Francis Thompson: Poet of the Image

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FRANCIS THOMPSON:

POET OF THE IMAGE

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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

Joseph Francis Murphy, son of Patrick Francis Murphy and Elizabeth Casey, was born April 28, 1911, at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. There he attended Our Lady of Mercy Elementary School and the Roman Catholic High School for Boys. He was graduated from the latter in 1929. On July 31, 1931, he entered the Society of Jesus and made his novitiate at Saint Andrew-on-Hudson, Poughkeepsie, New York. He entered upon his undergraduate studies at Fordham University, New York City, in 1933, and completed the same at West Baden College of Loyola University in February, 1937, when he received the degree of Bachelor of Arts. His graduate work was done at West Baden College, West Baden Springs, Indiana, during the academic years 1937-1938.
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INTRODUCTION

The question of imagination in poetry has engrossed the attention of poets and literary critics since the days of Aristotle. This is as it should be; for, generally speaking, a poet is judged by his power over images. Such an admission in no way discounts the necessity of thought and emotion in verse. If, moreover, the intellectual content be taken for granted, poetry may be divided into two classes, according as the primary emphasis is placed on emotion or on imagination.

Of the many nineteenth century poets whose work is characterized by the primacy of the image, none is more obviously dependent upon it than Francis Thompson. As his biographer writes, the poetry of Francis Thompson "abode by the Image."¹ Imagery--variously termed splendid, exuberant, riotous--is the obvious quality of his poetry. But if our knowledge of Thompson's theory of the function of the poetic imagination were confined to its expression in his verse, we should have very little that is definite and, at the same time, personal to him. We are not, however, so restricted. In his prose writings and correspondence, and among the pencilled fragments of his note-books, there is enunciated a consistent theory of the function of the imagination in poetry.

This body of writing is not large. Thompson offers us no disquisition on the subject of imagination such as may be culled from the philosophical meanderings of Coleridge. But the brevity of Thompson's remarks is compensated for by their discernment and their unequivocal expression. The occasion of the most explicit of his reflections was a friendly controversy
with Alice Meynell. This interchange of opinions will be treated more at length in the course of this paper. It is mentioned now to show that from the circumstances of epistolary controversy, Thompson, of necessity, spoke to the point. The statement of his views is pregnant with meaning.

This thesis does not attempt to prove Thompson's theory of the imagination in poetry. It is an exposition of that theory as stated by the poet and interpreted by his biographer, Everard Meynell. This exposition will constitute the first chapter of the thesis. The same chapter will include some discussion of Alice Meynell's view, which Thompson opposed, namely, that there is a higher poetry which lies on the yonder side of that expressed by images. In conclusion, a possible reconciliation of the opposed views will be indicated.

Building on the foundation of the first chapter, the thesis proposes to show in the end that Thompson must be ranked as a major poet precisely because of his daring and happy use of imagery. The necessary steps to this conclusion are the intermediate chapters of the thesis: the sources and stuff of Thompson's imagery as revealed in the poems (Ch. II), with special emphasis on ecclesiastical ritual and symbolism as a source (Ch. III); and the daring and success of the poet, together with certain excesses, in the use of images (Ch. IV).

This appraisal of the poems of Francis Thompson, in the light of his theory of the function of the imagination, is calculated to give a deeper understanding of Thompson as an artist and poetic craftsman. Such an understanding is the chief fruit expected of this study. But there should result also a more intimate knowledge of what may be called Thompson's philosophy
of poetry. For although Francis Thompson was frustrated in his desire to be a priest of God, yet as his biographer says: "Holding so grave an estimate of the functions of the imagination, he found in poetry the highest human scope and motive." 2.
NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

1. Life—p. 216.
2. Life—p. 216.

(N. B.: ABBREVIATIONS:

In reference to the following often-quoted works only the abbreviation indicated in each case will be given:

   Abbreviation—referring to page and lines: Poems:10/7-16.
   Abbreviation: Prose: p.—
   Abbreviation: Life: p.—
   Abbreviation: Megroz: p. --)
CHAPTER I

Francis Thompson's Theory of the Function
of the Imagination in Poetry.

It may be said more truly of Francis Thompson than of almost any other English poet, that the essence of his poetry is imagery. This most obvious characteristic of Thompson's poems is but the exemplification of his theory that images "belong ...... to the highest poetry, the poetry of revelation and the intellect." 1.

The emphasis which Thompson placed on the imagination is implied in many of his critical appreciations of poets and poetry, notably in the Shelley essay. But we have also his explicit statements on the subject.

In the first place, Thompson's theory of the image will be better understood, if it is seen in its relation to his concept of the function of poetry itself. In his note-books, he gives precise expression to this concept. He writes:

Job, Isaiah, Ezekiel, all the prophets with the amazing Apocalypse at their head, are but that Imagination (God's) stooping to the tongue of the nursery. Yet the Apocalypse is so big with meanings that every sentence yields significance for endless study. And it is just the child's apologue of that incalculably enormous Mind, whose mature book is the Universe, and its compendium Man. He cannot read himself — that compendium is beyond him — he is too big for himself; so that he takes up as an easier labor, the reading of God, and is seriously angry with his Author's obscurity. Yet in one germ-idea of that Mind a wilderness of Platos would be more unnoticeably lost than flies inside St. Paul's. But, secondly, there is an added reason for human confusion, which is nearly always ignored. The world — the Universe — is a fallen world. When people try to understand the Divine plans, they forget that everything is not as it was designed to be. And with regard to any given thing you have first to discover, if you can, how far it is as it was meant to be. That should be precisely the function of poetry — to see...
and restore the Divine idea of things, freed from the disfiguring accidents of their Fall. 2)

The function of poetry, therefore, is to capture, insofar as this is in man's power, God's viewpoint; it is to realize and express the underlying inter-relation of things. Thompson rightly claims that there is such a hidden inter-relation and, with equal right, attributes the surface complexity of life to its real and ultimate cause, original sin:

The angels keep their ancient places;
Turn but a stone and start a wing:
'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,
That miss the many-splendoured thing. 3)

The poet must be literally a "seer", one who sees. He must be childlike; still capable of wonder.

But what has imagery to do with this realization of things? Again we may appeal to Thompson's own witness. The source is the essay on Shelley. The words, though applied to his subject, may be taken as a generalization; for he is endeavoring to express the secret of Shelley's marvellous imagery, and hence of great imaginative poetry in general. He writes:

Any partial explanation will break in our hands before it reaches the root of such a power. The root, we take it, is this. He had an instinctive perception (immense in range and fertility, astonishing for its delicate intuition) of the underlying analogies, the secret subterranean passages between matter and the soul; the chromatic scales, whereat we dimly guess, by which the Almighty modulates through all the keys of creation. 4)

These words are not, of course, a direct proof of the dependence of poetry on image. But we may legitimately take the converse of this arrangement to show that poetry is to exercise its function precisely by means of imagery. The poet in restoring "the Divine idea of things," uses as his instrument, imagery. The hidden, the invisible, the divine depend for revelation to us upon the image. As Thompson observes in a manuscript note:
Imagery is so far from being "all fancy" (which is what people mean by saying it is "all imagination.") That the deepest truths - even in the natural or physical order - are often adumbrated only by images familiar, and yet conceived to be purely fanciful analogies.

At this point it will not be appropriate to stress the fact that Thompson was no superficial commentator on this matter of imagery. He combined the delight of the artist in his art with careful and discerning critical judgment. That he delighted, even revelled, in imagery is apparent in nearly all his own poems. We have, moreover, his tribute to Shelley's glowing poetic imagination. (It might be recalled whenever we speak of Thompson's comments on Shelley, that the following observation is quite true: "constantly he betrays an awareness that he is looking at himself in looking at Shelley." Of the latter he writes:

It would have been as conscious an effort for him to speak without figure as it is for most men to speak with figure. Suspended in the dripping well of his imagination the comment object becomes encrusted with imagery. Herein again, he deviates from the true Nature poet, the normal Wordsworth type of Nature poet: imagery was to him not a mere means of expression, not even a mere means of adornment, it was a delight for its own sake.

