry, and Inspiration and the Poet, are imaginatively treated in Sister Songs, and an understanding of them is necessary before the reader can pierce through the veil of imagery with which Thompson surrounds them in this poem. Those considered

in the last two parts, which form Chapter Five, Imagery and Imagination, and Form and Metre, justify, at least in Thompson's mind his lavish use of images and his seemingly lawless handling of poetic form. Both of these practices are reasons popularly assigned for the obscurity of Thompson's poems.

PART A

THE POET A DEDICATED SPIRIT

Thompson, in the following lines, describes his dedication to poetry, insisting upon the fact that this offering means that he, like an eremite, must live apart from the world.

Love and love's beauty only hold their revels
In life's familiar levels:
What of its ocean floor?
I dwell there evermore.
From almost earliest youth
I raised the lids o' the truth,
And forced her bend on me her shrinking sight;
Ever I knew me Beauty's eremite,
In antre of this lowly body set,
Girt with a thirsty solitude of soul.

(Pt.2,11.48-58)

There is one great difference between the poet who dedicates himself to seek his livelihood or to champion a cause, and the poet whom poesy chooses as her own. The former lives in the world and is of the world. The latter lives in the world as an expatriate of the spirit's domains. Thompson sums up his relations with the world in this passage:

I who can scarcely speak my fellows' speech,
Love their love, or mine own love to them teach;

A bastard barred from their inheritance,
Who seem, in this dim shape's uneasy nook
Some sun-flower's spirit which by luckless chance
Has mournfully its tenement mistook;
When it were better in its right abode,
Heartless and happy lackeying its god.

(Pt.2,11.11-18)

Here again the true poet differs from his mercenary fellows. There are writers living in the world, despising and belittling -- which must not be confused with denying themselves -- the joys and pleasures of life. They feel themselves superior to all these delights, and poetize about their feelings merely to put a halo about heads that already, so they believe, tower in the clouds. They are superior only in their own estimation, poets only in so far as they write verse, and dedicated only to themselves and their own glorification. Not so Thompson. He realized that his offering must be a holocaust, that he lacked contact with a noisy, busy world, that he must sit apart at "life's feast, a somewhat alien guest." In short, he was humanity's illegitimate offspring. But at the same time he realized and appreciated the fact that life was a feast, and he did not refer to it as the crumbs of existence. Even if he was born out of time, there was an inheritance that was full and good and proper. He fully appreciated the joy and pleasure in life, knew that "the world is crowned with the grandeur of God," and, though sin and sordidness abounded, still there lived "the dearest freshness deep down things." And what is more, he did not despise the joys of this life.

He felt their attraction, even yearned for them, but he realized that they were not for him. He was a lonely man in the bustle of life. That is what dedication to poetry meant for Thompson.

A passage in Everard Meynell's biography, to choose one from many, shows how Thompson appreciated even the commonest pleasures in life and how poignantly he felt being deprived of them.

His praise of domestic relationships ring with the note of one whose comprehension is sharpened by the desire of things out of reach. (1)

PART B

THOMPSON'S THEORY OF SUFFERING AND POETRY

Closely connected with this offering of himself completely to poetry is Thompson's view that only out of pain and loneliness and sadness do the sweetest songs arise. He muses over this fact in "Daisy."

She left me marvelling why my soul
Was sad that she was glad;
At all the sadness in the sweet,
The sweetness in the sad. (11.49-52)

This peculiar mixture of joy and pain is at the heart of Thompson's poetic theory of suffering and poetry. The pleasure was not merely in the pain itself. His was not a sadistic nature. With St. Francis of Assisi he might say, "Delight has taken

Pain to her heart," for with both Francises pain was not an end in itself but a means. It led Assisi's Francis straight to the God of love; it led London's Francis straight to the God of poetry. Thompson was a dedicated spirit and this dedication brought with it sorrow. The eager welcome he gives this sorrow may seem strange to many who read Sister Songs if they do not realize that pain was welcomed not for itself, but for its inevitable companion, poetry. Thompson explains it thus:

In pairing time, we know, the bird
Kindles to its deepmost splendour,
And the tender
Voice is tenderest in its throat:
Were its love for ever nigh it,
Never by it,
It might keep a vernal note,
The crocean and amethystine
In their pristine
Lustre linger on its coat.
Therefore must my song-bower lone be
That my tone be
Fresh with dewy pain alway. (Pt.2,11.82-94)

He repeats the same theme in his "Mistress of Vision."

That from spear and thorn alone
May be grown
For the front of saint or singer any divinizing twine.
(11.110-113)

There is one passage in Thompson's masterly essay on Shelley which so definitely pictures his attitude toward pain in the life of the poet that, though long, deserves quotation in full. Toward the end of the essay, he says:

Why indeed (one is tempted to ask in conclusion) should it be that the poets who have written for us the poetry richest in skiey grain, most free from admixture with the duller things

of earth -- the Shelleys, the Coleridges, the Keats' -- are the very poets whose lives are among the saddest records in literature? Is it that (by some subtle mystery of analogy) sorrow, passion, and fantasy are indissolubly connected, like water, fire, and cloud; that as from sun and dew are born the vapours, so from fire and tears ascend the "visions of Aerial joy"; that the harvest waves richest over the battlefields of the soul; that the heart, like the earth, smells sweetest after rain; that the spell on which depend such necromantic castles is some spirit of pain charm-prisoned at their base? Such a poet, it may be, mists with sighs the window of his life until the tears run down it; then some air of searching poetry, like an air of searching frost, turns it to a crystal wonder. The god of golden song is the god, too, of golden sun; so peradventure songlight is like sunlight, and darkens the countenance of the soul. Perhaps the rays are to the stars what thorns are to flowers; and so the poet, after wandering over heaven, returns with bleeding feet...