Thompson is careful, however, to qualify the statement that imagery was for Shelley "a delight for its own sake." A little farther on in the same essay, he illustrates "imagery for its own sake" thus:

.... 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 straight way to a fixed object, lags continually from the path to play...... So you may toy with imagery on mere intellectual ingenuity, and then you might as well go write acrostics: or you may try with it in raptures, and then you may write a Sensitive Plant.

In the same paper he makes a claim for Shelley which is not so valuable in itself as in that it is based upon a distinction, which only a careful
For astounding figurative opulence he (Shelley) yields only to Shakespeare, and even to Shakespeare not in absolute fecundity but range of images. 9."

It may carefully be granted that this claim is extravagant. The point to be noted here is that, as Mr. Megroz remarks, Thompson applies a "distinction he had already recognized between fecundity and range of imagery." 10. In other words, truly great poetry is dependent not on number and variety of images, but rather on their depth; the imagery of great poetry is packed with latent power and intensity. The same critic adds justly:

One is tempted to say that he (Thompson) is nearer than Shelley to Shakespeare, because in his best work the image is more dramatic as well as fecund, and displays the underlying thought more startlingly. 11.

The careful attention which Thompson devoted to his images is revealed by a manuscript foot-note to the phrase "Night's scintal idolatry" 12.

For once I have used a symbol which - unlike true symbolism - will not turn every way. The parallel is incomplete, for the moon is dead - 'the corpse in Night's highway' as Mr. Patmore says. Otherwise the parallel is accurate, your science may grasp at it. 13.

One more example may be given to show what a careful student of his craft Francis Thompson was. In a review written in 1889 he quotes the following lines from a verse by the Irishman, Thomas Davis:

Your steps like the rain to the summer-vexed farmer,  
Or sabre and shield to a knight without armour.

It is not remarkable that among other censures, Thompson should say that there is in these lines "a tendency to cheap imagery, facile imagery devoid of selectness" and add that "this is exactly the kind of imagery which can be turned out by the yard." 14. His subsequent observations, however, are well
worthy of note; for they reveal his scholarly insistence that the true image must have more than mere surface points of contact; it must "turn every way". Thompson continues that there is among examples of weak imagery:

.... one which is almost sufficient in itself to glorify the thing and stagger our judgment, since to this class of imagery must be referred those lines from Marlow which every literary student knows

Oh Thou art fairer than the evening air
Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars!

For one moment censure droops its head rebuked: the comparison so indubitably falls within the proscribed species, yet the lines are so indubitably beautiful. But a little consideration will show that the exception is only a seeming exception: The image is beautiful, not as an image, but as a poetical picture; the charm is latent not in the aptness of the simile, but in the isolated enchantment of the diction which sets before us the star-sown evening firmament. Were it not for this, we should cast aside as valueless a comparison which rested its sole ground of analogy on the fact that both the objects brought into relation were beautiful. 15.

The lengthy treatment there accorded to Thompson as a careful moulder and critic of images is in areal sense necessary. A poet who deals almost entirely in imagery is open to the charge of perpetrating far-fetched and fanciful analogies. The excerpts just quoted should amply prove that this fault is, for the most part, unjustly attributed to Thompson.

Moreover, he not only thought deeply on this subject, but also independently. In this matter of imagery he was far from blindly deferential to authority, even to standard authorities. One of the most widely accepted distinctions between imagination and fancy is that stated by Leigh Hunt in his essay: What Is Poetry. Professing to give the mind of Coleridge on the matter, Hunt says in substance that fancy - "Younger sister of Imagination without the other's weight of thought and feeling" 16./- detects
outward analogies, imagination inward analogies. Thompson flatly denies the adequacy of this distinction. Writing to Coventry Patmore in 1893 from Pantasaph, his monastic retreat in Wales, Thompson says:

In a fragment of a projected article, which has remained a fragment, I had written of "poets born with an instinctive sense of veritable correspondence hidden from the multitude." Then I went on thus: "..... 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 resemblance may be as superficial as outward resemblance; 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 things, its discernment is the product of imagination. This is the real distinction: fancy detects resemblances, imagination identities." 17.

From this declaration, it can be seen that, in Thompson's view, true imagery is the chief instrument of the poet in the accomplishment of his function: "to restore the Divine idea of things, freed from the disfiguring accidents of their Fall." This theory of the primacy of the imagination in poetry Thompson continued to hold in opposition to another and more respected authority, to whom in almost every other matter he deferred.

The claim that a higher simplicity than that which imagery can bestow, is ultimately the secret of the greatest poetry, is a recurrent theme in the writings of Alice Meynell. She has even made it the subject of one of her later verses, The Courts: A Figure of the Epiphany, in which she says of "ultimate poetry":

Plain, behind oracles, it is; and past
All symbols simple. 18.

In her prose writings, she illustrates her meaning. An essay on Tennyson cites the following lines from The Passing of Arthur

On one side lay the ocean, and on one
Lay a great water, and the moon was full,
with this comment:

Here is no taint of manner, no petty posture or habit, but the simplicity of poetry and the simplicity of Nature, something on the yonder side of imagery. 19./

Again, in her essay on the Bronteis, the following are quoted as "lines on the yonder side of imagery":

Of many thousand kisses the poor last,

Now with his love, now in the colde. grave,

and

Piteous passion keen at having found,
After exceeding ill, a little good. 20./

In the same essay we read:

You may hear the poet of the great imagery praised as a great mystic. Nevertheless, although a great mystical poet makes images, he does not do so in his greatest moments. He is a great mystic, because he has a full vision of the mystery of realities, not because he has a clear invention of similitudes. ........
A great writer is both a major and a minor mystic, in the self­same poem; now suddenly close to his mystery (which is his greater moment) and anon making it mysterious with imagery. (which is the moment of his most beautiful lines.). 21/

There is in these observations so much of the truth that one is, perhaps, inclined to see in Thompson's categoric denial of this view, another instance of the conceived theory, which seeks in vain to fit facts to itself.

Thompson is quoted by his biographer as follows:

It is false that highest or supremest poetry is stripped of figure. Purely emotional poetry at its highest is bare of imagery, not poetry of supremest flight. ...... Supreme emotion is not supreme poetry. 22/

One could wish that Thompson had adduced and commented on a few illustrations of "poetry of supremest flight." Be that as it may, it is clearly beyond the
scope of this thesis to prove and defend Thompson's view. It may, however, be indicated briefly how the two opinions, though not fully reconcilable, are mutually interdependent.

The great isolated lines cited by Alice Maynell as "ultimate poetry" are exceedingly rare. It is, moreover, almost impossible to find a whole poem bare of imagery. There is no proportion between the number of lines such as those already quoted and the number of images in the contexts from which they have been taken. He may, therefore, accept the conclusion of Theodore Maynard, who thus comments on Alice Maynell's theory of poetry of "the yonder side":

while ..... feeling at least it ought to be true of poetry, and is true of some ideal concept of it, I think we shall also have to say that for practical purposes poetry has to depend upon imagery. 23/

This is far from a vindication of Thompson; nor is it a refutation of Alice Maynell's view. But Professor Maynard adds:

.... we may say that the imagination is not solely concerned with the making of sensible images, and that in its highest flights it may even dispense with images, yet the image is the normal and general concern of the imagination. 24/

In the statement, "imagination ..... in its highest flights may even dispense with images", is a clue to the vindication of Francis Thompson's position. This so-called "purely emotional poetry" is not, as Alice Maynell would admit, emotional communication unaccompanied by intellectual content. And since we neither have the intellects of angels nor yet enjoy the Beatific Vision, our human intellects necessarily make use of the imagination to attain and to impart knowledge of the deeper truths. If, then, the poet may in certain great moments rise above the necessity of imparting his message
through images (and the lines quoted clearly show that the poets have done this), he may by no means dispense with the imaginative faculty in attaining the hidden truth that is his message. Poetry of "the yonder side" is, therefore, independent of images for its expression; but as long as the poet is man, his poetry is inextricably bound up with the imaginative faculty. This is a fact which Alice Meynell herself would seem to have acknowledged. Later in the essay already quoted, she wrote of Tennyson (though not merely with reference to the lines quoted above, but referring to the general absence of imagery in certain of his poems):

He has more imagination than imagery. He sees the thing, with so luminous a mind's eye, that it is sufficient to him; he needs not to see it more beautifully by a similitude. 25.