(2)

Throughout Sister Songs the plaint of the lonely spirit recurs again and again. Here are some samples:

Girt with a thirsty solitude of soul. (Pt.2,1.58)

Cozening my mateless days. (Pt.2,1.134)

And so I keep mine unaccompanied ways. (Pt.2,1.136)

Then in two lines he pictures this bewildering condition. Like Midas, the fabled Phrygian king, he possessed the power to turn everything he touched into gold.

And so my touch, to golden poesies
Turning life's bread, is bought at hunger's price.
(Pt.2,11.137-138)

It is the universality of the gift that is distressing. It would have been far better if Midas could have restricted to

certain objects or to certain times this power of his. But he must have it always or not at all. The same condition held good with Francis Thompson and his gift of creating poetry. He possessed the power to turn the ordinary bread of life into the golden flower of poetry -- but it was a gift purchased at the price of hunger. He yearned at times for mere bread. But his dedication was complete. He must always deny himself the joys of life so that out of the pain consequent upon this denial, he could draw golden poetry. And the world is richer for the pain Thompson suffered. He himself realized this fact and in "The Poppy" he prophesied:

I hang mid men my needless head,
And my fruit is dreams as theirs is bread:
The goodly grain and the sun-hazed sleeper
Time shall reap, but after the reaper
The world shall glean of me, me the sleeper.
(11.68-72)

PART C

INSPIRATION OF THE POET

Closely allied to Thompson's views on poetic dedication and love of poetry are his views on poetic inspiration. If the poet offers himself completely to poetry, then the Lady Poesy must inspire him. This view is not peculiar to Thompson. It is almost a commonplace among poets. But what is peculiar to Thompson is his insistence upon the fact of poetic inspiration

and, in Sister Songs, the striking similies he uses to illustrate the point.

His views on poetic inspiration are described in one long passage in Sister Songs, which is easily divided into three parts. In the first he describes the capriciousness of inspiration; in the second he states that the poem produced never exactly corresponds to the inspiration received; and finally, in an easily misunderstood passage, he says that the reader often sees more meaning in the poem than the author.

Poetic inspiration, according to Thompson, was capricious because it never came when he expected it, nor in the manner he desired it. He laments this fact in Sister Songs.

Thou canst foreshape thy word;
The poet is not lord
Of the next syllable may come
With the returning pendulum;
And what he plans today in song,
Tomorrow sings it in another tongue.
Where the last leaf fell from his bough,
He knows not if a leaf shall grow;
Where he sows he doth not reap,
He reapeth where he did not sow;
He sleeps, and dreams forsake his sleep
To meet him on his waking way.
Vision will mate him not by law and vow:
Disguised in life's most hodden-grey,
By the most beaten road of yesterday
She waits him, unsuspected and unknown.
The hardest pang whereon
He lays his mutinous head may be a Jacob's stone.
(Pt.2,11.381-398)

Because the inspiration was capricious, the poet must spend many idle days. This idleness troubled Thompson at first, but soon he not only became reconciled to the fact that some days

must be spent quietly, but he also became certain that even during his days of seeming idleness he was storing up poetic inspiration. His biographer found many jottings such as the following among his notes. "Where I found nothing done by me," he says in one place, "much may have been done by me." (3) And again: "For the things today done in you, will be done by you tomorrow many things." (4) In Sister Songs, referring to his life on the "ocean floor", he says:

Fair are the soul's uncrisp'd calms, indeed,
Endiapered with many a spiritual form
Of blosmy-tinctured weed. (Pt.2,11.73-75)

But there is more than capriciousness in poetic inspiration. Even when poesy does visit the poet and inspire him, he can never describe fully and exactly what the inspiration has given him. This saddened Thompson and he laments the fact in these lines:

In the most iron crag his foot can tread
A Dream may strew her bed,
And suddenly his limbs entwine,
And draw him down through rock as sea-nymphs
might through brine.
But, unlike those feigned temptress-ladies who
In guerdon of a night the lover slew,
When the embrace has failed, the rapture fled,
Not he, not he, the wild sweet witch is dead!
And though he cherisheth
The babe most strangely born from out her death,
Some tender trick of her it hath, maybe --
It is not she! (Pt.2,11.399-410)

This is a cause of sorrow for most poets. They themselves are strangely in tune with, and keyed up to their inspiration. They appreciate it to the full, but when they try to express the

inspiration and the emotions stirred by it, they are hampered by the restraining halter of language. The greater their mastery of the language, the closer will the finished product correspond to the inspiration. But never does it correspond exactly.

Besides these decided views on inspiration, Thompson further held that the reader usually sees more meaning and reacts more emotionally to a poem than the poet himself. He states:

We speak a lesson taught we know not how,
And what it is that from us flows
The hearer better than the utterer knows.
(Pt.2, ll.378-380)

This does not mean that the poet fails to understand what he is writing and that he leaves it for the reader to interpret. It means that the author is not sure of all the nuances of meaning the words of the poem may convey, nor of the exact emotional response the poem may evoke in the reader. This view will not be subscribed to by most poetic theorists nor even by most poets. The point made here is that this is the doctrine of Thompson on poetic inspiration and fruition, and these principles he repeats again and again in haunting melodies in Sister Songs. The score of the melody, for those who wish to read it aright, lies in a sympathetic understanding of Thompson's peculiar view of poetic inspiration.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

- 1) Meynell, Everard, op.cit., pp.291-292.
- 2) Thompson, Francis, "Shelley", pp.53-54.
- 3) Meynell, Everard, op.cit., p.325.
- 4) Loc. cit.