Thus may be closed the discussion of "poetry of the image" as contrasted with poetry of "the yonder side." Thompson, although he defended his position staunchly, began in practice to strive after greater simplicity. But to understand this change of attitude more completely, we must briefly consider the influence which Coventry Patmore exerted on Thompson.

It was to Coventry Patmore, more perhaps, than to any other, that Thompson looked for guidance in the craft of poetry. The marked difference between Thompson's earlier and later work is due chiefly to the influence of Patmore, with whom he had become intimate in the intervening years. His esteem for Patmore's critical judgments vied with his almost extravagant admiration of his poetry. In a later chapter of this thesis will be treated the exchange of opinions between these two poets on the question of symbolism. We may here consider Patmore's influence on Thompson, insofar as the latter tried to subordinate poetry of the image to "poetry of idea."
The most striking quality of Thompson's earlier work, especially obvious in *Sister Songs*, is a glorious spontaneity and perhaps, over-exuberance. *New Poems*, published in 1897, which forms the main body of his later work, is a volume different to a marked degree from the verse which had preceded it. This difference, moreover, is not confined to anyone aspect of Thompson's poetry, but is to be found in subject-matter, verse-forms, diction and imagery. The last is our chief concern here. The circumstances of composition, of course, influenced all Thompson's work. It is but natural, therefore, that the poems written before 1894, when his mind was newly freed from the thraldom of narcotics and when the memories of his outcast days were still vividly before him, should in content and quality differ from those composed in the seclusion of the Welsh Monastery of Pantasaph, where he resided during the three following years. But a far more important factor in the explanation of *New Poems* was the friendship with Patmore, which was formed at Pantasaph. Mr. Megroz, whose strictures on Coventry Patmore are hardly justifiable, is of the opinion that the Patmorean influence on Thompson has been greatly exaggerated. It is true that Thompson in his humility and through deference to his new friend may have given too much credit to the latter. There can, however, be little doubt that the profound modification of Thompson's work, so apparent even on a cursory reading, is due in great part to Patmore's guidance. The latter's work is in general more philosophical and less figurative than Thompson's. The poet of *Sister Songs*, in his turn, was not so open to direction that he could cease to be primarily a poet of the image. Greater depth as well as greater restraint marks Thompson's later work, yet he was still far from achieving the simpli-
city at which he aimed. His changing attitude towards his own earlier work is clear from a standpoint made to Everard Feilding in 1895 at Pantasaph. The latter wrote to William Mayne as follows:

He told us, I remember, of his poetical development, and of how, until recently, he had fancied that the end of poetry was reached in the stringing together of ingenious images, an art in which, he somewhat naively confessed, he knew himself to excell; but that now he knew it should reach further, and he hoped for an improvement in his future work. 27.

Although his exaggerated appraisal of his earlier poetic outlook cannot be taken at its face value, in view of the facts already staked in this chapter, yet this later view reveals Thompson, as still the serious student of the craft of poetry, but no longer rejecting the possibility of poetry of "the yonder side."

The following note with which he had intended to preface New Poems, but which was not published, likewise reveals Thompson's changing attitude:

... I shall also be found, I hope, to have modified much the excessive loading both of diction and imagery which disfigured my former work. 28.

This statement was not so much a concession to the contemporary critics, who had bewailed Thompson's "overloaded imagery", as a further indication of Patmore's influence. For Thompson had been unyielding in his resistance to any change of style in order to comply with the demands of reviewers. New Poems, moreover, was dedicated to Patmore, who had but recently died. To this fact the poet refers in the following words:

This latest, highest of my work, is now born dumb. It had been sung into his sole ears. Now there is none who speaks its language. 29.
The manuscript of this same volume was sent to Wilfred Meynell with a note which included the following appraisal by Thompson of his own achievement:

...... a very stern, sober, and difficult volume. 'Tis more varied in range than my former work. .... From the higher standpoint I have gained, I think, in art and chastity of style; but have greatly lost in fire and glow. 30.

The severity of the critics toward this volume and its alleged obscurity—the poetry is often difficult but by no means inexplicable—will be treated more at length in a later chapter. It is enough here to have indicated the Patmorean influence on Thompson as a poet of the image.

In concluding this section on Thompson's debt to Patmore one further comment is necessary. Francis Thompson showed himself in this instance quite amenable to suggestion and correction. He thought his poetry much improved and deepened from his intercourse with Coventry Patmore. But it must not be forgotten that, in his later, as in his earlier work, Thompson is always the poet of the image. Patmore taught Thompson to use his marvelous powers of imagination in a higher cause: to dare to become the singer of divine truths. As Everard Meynell says so well:

Patmore may have given Thompson a metre and a score of thoughts, but above everything else he gave him the freedom of his imagination. Having led him to a point of vantage, he looked in the same direction, but the revelation varied as the view varies to two men who walk along a road towards the same sunset. They are a few paces apart; to one an intervening tree may be black and sombre, to the other streaked with fire. 31.

Francis Thompson's trees and skies, men and angels were "streaked with fire" to the end. But lest it be thought that his own dissatisfaction with his earlier work was completely justified, we may adduce in denial of such a proposition the testimony of Father Cuthbert, O.S.F.C., a personal friend
and valued counsellor of the poet. In a certain sense, the earlier poems are not only better than the later, but are also more truly Thompson. The Franciscan writes:

Of the literary quality of Thompson's poetry, it has been said that it was 'too exuberant to be artistically perfect.' This is true of some of his work but not of all; it is least true of his earlier work, where the seemingly riotous flow of his imagery is but the counterpart of glorious spontaneity. In his later work he was less spontaneous, less vital; here it is as though he were recalling experience; and the exuberance is, therefore, less artistically correct. 32/

To conclude, we may briefly indicate what a profound influence Thompson's views on imagination exercised on his poetic career. From his theory of the function of poetry and of the place of imagination in the accomplishment of that function, one can readily see why Thompson, balked in his desire to be a priest, could regard the career of poet as a vocation inferior in dignity only to the sacerdotal calling. As his biographer remarks:

If religion is rightly defined as something more than communion between the man and the Almighty, as being besides the communion between man and man, and the sum of Mankind and the Almighty, then the poet is the immediate servant of God and Man. 33/

And his role of "servant of God and Man", as restorer of "The Divine idea of things," the poet's chief instrument is the image. With reason, therefore, Everard Meynell says of Francis Thompson, that:

Holding so grave an estimate of the functions of the imagination, he found in poetry the highest human scope and motive. 34/
NOTES TO CHAPTER I.

1. Life - p. 216
12. This phrase was later changed to "A bright scienitital idolatry." - Poems: 167/135.
13. Megroz - p. 64.
15. Ibid.: - p. 269.
17. Life - p. 191.
20. Ibid. - page 91.
22. Life - p. 216.
24. Ibid. page 232.


30. *Life* - p. 239.


34. *Life* - p. 216.
CHAPTER II

The Sources of Thompson's Imagery.

Since imagery is so essential a part of Francis Thompson's poetry, the sources whence the splendid fruit of his imaginings have come, are of particular interest. This inquiry, then, is justified in that it is calculated to deepen our appreciation of Thompson's creative genius. We shall more deeply appreciate the beauty of that splendid edifice which is his poetry, if we know whence the poet derived and -- in some measure -- how he transformed his materials. Of the many sources from which Thompson's imagery is drawn, two in particular will be investigated at some length: namely; Nature and the liturgy of the Catholic Church. The second will be treated in Chapter III; Nature as a source will constitute the main portion of this chapter.

For a better understanding of the remainder of this study, the chronicle of Francis Thompson's life may be stated briefly here. On Dec. 16, 1859, he was born at Preston in Lancashire of parents, who had been converted to the Catholic Church during the course of the Oxford Movement. From 1870 to 1877, he attended St. Cuthbert's College, Ushaw, in the hope that he would be able to continue there the higher studies necessary for the priesthood. In the latter year he suffered the most lasting disappointment of his life, when he was counselled to put aside the hope of becoming a priest. His dismissal from Ushaw was followed by six desultory years of apprenticeship in his father's profession, as a medical student at Owens College, Manchester. There, during an illness (1879), he became addicted to the use of opium.
After repeated failures in the final examinations in medicine, he returned home to a saddened and disappointed father. Soon thereafter, Francis set out for London. This was the darkest period of his life (1885-1888), during which he lived as an outcast in the streets of the great metropolis. Rescued by the Meynells in 1888, he was sent to the Premonstratentian Priory at Starrington. After a stay of more than a year in this retreat, he mastered the drug habit. From 1890 to 1892, he lived in London near the Meynells. Then for more than three years he was at the Capuchin Monastery, Pantasaph, Wales, again battling the craving for drugs. In 1896 Thompson returned to London, where he wrote little verse, but continued his work as a book-reviewer almost until his death from tuberculosis, Nov. 13, 1907.

Although we shall not formally treat as a source of imagery, the sights and sounds experienced by Thompson at the various stages of his career, many of these have found their way - usually after a glorious transformation - into his verse. Some few may be cited in passing. The simile in A Judgment in Heaven: "as night seas on phosphoric bars" is, we are told by Mother Austin, the poet's sister, a recollection of childhood holidays at Colwyn Bay. Alice Meynell writes of the poem, A Fallen Yew, that "a memory of Ushaw - the fall of the old yew tree in the playing field - gave him the subject of this splendid religious poem." While in An Anthem of Earth, Wilfred Meynell sees at least one "definite reminiscence of the dissecting room at Manchester where Thompson studied medicine." The lines are these, in which Thompson speaks of the heart of man

Arrased with purple like the house of kings,
  To stall the gray-rat and the carrion-worm
Statelily lodge 5.
The vivid autobiographical passages of *Sister Songs* are even richer in imagery drawn from the poet's personal experiences. There were nights during the "nightmare time" which Thompson spent as an outcast in the London streets, whereon, lacking the few pence requisite for a night's lodging, he literally:

...... endured through watches of the dark
    The abashless inquisition of each star.

The poet's biographer, commenting on the continuation of the same passage, notes the promotion to a part in *Sister Songs* of "the clock of Covent Garden, the arrowy minute-hand of which Mr. Shane Leslie has remarked as suggesting Thompson's description of himself when he

"Stood bound and helplessly
    For Time to shoot his barbe'd minutes at me"  

The lines which follow immediately upon those just quoted are:

Suffered the trampling hoof of every hour
    In night's slow wheele'd car;
Until the tardy dawn dragged me at length
From under those dread wheels; and, bled of strength,
I waited the inevitable last.  

Of this passage Everard Meynell writes:

Even before he was knocked down by a cab, as happened to him later, the heavy traffic of Covent Garden, harassing the struggler in the gutter, may well have been to him a type of danger and fears.

Finally, there is a line strongly reminiscent of Thompson's lengthy sojourns in the monastic retreats of Starrington and Pantasaph. In *A Fallen Yew* he says of the heart, that

Its keys are at the cincture hung of God.  

From these few citations, it is clear that the poet drew freely upon his daily experiences, and often, as in the case of the London cab-wheels, molded
in the deep well of his imagination, a thing of rare beauty from quite
prosaic materials.

Now, before entering upon the formal subject-matter of this chapter,
brief mention may be made of one factor which did not enter into the accom-
plishment of Thompson as a poet of the image. His imagery - whether we re-
gard the "wassail of orgiastic imageries" 12./ or the perfect garment of fervid
and weighty thought" 13./ - is not the product of opium dreams. That this is
no idle refutation is clear from the expressed opinion of many critics, to
whom Thompson is interesting primarily as a pathological exhibit. Yet ac-
cording to the testimony of those who knew Francis Thompson best and of com-
petent medical authority, not indulgence in drugs, but their renunciation was
the source of his highest and most sustained imaginative flights. A medical
doctor in a recent article tells of Thompson's successful battle against the
drug habit at the priory of Starrington during the year 1889-90. He
continues:

The reward of this renunciation was immediate. It opened the
doors of his intellect and images came toppling about his thoughts.
His greatest poems and prose were written in the following years.
The energy of creation and the altered state of his life found an
outlet for all his pent-up feelings and miseries 14./

Thompson's biographer writes in the same strain:

"...Opium killed the poet in Coleridge; the opium habit was stifled
at the birth of the poet in Thompson. His images came toppling about his
thoughts overflowing during the pains of abstinence. 15./

Francis Thompson was not, therefore, like Coleridge in regard to his poetry.
His verse is not the beautiful but shattered fragment of a drug-dream, such
as is Kubla Khan. The likeness between the two poets is rather in another
respect: "an evasion of the daily dues of man to man." 16/ This is refutation
sufficient of the charge that the foundation of Thompson's poetry was a mental state, induced by indulgence in drugs. The foundation on which the towering structure of Thompson's verse was reared was rather the renunciation of the opium habit. But this renunciation could have been at best only a partial cause; in itself, a negative element. For, as Professor Lowes observes in his "study in the ways of the imagination", The Road to Xandu:

The notion that the creative imagination, especially in its highest exercise, has little or nothing to do with facts is one of the "pseudoxia" which die hard.

For the imagination never operates in a vacuum. Its product is that fact transmuted. 17.

Whence, then is the stuff of Francis Thompson's imagery? As has already been stated, the source of these images is in the main two-fold: Nature and the liturgy of the Catholic Church.

When we speak of Nature poetry, we mean generally the expression of the wonder and delight that the visible world about us - sky and sea, field and stream - awakens in the heart of the poet and seer. Yet there is another aspect under which Nature finds its way into the poems of Francis Thompson, so important that it may not be omitted. These are the marvels of the physical universe, as unveiled by modern science. Thompson, although remote from his age in many respects, was as a nineteenth century Englishman intensely alive to the discoveries of science. Repeatedly these discoveries found their way into his verse. But before this fact is illustrated, the attitude of the poet toward science must be made clear.

First of all, Thompson's approach to science was seriously intellectual; he was no dilettante in any branch of knowledge which interested him. He had certainly a more thorough foundation in the physical sciences
than most poets, if his six years as a medical student be recalled. It is true that these years were ill-spent, but he himself bears witness that they were not without fruit.

I hated my scientific and medical studies, and learned them badly. Now even that bad and reluctant knowledge has grown priceless to me. 16.

As the medical doctor already quoted justly observes:

His imagery was largely drawn from astronomy, the physical marvels of The Universe, the crystalline beauty of the snow-flake, the minute marvels contained in a single atom of apparently inert matter, the minute structure of a blade of grass. 19.

Although this statement may be verified from the poetry and although Thompson maintained throughout his life an active interest in things scientific, it would be a mistake to portray this as a primary interest in his life. Francis Thompson had always before him, God. Science mattered only insofar as it was one of several means by which the greatness of God was revealed to the poet. What a gulf, therefore, stretches between Thompson and, for example, the followers of Huxley. One, moreover, who tends to value science disproportionately, would try to find in Thompson’s poetry more of the scientific than is really there. This would seem to be the error of Mr. Megroz. The latter remarks - truly as will be shown below - that Thompson never loses his grip on scientific reality; he transcends it. Less justly, however, the same critic adds that in an apostrophe to the sun, the line:

Beauty is beautiful but in thy glance 21.

"contains the theory of radiation" 22; and that to speak of the sun as the power which

girt dissolve'd lightnings in the grape." 23.
is strangely anticipatory of the theory of electrical energy." Leaving the Ode to the Setting Sun, from which the above quotations have been made, Mr. Megroz finds that in the Orient Ode, the power of his imagination enables the poet more than to hint at the electronic theory of matter and the reality of time and space." It may be admitted that in all these assertions there is some truth. But that Thompson foresaw the scientific hypotheses of a subsequent generation is a conclusion neither warranted by the facts nor very helpful in establishing his place as a poet.