CHAPTER FIVE

POETIC THEORY OF FRANCIS THOMPSON (cont.)

PART D

IMAGERY AND IMAGINATION

With the exception of Thompson's intimate vision of the reality and force of spiritual truths and beings, perhaps the most outstanding element in his poetry is its imaginative quality. Sister Songs, in particular, is an indefinite succession of images. In the words of Alice Meynell, "Sister Songs is, in both parts, piled high with imagery so beautiful as almost to persuade us that imagery is the aim and goal of poetry." (1) This imaginative quality is closely allied with Thompson's spiritual insight. He aspires to rise to God not alone by philosophical reasoning, but by a form of intuition or insight of an imaginative nature. By means of this insight he realized the presence of God in creatures, and when in this inspired mood he is capable of expressing his emotions only through exalted and abundant images.

Thompson himself regarded imagery as a touchstone for testing the poetical genius of a lyrical poet. It was the chief means of clothing philosophy and theology, "the soul of truth... to create an organism which can come down and live among men." (2)

Imagery was also a beautiful thing in its own right. "How beautiful a thing the frank toying with imagery may be, let 'The Skylark' and 'The Cloud' witness. It is only evil when the poet, on the straightway to a fixed object, lags continually on the path to play." (3) Any lagging on the path to a fixed object to toy with imagery would detract from the proper progression and emotional height of the poem. It would cause the loss of that poetic ardor and intensity so highly prized by Thompson.

But, according to Thompson, there is another improper use of imagery. "The Metaphysical School," he says, "failed, not because it toyed with imagery, but because it toyed with it frostily." (4) The inspired poet with the ardor of love will not lag by the wayside nor toy frostily with mere imagery. His emotion will carry him on. Love or ardor is Thompson's keynote, when he writes:

To sport with the tangles of Neaera's hair may be trivial idleness or caressing tenderness, exactly as your relation to Neaera is that of heartless gallantry or that of love. (5)

Here, "trivial idleness" toys with imagination frostily, which suggests to Thompson "mere intellectual ingenuity"; whereas the "caressing tenderness" of the inspired poet's imagery will be the result of toying with imagery when in the creative mood of the poet's raptures. Thompson expresses this when he contrasts Shelley with the Metaphysical poets:

So you may toy with imagery in mere intellectual ingenuity, and then you might as well go write acrostics; or you may toy with it in raptures, and then you may write a "Sensitive Plant". (6)

This treatment of imagery in the Shelley essay gives the keynote to Thompson's general views on the subject. Imagery is beautiful in its own right, yet it must be restrained. The restraint demanded is best governed by the ardor of poetic spontaneity. Where such spontaneity is lacking, mere intellectual acrostics, a frosty, unpoetic use of imagery, may be the result.

Closely connected with Thompson's theory of imagery is his distinction between fancy and imagination. It may be summed up in the phrase "fancy detects resemblances, imagination identities." (7) In a letter to Patmore Thompson wrote:

I had written of poets born with an instinctive sense of veritable correspondence hidden from the multitude. Then I went on thus: "In this too lies the real distinction between imagination and fancy. Leigh Hunt, interpreting Coleridge as shallowly as Charmian interpreted the Soothsayer, said that fancy detected outward analogies, but imagination inward ones. The truth is that inward resemblances may be as superficial as outward resemblances; and it is then the product of fancy or fantasy. When the resemblance is more than a resemblance, when it is rooted in the hidden nature of the thing, its discernment is the product of the imagination. This is the real distinction; fancy detects resemblances, imagination identities." (8)

True imagination, then, for Thompson would not express resemblances, be they outward or inward. The imagination must pierce the veil of mere resemblances to the hidden meaning of things

beyond. The imaginative powers of the true artist must be such that he can trace the hidden identity of one being to that of another. If the poet is of a merely fanciful nature, he will immediately detect resemblances; if he has deep imaginative insight, he will detect identities. These identities he is then able to express in fitting words, making clear to other men the hidden natures of things. Here Thompson is consistent with his theory of the purpose of poetry, which is "to restore the Divine idea of things." (9)

Thompson's theory of imagery and imagination is of prime importance in understanding any of his highly imaginative poems, such as Sister Songs. If imagery is a necessary means of communicating truth and vision, imagery is one of poetry's essential elements. Emotion can reach a great height and be expressed without much figure or imagery, but for Thompson purely emotional poetry was in no sense the highest poetry. Poetry in its highest form had to be poetry of revelation, poetry with a strong intellectual or intuitive element, otherwise it could hardly restore the Divine idea of things. Thompson held tenaciously to the point that imagery is an essential means of communicating the intellectual truth or revelation of the poet. After a difference of opinion on this subject he addressed to Alice Meynell the following words:

It is false that highest or supremest poetry
is stripped of figure. Purely emotional poetry
at its height is bare of imagery, not poetry

of supremest flight...Supreme: emotion is
not supreme poetry. (10)

In connection with the subject of imagery, Thompson's estimate of the metaphor as a figure of higher poetic rank than the simile must be noted. Thompson held so firmly to this view, that he stated as a principle of his writing, "I never use a simile if I can use a metaphor." (11) Referring to the writer of an unsigned review of Sister Songs in the Edinburgh Review of April, 1896, he expressed this principle:

The writer shows not only taste...One remark goes curiously home -- that on the higher poetic rank of metaphor as compared to simile. It has always been a principle of my own; so much so, that I never use a simile if I can use a metaphor. (12)

A proper understanding of the value placed upon imagery by Thompson is necessary to one who wishes to evaluate the highly imaginative Sister Songs. For the sequence followed in the poem is a sequence of images. As Mr. Megroz says:

The passages in the poem grow out of previous images and subside into succeeding images. This flexuous symmetry and complicated continuity of images and perceptions supplies the concealed framework of Sister Songs, which constitute, with no external rise and fall, beginning and fulfillment of design, the almost perfect whole of a single poem. The sections and sections of sections bud and bloom and seed in the seasonal rhythm of one garden. (13)

To assist the reader in following the concealed procession of images, perhaps it would be well here to indicate the sequence of thought and incident in the poem. After that several ex-

amples of Thompson's application of his theory of imagery will be noted.

In the Proem of the poem, Thompson describes his joyous reactions to the coming of spring, and invites spring's children to join with him in singing Sylvia's praises.

The first section of the poem describes the response of spring's children to the call of the poet. The first to respond are the leaves and the flowers, the visible children of spring. Then her invisible children are attracted by the strains of the magic music. The flower-elves of the field and the Hours and Dryads of the air come to honor spring and Sylvia in the festal dancing. Among the children at the feet of the personified Spring the poet recognizes Sylvia, in whose honor all have gathered. At the sight of her the poet remembers those days when first she came into his life and gained the castle of his heart with a kiss. That kiss restored his lost hope and happiness, and in gratitude he asks and obtains of Spring the promise that she will keep the child's soul ever pure and sweet until at last she has obtained "solemn courts and covenanted streams."

The second part of the poem comprises the hymn to Monica, who comes floating as a wraith into the poet's "vaporous dreams." She reminds him of the effect she has had upon his life. Monica gave to his soul a tangible proof of the reality of that beauty which all his life he had sought. In the seeking of this beauty

he has lived a life unshared of man or woman. Into that life Monica has come, a visible assurance of the reality of that invisible beauty, as surely as the appearance of palm and tamarind in a mirage indicate their actual existence elsewhere.

The realization that this beauty, though clearly foreshadowed in the beauty of the child, is unattainable in this life suggests to Thompson a parity. In like manner is the future mortal woman foreshadowed in the precursive powers of the child in whom the powers of sex exist surely though hidden. The poet passes from one image to another to illustrate the climax of this song. The hidden powers of sex are like the concealed intellectual powers that in a child wait upon the maturity of the body. They are like the powers of a child king who must wait until he reaches his majority before he can exercise these powers. Finally they are like the great mystery of the Incarnation wherein the powers of God were subservient, as it were, to the powers of man, and the powers of Christ's human soul waited upon the development of his bodily senses.

In the child's unknowing repetition of her mother's verse the poet sees a symbol of her poetic powers, and a sign of other hidden powers in the child that will one day manifest themselves in the woman.

After a prayer that the child's beauty of soul may never be spoiled by sin, Thompson contrasts her sinlessness with his sinfulness, and reflects upon what her pure love has brought to

him of sorrow and of joy. In prophetic vision he sees the future woman into whose life a lover will come, through whom the poet will love the child-woman. This suggest the realization of how esoteric his own poetry will be. After lamenting this fact he prays to the invisible powers of the world beyond always to guard the child of his song.

Thompson padded this skeleton outline with so much imagery that it would be impossible in a work of this length to study separately each figure. However, a few examples will suffice to show how Thompson carried out his theory of imagery in Sister Songs, and how he communicated truth and vision by means of this application. In the second part of the poem, while addressing Monica, he uses these words: "Thou, whose young sex is yet but in thy soul." (14) These words immediately bring to his mind a number of images which express concretely the philosophical notion of potency being reduced to act. In the theory of Thompson these images communicate an intellectual truth. The first two images are similes:

As hoarded in the vine
Hang the gold skins of undelerious wine,
As air sleeps, till it toss its limbs in breeze.
(Pt.2, ll.305-309)

Then he uses as metaphor the reference to the legendary Hesperides, in order to express how Monica's maturer love is hidden within her.

In whom the mystery which lures and sunders,
Grapples and thrusts apart, endears, estranges,

--The dragon to its own Hesperides--
Is gated under slow revolving changes,
Manifold doors of heavy-hinged years.

(Pt.2, ll.305-309)

The poet concludes the images called up by the idea of a soul in a child's body, with a reference to the prefiguring of the happiness of Christian love (Laughter) in the nascent beauty of Pagan love (Tears). Mr. Megroz says of these seven lines that "Ten times as many words could not paraphrase all the ideas in these lines." (15)

So once, ere heaven's eyes were filled with wonders
To see Laughter rise from Tears,
Lay in beauty not yet mighty,
Conched in translucencies,
The antenatal Aphrodite,
Carved magically under magic seas;
Carved dreamlessly beneath the dreamful seas.