From the poet's own words - in verse and prose - his attitude toward science may be briefly indicated. The scientific achievement of his time is celebrated in the ode, The Nineteenth Century, and in the Ode for the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, 1897. But the men whose praise he sings are those in whom knowledge has engendered reverence. Withering is his scorn for their shallow confreres, who in their little skill thought that they had outgrown the need of God. In An Anthem of Earth, we read of:

Science, old noser in its prideful straw,  
That with anatomising scalpel tents  
Its three-inch of thy skin, and brags "all's bare" -  
The eyeless worm, that boring works the soil,  
Making it capable for the crops of God.  

Quite other is the attitude of the poet himself:

Nor thrust my arm in nature shoulder-high,  
And cry - "There's naught beyond!" How should I so,  
That cannot with these arms of mine engirdle  
All which I am; that am a foreigner -  
In mine own region?  

No, Thompson draws on the findings of science only "to weave the garment of God." In keeping with his conviction that "imagination discovers identities", he holds that
There was never yet a poet beyond a certain range of insight, who could not have told the scientists what they will be teaching a hundred years hence.

The poet is, of course, speaking in a broad sense. As Mr. Megroz says:

Profound imaginative expression of the connections between phenomena must always contain a core of meaning which the "old noser science", will eventually prove by measurement.

A few examples will make clear both how the discoveries of science were incorporated into Thompson's verse and also how definitely they were subordinated to the Author of Science, God. In From the Night of Forebeing we read—

The stars still write their golden purposes
On heaven's high palimpsest.

The universe, moreover, and what science may discover of it are for man, that through them he may come to God. As the poet addresses God in any Saint:

In thy deific whim
Didst bound
Thy works great round
In this small ring of flesh;
The sky's gold-knotted mesh
Thy wrist
Did only twist
To take him in that net.

As Father Connolly comments on this passage:

It would be difficult to surpass the subtle beauty of this expression of God's ways with man, striving, as it were, to catch him in the "gold-knotted mesh" of stars.

Here may be noted a most beautiful simile which the poet draws from his knowledge of the vast distance between the earth and the stars. He conceives his poetry as going down through the ages to come:
As down the year the splendor voyages
From some long ruined and night submerge'd star. 34./

Still dealing with the heavenly bodies, the poet in another place refers to the course of the planets:

And round and round in bacchanal rout reel the swift spheres intemperably. 35./

Again, the planets in their orbits are pictured in flight before the sun:

Before Thy terrible hunt Thy planets run;
Each in his frightened orbit wheels,
Each flies through inassuageable chase,
Since the hunt o' the world begun,
The puissant approaches of Thy face. 36./

The earth, however, does not flee, but "recoils" from the sun's embrace:

Though dear recoil, the timorous muse of joy,
From thine embrace still startles coy,
Till Phospher lead, at thy returning hour,
The laughing captive from the wishing West. 37./

More directly connected with the scientific theories peculiar to Thompson's own generation are the lines of the poem Contemplation, which give expression to the theory of scientific atomism:

No stone its inter-particled vibration
Investeth with a stiller lie. 38./

This same direct connection is revealed also in these lines, in which the poet strives to explain his lyrical outburst in Sister Songs:

Inspiring time, we know, the bird
Kindles to its deepmost splendor
And the tender
Voice is tendered in its throat. 39./

Apropos of these lines, a contemporary critic in the Bookman wrote that in Sister Songs the primary things of poetry are newly and immortally said. But
Mr. Thompson's mind is saturated with modern thought, and he uses it in a singular way to deepen the ancient interpretation. He touches Darwinism, and it becomes transmutable in a lovely and poignant lyric. 40./

Let this consideration of the findings of science as a source of images end where it began - in Manchester. During the poet's idle years there, an almost daily refuge was the museum of natural history. As Everard Meynell writes:

Silent minerologies, fragments, fossils, tell the pact more than the boisterous tongues of the young men. Yorkshire delivered up to the museum a vast saurian and other creatures of the past of whom we hear in the *Anthem of Earth*. 41./

The passage referred to is the following:

Thou hast devoured mammoth and mastodon,
And many a floating bank of fangs,
The scaly scourges of thy primal brine,
And the tower-crested plesiosaure. 42./

We must now treat of Thompson's use of *Nature* - in the more commonly accepted poetic meaning of the word - as a source of images. To the casual reader, Francis Thompson's wide knowledge of the visible creation seems only too obvious. In this judgment the casual reader is not wrong; yet Thompson was not an accurate observer of trees and the flowers of the field. Wilfred Scawen Blunt, a contemporary of Thompson, records with a certain ironic satisfaction, an instance of the ignorance of the poet of nature:

When we all went out after luncheon to the woods, I found him quite ignorant of the names of the commonest trees, even the elm which he must have seen every day in London. I pointed one out to him, and he said, "I think a maple". 43./

How, in the face of such testimony can we explain all the superb images drawn from nature, with which the poet has clothed the most lofty abstract concepts? His biographer gives, perhaps, the best explanation:

..... an observer in the exact sense, Francis never was. He would make any layman appear a botanist with easy questions about
the commonplaces of the hedges, and a flowered dinner-table in London always kept him wondering, fork in air, as to the kinds and names. On the other hand he was essentially an observer: let him see but one sunset and the daily mystery of that going down would companion him for a life-time; let him see but one daisy and all his paths would be strewn with white and gold. He had the inner eye, which when it lifts heavy lashes lets in immutable memories.

The transfer of direct observation of nature into verse is of comparatively rare occurrence in Thompson's work. His typical nature poetry is symbolic. He is not as faithful a garden poet as Tennyson. But a few examples will prove that he "possessed the art to translate what he saw when a coincidence occurred so that his mood embodied what had intruded itself upon the retina of his physical eye." For instance, Thompson was indeed happy in his designation of the poppy as "a yawn of fire." With almost equal felicity, the laburnum, a London bloom, is called to our notice:

Mark yonder how the long laburnum drips
Its jocund spilth of fire, its honey of wild flame.

Even here, however, the picture is elaborated. For more direct reproduction of observation, there is the simile:

The long broad grasses underneath
Are waited with rain like a toad's knobbed back.

But such photographic reproduction is not the typical Thompson. The true Thompson appears in the lines which almost immediately follow those just quoted:

In the new-sucked milk of the sun's bosom
Is dabbed the mouth of the dairy-blossom;
The smouldering rosebud chars through its sheath;
The lily stirs her snowy limbs,
Ere she swims
Naked up through her cloven green,
Like the wave-born Lady of Love Hellene.
Here, certainly is more than mere observation; here is poetry which evokes a greater response than the most pointed poetic description.

At this point another question presents itself. Was Thompson such an observer of nature as Dryden has called Milton: one who saw nature through the spectacles of books? In other words is Thompson's outlook too "author-colored"? Is he a mere imitation? Among other changes, that of plagiarism was not absent from the indictment brought against the poet by many of his earlier critics. It is comparatively easy to show that Thompson drew directly from the works of Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats, especially the last. But the charge that Thompson was, in certain instances, a mere copyist of his masters can by no means stand. Before refuting it, a word on plagiarism and originality in general may not be out of place. As Professor Lowes has pointed out, in his lectures on *Convention and Revolt in Poetry*, to speak of originality as an antonym for plagiarism is to restrict greatly the meaning of the former, and to conform not to an absolute standard but to a current literary convention. He continues:

The Middle Ages, for example, had practically no sense whatever of literary property as we conceive it. To take over another's "goodly words" into one's own "dance melodie" was in itself a compliment as acceptable and courtly as any that one could pay. Acknowledgment might or might not be made, precisely as one pleased. And there, indeed, lies the crux of the whole matter. Barring the single point of acknowledgment, originality meant in Chaucer's day substantially what it means now - the transformation of what is taken over, into something that is essentially one's own.

Francis Thompson certainly was original in this sense. No matter whence he derived his materials, the finished product was essentially Thompson. A single quotation must here suffice to prove this statement. The nature of this passage, however, is such that it is adequate proof.
Who made the splendid rose
Saturate with purple glows
Cupped to the marge with beauty; a perfume press
Whence the wind vintage
Gushes of warm fragrance richer far
Than all the flavorsous ooze of Cyprus' vats?
Lo, in yon gale which waves her green cymar,
With dusky cheeks burnt red
She sways her heavy head,
Drunk with the must of her own odorousness;
While in a moted trouble the vexed gnats
Maze and vibrate and tease the noontide hush. 52./

As Mr. Megroz observes of these lines:

At his best the poet accomplishes miracles of recreation of nature beyond the reason of any other English poets except Keats and Shakespeare. Who else could have dared so successfully to adapt imagery in Keats' Ode to Autumn and make his words as magical as the original? There is no word in Keats' ode more potent than the word "maze" just there, and nothing more vivid and warm in English poetry than that picture of the wind- swayed rose. 53./
(Note: For some further examples of imitation, together with the presumed originals, confer Appendix I.)

But apart from the questions of direct observation of nature and of originality if treatment, there is the larger matter of Thompson's attitude toward nature. Did he see in the beauty of the created universe in itself an end worthy of man? Did Thompson find in nature only that cold consolation which was Shelley's on the death of Keats? —

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

Or was he as frankly pagan as Meredith, who wrote:

Into the breast that gave the rose
Shall I with shuddering fall?

No, Francis Thompson was too well acquainted with life to overlook the fact that nature produces, as well as the rose, the canker which destroys it. To the lines quoted from Adonis, moreover, Thompson referred as
... Shelley's inexpressibly sad exposition of Pantheistic immortality ....... What utter desolation can it be that discerns comfort in this hope, whose wan countenance is as the countenance of a despair? 54./

Thompson's attitude is not even Nature-worship in the Wordsworthian sense, for he has declared:

To be the poet of the return to Nature is somewhat; but I would be the poet of the return to God. 55./

In view of these facts, certain opinions stated by Hobbrook Jackson in his work of The Eighteen Nineties are quite unjustifiable. One may not speak of Thompson's "kinship with Shelley in a common Pantheism." 56./ To say of him, moreover, that he had the quietism of Wordsworth and the exalted sensuousness of Shelley and he had the fundamental saintliness of both", is to make a statement hardly acceptable at face value. We must ask at least a definition of terms.

No, Thompson has affirmed more than once that nature is not an ultimate; let us say rather, not in itself an absolute. Nature's inadequacy has been stressed most notably by the poet in The Hound of Heaven:

In vain my tears were wet on Heaven's grey cheek.
For ah! we know not what each other says,
These things and I; in sound I speak —
Their sound is but their stir they speak by silences.
Nature, poor stepdame, cannot slake my drouth. 58./

Yet Thompson loved beauty — earthly beauty — with a passionate love. He differed from her other lovers — Shelley and Meredith and the rest — in that he came through nature to God. Let us hear his own testimony:

Absolute Nature lives not in our life, nor yet is lifeless, but lives in the life of God; and in so far, and so far merely, as man himself lives in that life, does he come into sympathy with Nature, and Nature with him. She is God's daughter who stretches her hand only to her Father's friends. Not Shelley, not Wordsworth himself, ever drew so close to the heart of Nature as did
the Seraph of Assisi, who was close to the heart of God. .......
.... Yet higher, yet further let us go. Is this daughter of God
mortal? can her foot not pass the grave? In nature, as men tell us

................. a fold
Of heaven and earth across His Face,
which we must rend to behold that Face? Do our eyes indeed close
forever on the beauty of earth when they open on the beauty of
Heaven. I think not so; I would fain beguile even death itself
with a sweet fantasy ............ I believe that in Heaven is
earth. Plato's doctrine of Ideals, as I conceive, laid its hand
upon the very breast of truth, yet missed her breathing. For
beauty — such is my faith — is beauty for eternity. 59./

This, then, was Thompson's view of Nature. How did he draw on the rich
storehouse of imagery which is the visible creation? Largely, it is clear,
by way of symbols expressive of a higher reality. But we may first con-
sider his hymns to "Nature's little children", which, though often not with-
out a higher symbolic significance, are for the most part in praise of their
own intrinsic worth as creatures of God. Such is the phantasy in which he
sings of the field-flower that it:

... came up redolent of God,
Garrulous of the eyes of God
To all the breezes near it. 60./

Such is his praise of daisies, those

.... drops of gold in whitening flame
Burning. 61./

Such as a final example, are the exquisite lines To A Snow-Flake, that
"filigree petal" fashioned by God "from argentine vapor":

Mightily, frailly,
Insculpted and embossed,
With His hammer of wind,
And His graver of frost. 62./

Even when Thompson's work has taken on the higher and more symbolic character
as in The Hound of Heaven, he remains the poet who
drew the bolt of Nature's seclusions; 53./

who

...... knew how the câouds arise
Spurne'd of the wild sea-snortings; 64./

and who

... was heavy with the even,
When she lit her glimmering tapers
Round the day's dead sanctities. 65./

He is the same who sees in *A Hollow Wood*:

...... The Mansion built for me
By the sweating centuries;
Roofed with intertwine'd tree 66./

This last, more reflective mood is deepened in one of Thompson's later poems: *An Anthem of Earth*. This was the poet's first serious attempt to write in blank verse. Although he apparently thought little of it, such a critic as 67./ Alice Meynell has called it his "most magnificent ode". In certain passages at least, the tremendous images with which it is freighted give to the work an Aeschylean grandeur. The poet addresses Earth:

...Mother of mysteries!
Sayer of dark sayings in a thousand tongues,
Who bringest forth no saying yet so dark
As we ourselves, Thy darkest. 68./

..........  
..........  
Linking such heights and such humilities
Hand in hand in ordinal dances,
That I do think my tread,
Stirring the blossoms in the meadow-grass,
Flickers the unwithering stars. 69./

..........  
..........  
In a little dust, in a little dust,
Earth, thou reclaim'st us, who all our lives
Find of thee but Egyptian villeinage.

..........  
Thou fillest thy mouth with nations, gorgest slow
On purple aeons of kings, man's hulking towers
Are carcase for thee, ........
............ Thou hast sucked down
How many Nineveh's and Hecatomphylco,
And perished cities whose great phantasmata
O'erbrow the silent citizens of Dis. 70./

Here is the poet in a mood that grown dark, indeed. He has known in his contemplation of nature both joy and sadness. We have not yet seen his joy in the loveliness of nature at its highest intensity. It is fitting that we should now behold Francis Thompson so revelling in external nature that he draws reproves from nor a few Catholic critics. The lines with which his accusers find fault are those with which A Corymbus for Autumn opens:

Hearken my chant, 'tis
As a Bacchante's,
A grape-spurt, a vire-splash, a tossed tress, flown vaunt 'tis!
Suffer my singing,
Gypsy of seasons, ere Thou go winging;
Ere winter throws
His slaking snows
In thy feasting-flagon's impurpurate glows!
The sapped sun — taper as ever drank hard —
Stares foolish, hazed,
Rubicund, dazed,
Totty with thine October tankard.
Tanned maiden! 71./

Is it a Christian poet who writes these lines, in themselves so frankly pagan? Yes; and in this same poem is verified the judgment of a recent critic, who writes of Thompson that:

He used a pagan wealth of sensuousness in the service of his religion, and his accumulation of gorgeous images suggested the variety of God's creative power. 72./

For in the course of this same "chant", the poet's mood undergoes a change and he hymns Autumn:
Or higher, holier, saintlier when, as now,
All Nature sacred seems, and thou.
The calm hour strikes on yon golden gong.
In tones of floating and mellow light
A spreading summons to even-song:
See how there
The Cowled Night
Kneels on the Eastern sanctuary-stair.
What is this feel of incense everywhere?
Clings it round folds of the blanch-amiced clouds,
Upwafted by the solemn thurifer,
The mighty Spirit unknown,
That swingeth the slow earth before the emboureded throne?
Or is't the Season under all these shrouds
Of light, and sense, and silence, makes her known
A presence everywhere,
An inarticulate prayer,
A hand on the soothed tresses of air?
But there is one hour scant
Of this Titanian primal liturgy;
As there is but one hour for me and thee,
Autumn, for thee and thine hierophant,
Of this grave ending chant.
Round the earth still and stark
Heaven's death-lights kindle, yellow spark by spark,
Beneath the dreadful catafalque of the dark. 73.

After this, one is not too surprised that in a recent interview - nearly forty years after the publication of this poem - Mother Austin, a Presentation nun and the poet's sister, is quoted as saying that "of all Frank's poems, she preferred A Corymbus for Autumn." 74.