(Pt.2, ll.310-316)

Another fine example of Thompson's power to express abstract truths concretely and poetically occurs in the passage following the one quoted above. It is an imaginative rendition of some of the great truths of psychology. If, as Thompson held, imagery is beautiful in its own right, then the following passage, because of the sublime matter treated and because of the manner in which it is treated, must rank as one of the finest in the entire poem. The thought is briefly this: the soul depends upon the spiritual faculties and bodily senses for the development of its powers; then, by a series of comparisons, three great fundamental philosophical principles are brought out -- the interdependence of the spiritual and material elements of

of life, the necessity of restraint in all real power, and the contrasting of the fairness of virtue with the foulness of sin. Here is Thompson at his best, embodying spiritual realities with the flesh and blood of imagery.

What think we of the soul?
Which has no parts, and cannot grow,
Unfurled not from an embryo;
Born of full stature, lineal to control;
And yet a pygmy's yoke must undergo:
Yet must keep pace and tarry, patient, kind,
With its unwilling scholar, the dull, tardy mind;
Must be obsequious to the body's powers,
Whose low hands mete its path, set ope and close
its ways;
Must do obeisance to the days,
And wait the little pleasure of the hours;
Yea, ripe for kingship, yet must be
Captive in statted minority.
So is all power fulfilled, as soul in thee.
So still the ruler by the ruled takes rule,
And wisdom weaves itself i' the loom o' the fool,
The splendent sun no splendor can display
Till on gross things he dash his broken ray,
From cloud and tree and flower re-tossed in
prismy spray.
Did not obstruction's vessel hem it in,
Force were not force, would spill itself in vain;
We know the Titan by his champed chain.
Stay is heat's cradle, it is rocked therein,
And by check's hand is burnished into light;
If hate were none would love burn lowlier bright?
God's Fair were guessed scarce but for opposite sin;
Yea, and His mercy, I do think it well,
Is flashed back from the brazen gates of Hell.
(Pt.2,11.318-346)

Another example of Thompson's "clothing the soul of truth in order to create an organism which can come down and live among men", appears in the second part of Sister Songs when the poet speaks of Monica coming into his life. Here she gives him a visible assurance of the reality of that invisible beauty

which he loved, as surely as the appearance of tamarind and palm in a mirage indicate their actual existence elsewhere. The philosophical principle here enunciated is that the appearance of limitation in beauty in this world argues to the reality of an existing perfect beauty. Here is how Thompson toys with imagery in visualizing the appearance of a mirage:

As an Arab journeyeth
Through a sand of Ayaman
Lean Thirst, lolling its cracked tongue,
Lagging by his side along;
And a rusty-winged Death
Grating its low flight before,
Casting ribbed shadows o'er
The blank desert, blank and tan;
He lifts by hap toward where the morning's roots are
His weary stare, --
Sees, although they splashless mutes are,
Set in a silver air
Fountains of gelid shoots are,
Making the daylight fairest fair;
Sees the palm and tamarind
Tangle the tresses of a phantom wind; --
A sight like innocence when one has sinned!
While a green and maiden freshness smiling there,
With unblinking glare
The tawny hided desert crouches watching her.
(Pt.11.214-233)

Besides the imagery Thompson has added the note of personification. F.H.Pritchard in his Studies in Literature says of this passage:

The gaunt figure of lean Thirst and the ominous flight of rusty winged Death make the scene terribly real and near...The final impression left upon us is one of utter despair. It would be impossible for such a feeling to be aroused in the reader if the writer had not first seen the vision himself. Those poets of the 18th century who thought to produce this effect merely by bespattering their pages with capital letters failed as conspicuously as Thompson has succeeded. (16)

Having set up the image, Thompson draws the parity between the mirage and his vision of Monica.

'Tis a vision
Yet the greeneries Elysian
He has known in tracts afar;
Thus the enamouring fountains flow,
Those the very palms that grow,
By rare-gummed Sava or Herbalimar.--
Such a watered dream has tarried
Trembling on my desert arid;
Even so
Its lovely gleamings
Seemings show
Of things not seemings;
And I gaze,
Knowing that, beyond my ways,
Verily
All these are, for these are She. (Pt.2, ll.234-249)

Sister Songs, along with the greater portion of Thompson's poetry, has been criticized for its too luxuriant imagery. In evaluating the poem the reader must remember Thompson's theory on the use of imagery. For him it was the touchstone of lyric poetry. It was a beautiful thing in its own right, yet it must be restrained by the ardor of poetic spontaneity. No one has ever accused Thompson of being other than spontaneous when he wrote. Imagery is used by Thompson to communicate truth and vision, to "bring the soul of truth down to live among men." If the reader fully appreciates this view of Thompson on the necessity of imagery, he will no longer carp at the succession of image after image in Sister Songs. He will probably say, with John Freeman, that

Almost alone among later imaginative writers, he sails out boldly into that spiritual sea which to many is all but unknown, and by some still held

unknowable. But even to those who sail not with him, groping still in the comfortable twilight, there comes the great inspiration of his song, a consciousness of the purity of his faith, and at the least guidance of the white foam of his course. (17)

PART E

FORM AND METRE

Both the form and the metre of Sister Songs are irregular. We may call the poem an ode, using the term in its commonly accepted meaning to designate not so much the form of the poem as its substance and tone. Mr. Gardner says that Part One "is a kind of glorified Italian ballata, and Part Two is an extension of the later and irregular form of 'canzone' in which stanzas are practically musical paragraphs with unfettered rhymes!" (18)

It must not be thought that the poem is without order. The charge of lawlessness has often enough been hurled against it by unwary critics. The best way to refute such charges is, by an exposition of Thompson's doctrine on form and metre, to show the orderly principles underlying the formation of the poem.