In the two passages just quoted from this poem, we have found the authentic Thompson: Nature's priest and poet that he might more nearly be God's. The following chapter will reveal how the poet combined, in a higher synthesis, as it were, the symbolism of nature and the liturgy of the Church.
NOTES TO CHAPTER II


2. Life - p. 12.


15. Life - p. 95.


18. Life: - p. 36

19. Article cited supra: 14.)

20. Megroz - p. 195

23. Poems - 86/140
29. Life - p. 238.
35. Poems - 175/168.
37. Poems - 165/51-54.
40. Mr. Louis Garvin, in the Bookman, March, 1897. -(Quoted: Life p. 244.).
41. Life - pp. 36, 37.
42. Poems - 224/275-278.
44. Life - p. 30
46. Poems - 7/3.
47. Poems - 19/26-27.
50. Lowes, J.L.: Convention and Revolt in Poetry. - p. 120.
51. Ibid. - p. 122.
52. Poems - 86/128-139.
54. Prose - p. 28.
55. Life - p. 205.
57. Ibid. - p. 212.
59. Prose - pp. 82-83.
60. Poems - p. 278/10-12.
63. Poems - 79/75.
64. Poems - 79/78-79.
65. Poems - 79/84-86.
66. Poems - 270/1-3.
68. Poems - 220/122-125.
70. Poems - 224/259 ff.


74. The Sower - (British Catholic Quarterly) - "Poet's Village" -
CHAPTER III
Ritual and Symbolism.

Note: The words "symbolism" and "symbol" are not used in this thesis in their more strict technical significance, according to which they are not synonymous with "metaphor." Here the words are used as practically synonymous with "metaphor."

The two quotations from *A Corymbus for Autumn* given at the close of the last chapter illustrate how naturally Thompson passed from the praise of external nature for itself to the use of the visible creation in a higher symbolism. There is no evidence of strain, as though the poet were forcing natural beauty into an unaccustomed mold. He appears rather to point out an already existing symbolism. As a contemporary critic wrote:

In this new mystical poetry, which Mr. Thompson has made peculiarly his own, Nature and the Catholic Church are one in their ritual; the former, in her changes and her pageantry, merely offers on a larger scale the same homage to God as the Church in her solemn Offices. 1,

The same critic then quotes as a splendid example of this new conception of nature, the opening lines of the *Orient Ode*. The passage may here be given in full as a prelude to some comments on Thompson's use of sun-imagery.

Lo, in the sanctuaried East,
Day, a dedicated priest
In all his robes pontifical express,
Lifeth slowly, lifeth sweetly,
From out its Orient tabernacle drawn,
Yon orbe'd sacrament confest
Which sprinkles benediction through the dawn;
And when the grave procession's ceased,
The earth with due illustrious rite
Blessed, — ere the frail fingers fealty
Of twilight, violet-cassocked acolyte,
His sacerdotal stoles invest —
Stes, for high close of the mysterious feast,
The sun in august exposition meetly
Within the flaming monstrance of the West. 2./

As in this poem, so in the earlier Ode to The Setting Sun, the sun is a
"type memorial" of Christ:

Like Him thou hang' st in dreadful pomp of blood
Upon thy Western rood. 4./

Thus, though the sun is so obviously a potent influence in the poetry of
Francis Thompson, his attitude is never pagan or pantheistic. As Everard
Meynell notes, Thompson cries to the sun:

I know not what strange passion bows my head
To thee, whose great command upon my veins
Proves thee a god for me not dead, not dead! — 5./

But before his singing is done, the true source of inspiration is revealed:

Thou, for the life of all that live
The victim daily born and sacrificed;
To whom the pinion of this longing verse
Beats but with fire which first thyself didst give,
To thee, 0 Sun — or is't perchance to Christ? 6./

The Christocentric character of Thompson's greatest poetry is most clearly
seen in his odes to the sun. As his biographer writes:

Through the symbolism of the sun all things were brought into
line. Likened to the Host, with sky for Monstrance; to the
Christ, with the sombre line of the horizon for Rood; to the
Altar-Wafer, and signed with the Cross; the Sun is to the Earth
only what Christ is to the Soul:—
Thou to thy spousal universe
Art Husband, she thy Wife and Church. 7./

The aim of Thompson's hymns to the sun — namely, the praise of the God-Man
— is given even more concise and pointed expression by Mr. Gardner, the
critic quoted at the beginning of this chapter. He writes — and his words
are really paraphrase of the closing lines of the Orient Ode, in which the poet answers his own question: "... or is't perchance to Christ?":

...... the sun is the type of Christ, giving life with its proper blood to the earth, its spouse and Church; and on all heaven's face the poet traces the sacred signs which hold their place round the Church's altars.

The early training at Ushaw had made the poet familiar with the various liturgical practices of The Church. With him, moreover, the "priesthood" of the poet was no mere manner of speaking, but a vivid reality. As a consequence he thought of his poetic vocation as a call to priestly functions, and he looked on God's world about him, the course of nature, as an unending service of praise. This latter point might be illustrated in various ways; examples of one frequently recurring image, however, will suffice. This is the "censer image." ... It might be noted in passing at this point, that Francis Thompson's oneness with nature, which some have erroneously believed pantheistic, is easily explained by a figure of frequent occurrence in the prayers of the Church. There, the life and actions of one dedicated to the divine service are spoken of as arising like clouds of incense before the throne of God, or as ascending in an odor of sweetness. This is the extent of Francis Thompson's pantheism. He would have had his songs and his life — so irregular despite the most determined efforts at regularity — form a continual paean of praise, at one with the never-ending hymn of the inanimate creation. In The Serene of The Leaf he wrote:

The heart, a censered fire whence fuming chants aspire,
Is fed with ooze'd gums of precious pain;
And unrest swings denser, denser, the fragrance from the censer,
With the heart-strings for its quivering chain.

In his commentary on these lines, Father Connolly applies them to the poet...
In these lines Thompson pictures the nature of his own vocation as a poet. The heart is a censer within which is the glowing coal of love. This censer, suspended upon the "quivering chain" of man's "heart-strings", is swayed by the soul's unrest, while the fire within it is fed with "precious pain" and from it chants of God's praise rise up as smoke of incense.

... But, this digression done, we come to the chief purpose of this section, the illustration of the use of the censer-image as applied by the poet to nature. In the second part of Sister Songs, the setting sun is pictured as a censer, and the clouds that cover its disappearance are incense smoke:

The day is lingered out:
In slow wreaths folden
Around yon censer, sphere'd golden,
Vague vesper's fumes aspire.

In the lines quoted at the close of Chapter II, an angel of the Apocalypse is pictured as a thurifer swinging the earth — the praise of creatures — before the throne of the Almighty.

What is this feel of incense everywhere?
Clings it round folds of the blanch-amiced clouds,
Upwafted by the solemn thurifer,
The mighty Spirit unknown,
That swingeth the slow earth before the embannered Throne.

Finally, the image is used of Christ in the seventh stanza of The Mistress of Vision. There is no explicit mention of the God-Man, but as Father Connolly notes in his paraphrase of the stanza, which is given below, the sun of the mystic garden is the Divinity made visible to man. In Thompson's words:

The sun which lit that garden wholly,
Low and vibrant visible,
Tempered glory woke;
And it seemed solely
Like a silver thurible
Solemnly swung, slowly,
Fuming clouds of golden fire, for a cloud of incense-smoke.
These lines are paraphrased:

Divinity, the sun from which everything within that garden derived its light, was lowered to the level of mortals and made visible to them in the glory tempered to man's powers, which was Christ. The glory of God Incarnate seemed a silver censer, solemnly swung, emitting clouds of fire rising as a cloud of incense to God the Father.  

These examples must here suffice as specimens of Thompson's use of ecclesiastical images. Even a cursory reading of the poems, however, reveals many a similar figure; confer, e.g., the passage from the Ancient Ode quoted above. But rather than trace these images in any detail, let us consider a topic of equal interest, Thompson's direct borrowings from the words of the Church's liturgy.