Strange as it may seem, the seemingly unfettered Thompson regarded form in poetry of prime importance. "Of such immutable importance is form," he wrote, "that without this effigy and witness of spirit, spirit walks invisible among man." (19)

This was due, perhaps, to his early and meticulous study of

metre and diction, and to his work in later life as literary critic and reviewer. Yet he always distinguished very carefully between form and formalism, as the following study will make clear.

One of his cardinal points in regard to form was that a certain freedom in technical matters is a necessity for good style and is characteristic of the native English literature. Where this freedom of form has been sacrificed, as in the 18th century and in the later 19th century, literature has suffered. Despite Thompson's wide acquaintance with classical letters and French literature, he was overpartial to this English freedom. It was to him a supreme heritage of the English people, part of their birthright which should not be lost. This attitude is expressed most clearly in his essay on Ernest Dowson. (20)

Dowson was a melancholy example of the treatment of the decadent and (commercially) unsuccessful poet -- an example more French than English. He has more affinity with Verlaine than with Keats. The French influence was an evil thing in his career. But if, in substance and in spirit, Verlaine be writ large on his work, it is not Verlaine's manner that he seems to us to have obtained...The dainty sense of form, the diction delicately cut and graven, rather than (like Verlaine's and our own supreme lyricists') condensing from the emotion inevitably and freshly as dew. These features suggest...Gallic lyricism in general...

"The dainty sense of form, the diction delicately cut and graven" are characteristics Thompson contrasts with the characteristics of "our own supreme lyricists." These English poets he saw as writers with a sense of form who "condense from the emotion in-

evitably and freshly as dew." He continues his analysis:

It is the contrast between Greek artistry, reliant on the sculptural or architectural elements of form and structure; and Gothic or Celtic poetry, rooted in a peculiarly spiritual intimacy, which we Goths distinctly recognize as poetry, and of which there are but the rarest examples in the classic poets (by classic meaning Greek and Latin.) The French as a nation are classic and artistic rather than purely poetic. But Verlaine for all his nation's instinct for external symmetry, had at his best the spiritual intimacy both in substance and style, which is un-Greek and un-Gallic. Dowson, enamoured of Verlaine as an ideal, and evidently suggesting him in substance, is too natively Gallic to recall him in style. Paradox though it seems, with his devout endeavour he might have come neared Verlaine had he been more English.

Thompson's stressing of the Gothic or Celtic spirit in the above quotation is significant. To him it is characteristic of the best English poetry. It is characteristic, too, of his own poetry, which, judged by any standards approaching the Classic or Gallic, bears considerable criticism on the score of structure. Gothic unity is the only unity attributable to many of his longer poems, and especially to Sister Songs.

This same question of freedom of form, so important from Thompson's viewpoint, is discussed in his essay "Form and Formalism." It is a plea for the recognition of the value of true form, but a rejection of formalism. In the essay he denounce in strong terms the "materialistic worship of form that in literature (and possibly in art) curiously prevails." (21)

True form, spontaneous and natural, as distinguished from formalism, accounts for the freedom of style which Thompson

earnestly calls for in art. He calls poetic ardour the strongest safeguard against formalism. "In poetry as in the kingdom of God," he says, "we should not take thought too greatly wherewith we shall be clothed. Seek first the spirit and all these things shall be added unto us." (22)

The whole age from Pope to James Thomson was in Francis Thompson's view lacking in this ardour. The English Romantic poets, by means of it, made their best work valuable as poetry. Thompson's own work is shot through with it. It gives to Sister Songs the only unity it possesses, a Gothic not a Gallic unity. And to Thompson Gothic unity is the heritage of the finest English poetry.

Much of what has already been said concerning the form of Sister Songs can be applied also to the metre. In determining the metre of a poem, and especially of an ode, Thompson advocated freedom dictated by poetic ardour. He disregarded exact adherence to academic rules and followed the higher law of clothing his inspiration with the form which ^{would} ~~will~~ most accurately express his poetic vision. He varied his metre to express changes of thought and mood. It may be said in general that Sister Songs is written in iambic pentameter. It is founded upon Patmore's use of the iambic movement, called by him the "free tetrameter," because the long lines have the time of eight iambs, and the shorter lines, which occur irregularly, the time of six or four. But the poem's movement is so irregular, and its changes so sub-

tle, that it is practically impossible to classify it. To understand the regularity underlying the apparent irregularity of Sister Songs it is necessary to study Thompson's metrical theory.

Thompson's interest in metre was lifelong. He relates that from the time he was sixteen years of age he studied and practiced the art of metre with "arduous love." (23) And to this was added the study involved in more than twenty years of reviewing. He observed the metrical practices of poets with great care, and arrived at certain definite conclusions regarding the use of metre.

First of all, he considered no poet or poetaster ignorant of the academic metrical rules. "I have reviewed poets and poetasters this twenty years or more," he says, "and never yet impeached one of such a matter as infraction or ignorance of academic metrical rules." (24) In this same passage he discusses how true poets depart from the academic rules. Here he gives the underlying principle for his own use of metre.

True poets have the law in their members, assimilated by eager obedience from their practiced youth; their liberty is such liberty won by absorption of law, and is kept in its orbit by their sensitive foedality to the invisible -- the hidden -- sun of inspiration. "They do not wrong but with just cause." (25)

In such wise did Thompson write. He had mastered metrical study in his youth and ever after was able to write with natural freedom, as inspiration dictated. The inspiration expressed itself

spontaneously, and the subject matter of the poem determined the form. His poetical equipment was at hand ready for use. Metrical irregularities resulted. But the irregularities and freedom from law are not actually irregular in their final effect. The law is concealed but the metre ebbs and flows with the motion of the poem. Only delicate responsiveness to inspiration and changes of mood can effect this. In one of his notebooks Thompson wrote:

Temporal variations of metre responsive to the emotions, like the fluctuations of human respiration, which also varies indefinitely, under the passage of changeful emotions yet keeps an approximate temporal uniformity. (26)

But the accurate expression of the poet's changes of emotion in a naturally flowing style demands careful metrical preparation. Thompson did not underestimate the value of metrical study. This is evidenced in a passage written in reference to his poem, "Heard on the Mountain." Here he treats of fourteen and sixteen syllable verse:

That splendid fourteen-syllable metre of Chapman, to which Mr. Kipling has given a new vitality, I have here treated after the manner of Drydenian rhyming heroics; not only with the occasional triplet, but also the occasional Alexandrine, represented by a line of eight accents. Students of metre will see the analogy to be strict, the line of eight being merely the carrying to completion of the catalectic line of seven, as the Alexandrine is merely the filling out of the catalectic line of five accents. (27)

In Thompson's estimate of the most suitable ode form, Patmore's influence predominates. The ode, according to Thompson,

was the highest form of lyric poetry (28) and the free ode metre of Patmore the best metrical technique of the species. "The ode metre of New Poems is," he said, "with this exception, completely based on the principles which Mr. Patmore may virtually be said to have discovered." (29) In general, Patmore believed that accents rather than syllables should be taken as the metrical standard. He also advocated metrical form in which the metre varies with the emotion and the context of the poem. Thompson's admiration for this aspect of Patmore's theory is a natural prelude to his imitation of Patmore's metre. In an early Merrie England review Thompson wrote:

Crashaw's employment of those mixed four-foot iambs and trochaics so often favored by modern poets marks an era in the metre. Coleridge...adopts an excellent expression to distinguish measures which follow the changes of the sense from those which are regulated by a pendulum-like beat or tune --however new the tune-- overpowering all intrinsic variety. The former he styles numerous versification. Crashaw is beautifully numerous, attaining the most delicate music by veering pause and modulation. (30)

"Numerous versification" proved to be one of the guiding principles of Thompson's metrical theory. Measures which follow the changes of sense account for his use of pauses of varying length, making some lines of the ode exceptionally short, others long. The poet's feelings must determine and justify the irregular ode metre. If the poet is lacking in the motive power of passionate thought, he will produce nothing but metrical nonsense. If the reader finds it difficult to tag each line of Sister Songs with a metrical symbol, he must remember that Thompson

was not writing metrical nonsense. Thompson himself regarded veiled rhythm as a high form of poetic achievement. "All verse is rhythmic," he says, "but in the graver and more subtle forms, the rhythm is veiled and claustral; it not only avoids obtruding itself, but seeks to withdraw itself from notice." (31)

Thompson's theory of metre might be summed up as follows. Infraction or ignorance of academic metrical rules is a fault of neither poet nor poetaster; the latter is careful to count out his syllables, the former has early mastered academic rules and is guided by a proper metrical sense. The poet follows the higher law of clothing his inspiration with the form which will accurately express his poetic vision. He may vary his metre to express changes of mood or thought. The resulting irregularities are not actually irregular, but are an inherent part of the production marked by organic unity and the variations this demands. In the higher and more subtle forms of poetry the rhythm is less marked; it veils itself and retires from notice, thereby increasing the total effect of an organic whole to which all the elements of poetry should contribute. This change of metre following change of mood is sometimes called "organic rhythm," a cardinal point in Thompson's metrical theory.

Sister Songs exemplifies this organic rhythm or numerous versification. The entire poem is a triumph of varying lines and patterns closely interwoven with the thought and mood. Several examples will suffice to show this variation. ~~The first is~~

The first is the introduction to the account of his experiences in London.

A kiss? for a child's kiss?
Aye, goddess, even for this.
Once, bright Sylviola, in days not far,
Once -- in that nightmare time which still doth haunt
My dreams, a grim unbidden visitant.

(Pt.1, ll.272-276)

The first two lines of the above are a great variation of the usual iambic pentameter. The first line includes two questions, and the pauses, natural enough after each question, makes up for the two missing beats. The second line is a slow deliberate statement, where brevity lends the weight of conviction. Then in the third, fourth, and fifth lines he resumes his customary metre. One can see him settling back in his chair as he starts his tale of sorrow.

An even more remarkable change of rhythm occurs near the opening of the second part of the poem.

In pairing time, we know, the bird
Kindles to its deepest splendor,
And the tender
Voice is tenderest in its throat:
Were its love, forever nigh it,
Never by it,
It might keep a vernal note,
The crocean and amethystine
Luster linger on its coat.
Therefore must my song-bower lone be,
That my tone be
Fresh with dewy pain alway. (Pt.2, ll.82-94)

To scan the above lines and find a uniform metrical scheme would be impossible. But that does not mean that there is no uniformity in the poem. The poem as a whole is a masterpiece

of organic rhythm, the change of metre following the change of sense. And this, according to Thompson's metrical theory, is the practice of the true poet. Thompson admired Shelley for sacrificing at need "smoothness to fitness" and for permitting himself to "write an anapest that would send Mr. Swinburne into strong shudders", thereby "forgoing the more obvious music of melody in order to secure the higher music of harmony." What he admired in Shelley he himself practiced. His one norm was to clothe his inspiration with a suitable garment for creating an organism which could "come down and live among men!" (32)

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

- 1) Meynell, Alice, "Some Memories of Francis Thompson," The Dublin Review, Jan. 1908.
- 2) Works III, p.71.
- 3) Ibid. p.21.
- 4) Ibid. p.21-22.
- 5) Ibid. p.21.
- 6) Ibid. p.22.
- 7) Quoted in the Life of Francis Thompson, p.191.
- 8) Loc. Cit.
- 9) Ibid. p.204.
- 10) Meynell, Alice, "Francis Thompson," Nation, Nov. 23, 1907.
- 11) Quoted in the Life of Francis Thompson, p.151.
- 12) Loc. Cit.
- 13) Megroz, Rodolphe L., Francis Thompson, The Poet of Earth in Heaven, p. 66.
- 14) Pt.2, l.301.
- 15) Megroz, Rodolphe L., op. cit.,p.66.
- 16) Pritchard, F.H., Studies in Literature, pp.38-39.
- 17) Freeman, John, "Coventry Patmore and Francis Thompson," The Moderns, p.316.
- 18) Gardner, John, "Poetry of Francis Thompson," The Month, Feb. 1898.
- 19) Works, III, p.71.
- 20) This essay on Dowson is not included in Thompson's publish-

ed prose, but is found in manuscript form in the Seymour Adelman Collection of Manuscripts and Rare Editions of Francis Thompson. The writer is indebted to Norman T. Weyand S.J., and through him to Mr. Seymour Adelman for access to this manuscript.

- 21) Works III, p.31.
- 22) Ibid. p.32.
- 23) Quoted in the Life of Francis Thompson, p.175.
- 24) Loc. Cit.
- 25) Loc. Cit.
- 26) Ibid. p.178.
- 27) Ibid. p.175.
- 28) Works III, p.175.
- 29) Meynell, Everard, op.cit.,p.176.
- 30) Ibid. p.179.
- 31) Ibid. p.178.
- 32) Works III, p.71.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The conventional sketchy biography of a poet is apt to portray merely the outer shell of the real man, limiting itself, as it does, to the external facts of the poet's life, dates of birth and death, principal places visited, when and under what circumstances he composed his principal poems, and an enumeration of his contacts, influences and friendships. The picture is usually true as far as it goes, but the difficulty is that it stops far short of a real analysis. Instead of portraying the real man, his inner loves, thoughts, and desires, it merely gives his empty form.

What, then, of the lyric poetry taken by itself? Will that give us the true picture of the poet? Here, again, the student is too often blinded by the dazzling splendor of imagery, phantasy, poetic effusions, and emotional reactions. Far from helping him to penetrate the poet's spirit, it seems but to hinder him. In some instances it does not even clarify itself, much less give a clear picture of the poet. So where is the bewildered student to turn? He has the materials at hand, but what should he do with them?

The solution of the problem seems to lie in a correct cor-

relation of the biography and the poems. If the biography is the outer form, the poetry is the spirit. The form, by itself, is lifeless; the spirit, alone, we cannot discern. The two joined together give us a living, visible picture. By applying what we know of a poet's life, we can better understand his poems; and through a more perfect understanding of his poetry we complement the facts garnered from his biography.

The present thesis is an example of this point. It has resolved itself into a poetic explication. In the Introduction was admitted the statement that the poems of Francis Thompson seemed esoteric to the average reader, and several reasons for their obscurity were assigned. Three of these were chosen as a basis for the thesis, the autobiographical materials packed into the poems, the lavish use of imagery, and the apparent lawlessness of their style. The problem then was to show that if the reader had a definite knowledge of the facts of Thompson's life and of his poetical theories, much of the obscurity apparent at first sight would vanish. Hence the inclusion of the words, "the man and the poet", in the title. To illustrate this contention by a practical example, the poem Sister Songs was chosen, since it is admittedly one of the most intricate in thought content, imagery, and form, and is one of his major poems in the estimation of careful critics. By means of this one poem, our touchstone itself was to be tested.

All of the autobiographical references, in the order in

which they appeared in the poem were explained by a complete unfolding of two external phases of Thompson's life, his relations with the Meynell family and his experiences on the London streets. As far as possible, an exposition of his emotional and volitional reactions to these two portions of his life was added. In the same way, the portions of the poem referring to Thompson's lonely life as a poet were explained by introducing his theories on poetic dedication, and poetry, the product of pain and sorrow. The final pages of the thesis showed that, according to Thompson, imagery was a beautiful thing in itself, that, when the poet wasⁱⁿ the inspired mood of realizing the presence of God in all creatures, imagery could not be too luxuriant. Against the charge of Thompson's irregularity in the use of form and metre, his metrical theory was explained, and Sister Songs was shown to be a triumph of organic rhythm and Gothic unity.

No direct attempt at a critical evaluation of the poem has been made during the course of the thesis. The direct and indirect purpose of this work will have been realized if the reader, in studying the works of Francis Thompson, will intelligently remove the barriers in the manner indicated, and will remember in his final evaluation of the poems that Francis Thompson wished to be judged as, "the poet of the return to God".

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The thesis, "Francis Thompson, The Man and the Poet in Sister Songs," written by Paul Lynch O'Connor, S.J., has been accepted by the Graduate School with reference to form, and by the readers whose names appear below, with reference to content. It is therefore accepted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Rev. John Burke, S.J.

August, 1938

Rev. Burke O'Neill, S.J.

August, 1938