A passage from a review written by Thompson leads us to expect a reflection of the liturgy in his verse:

How many outside the ranks of ecclesiastics ever open the Breviary, with its Scriptural collocations over which has presided a wonderful symbolic insight, illuminating them by passages from the Fathers and significant prayers? The offices of the Church are suggested poetry — that of the Assumption for example, the Little Office, and almost all those of Our Lady. The very arrangement of the liturgical year is a suggested epic, based as it is on a deep parallel between the evolution of the seasons and that of the Christian soul of the human race.

Our expectations are not disappointed; Thompson acted upon his own suggestion and the result is the Assumpta Maria. In this paean of heaped-up praises of Mary, the Mother of God, the office of the Assumption and the sources from which it is compiled lose neither beauty nor power beneath the modern poet's touch. Thompson quite frankly spoke of his poem as being "vamped" from the office of Our Lady ; and before its close he has made open confession in a prayer to the Mother of God:

Remember me, poor Thief of Song!
With the enclosure of poems, which included the *Assumpta Maria*, came an explanation of his borrowings and also of the motto of the poem, a line from Cowley's ode, *On the Death of Crashaw*:

They are almost entirely taken from the Office of the Assumption, some from the Canticle, a few images from the heathen mythology. Some very beautiful images are from a hymn by St. Nerses the Armenian, rendered in "Carmina Mariana". You will perceive therefore the reason of the motto from Cowley: "Thou needst not make new songs, but say the old." 19.

Parts of the liturgy more familiar to the ordinary Catholic layman likewise found their way into Francis Thompson's poetry. In a brief but interesting article, the Rev. Kenneth Ryan traces two passages to prayers in the Common of the Mass. In the lines,

Lo, a wonder and a terror —
The Sun hath blushed the Sea to Wine! , 21./

he sees a reflection of the prayer, "Deus qui humanae substantiae"; while the prayer before the Gospel finds new utterance in verse as follows:

That thou, Isaiah coal of fire,
Touch from yon altar my poor mouth's desire. 22./

But more to our present purpose is the entire poem from which the lines last quoted are taken. For the *Orient Ode* is, like the *Assumpta Maria*, almost a direct adaptation of the office of a feast. The feast is that of Holy Saturday and the application of the sun-symbol to Christ has in this case Scriptural warrant. Before the coming of Christ, the Messiah had been referred to as "the Orient"; 23./ and in the New Testament, Zachary bore witness that "the Orient from on high" had come. 24./ The poet acknowledged his source in a letter to Coventry Patmore:

... it was written soon after Easter, and was suggested by passages in the liturgies of Holy Saturday. 25./
The comment of Mr. Megroz on Thompson's use of this source is worthy of note:

(The liturgy) does not fail to stress the anger of God against Jerusalem, the "city of malediction"; but what attracts Thompson in the liturgical literature is the prevision of the resurrection of the Son, who had already become for many poets, the sun of the soul. 26./

It is not purposed here to subject to analysis the Orient Ode, but this poem will serve as a basis for discussion of the Patmorean influence on Thompson in regard to symbolism.

.... One passage of the ode, however, now merits a brief comment. It is an echo of verses written years before in the Ode to the Setting Sun and is illustrative of Thompson's attitude toward the liturgy, as indicated in the citation last made. The poet addresses the sun:

God whom none may live and mark!
Borne within thy radiant ark,
While the earth a joyous David,
Dances before thee from the dawn to dark. 27./

Earlier he had written of the sun:

Beauty is beautiful but in thy glance:
And like a jocund maid,
In garland flowers arrayed,
Before thy ark earth keeps her sacred dance. 28./

These passages, both presumably derived from the Old Testament narrative in II Kings - Ch. VI, emphasize Thompson's view of what should be the consistent attitude of all creatures to their Creator; namely, that all that is should direct an unending hymn of praise to the donor of that existence. The earth does dance before the Lord, and then is man most pleasing to God, when, as David, he gives with childlike spontaneity, glory to God. If we take the biblical account, we see the depth of the imagery employed by Thompson and we come to a clearer understanding of his viewpoint, sometimes miscalled
pantheistic. As they brought the ark of the covenant from the house of Abinadab to the tabernacle, David, we are told in one of the most delightful narratives in Holy Scripture, "danced with all his might before the Lord."

Therefore, Michol, the daughter of Saul, "despised him in her heart" and coming out to meet David said: How glorious was the king of Israel today, uncovering himself before the handmaids of his servants, and was naked, as if one of the buffoons should be naked. And David said to Michol: .... I will both play and make myself meaner than I have done: and I will be little in my own eyes: and with the handmaids of whom thou spokest, I shall appear more glorious. 29.

This entire scene and especially the speech of David was no doubt in Thompson's mind, and is evoked by the words: "The Earth, a joyous David dances before thee." The space devoted to this explanation will not seem too great if it be recalled that the image in question is one of the great pattern of similar figures - equally rich in significance - which make up the poetry of Francis Thompson. - - - - We may now bring this chapter to a close with some account of the influence of Coventry Patmore on Thompson in regard to symbolism.

In Thompson's later poetry there are noticeable changes. The diction has been chastened, violence has been excluded, but without loss or power. The verse forms of the odes are more varied and irregular. Both changes may be attributed to the influence of Patmore on Thompson, as the latter has testified. But the closest bond between the two poets was forged from their common interest in symbolism. Thompson's greatest debt to his fellow-craftsman is to his thought, specifically, to his interpretation of symbols.
In *Assumpta Maria* this influence is obvious. As Father Connolly notes:

there is an attempt to adapt a Patmorean conception of Eros to the Roman Catholic liturgy of the Assumption. The poet treats the soul, as all mystics do, as the Bride of the Spirit, because it is the receiver of love. In a wonderful series of statements he gathers up all the universal symbolism of the female half of creation, the heaving womb, the grove and garden, the life-streaming breast, the mystic mountain, the "four Rivers' Fountain", the Hall or house, the cave of sky, the virgin; and the converse imagery keeps pace with it. 30./

Earlier, Thompson had questioned the orthodoxy of the views of the poet of *The Unknown Eros*, who would establish a perfect analogy between sexual love (supernaturalized, of course, in the sacrament of Matrimony) and the love of God for man. Reassured, however, by the attitude of their mutual friend, The Franciscan Father Anselm, he began to make use of similar imagery.

In the *Orient Ode* this love symbolism again appears. The sun is pictured as having gazed upon the earth, as God looked upon the Virgin Mary, and the earth as having conceived and brought forth the beauties of nature. Later, he hymns the sun:

```plaintext
Thou to thy spousal universe  
Art Husband, she thy Wife and Church. 31./
```

But this poem is of special interest here, because Thompson's doubt about a certain symbolic use of "the West" led to a most interesting exchange of letters between Patmore and himself on the subject of symbolism. Thompson had written of the coy earth retreating from the embrace of the sun:

```plaintext
Till Phospher lead, at thy returning hour,  
The laughing captive from the wishing West 32./
```

Having sent a copy of the ode to Patmore, we find Thompson acknowledging the criticism and appreciation sent him in return. He continues:
I want to allude particularly to your invaluable correction of my misuse of the Western symbolism; ..... Do you mean that historically men have prayed in three distant periods to W., E., and N.? 33./

Patmore answers this question and in a second reply amplifies his interpretation. The details do not concern us here, since the purpose of the quotation given is to illustrate the respective roles played by the two friends in this particular correspondence. The same letter from Patmore contains a confirmation of Thompson's use of a certain symbol in the Orient Ode. The lines in question are part of an address to the sun, in which it is said of the earth that she:

Offers to thee her fruitful water
Which at thy first white Ave shall conceive 24./

Patmore thus endorses this symbolism:

Water ..... is constantly used for the sensible nature in its extreme purity, as in the Blessed Virgin. 35./

From the questions given it might seem that Thompson was always the pupil and Patmore the teacher. But their relations on the question of symbolism were not exactly those of disciple and master. Patmore was a great inspiration to Thompson in this matter, but he by no means introduced the latter to a subject hitherto unknown. In a later letter of the same series, Thompson states:

I am familiar with the principle and significance in this and mythological imagery generally, etc. .............. when I came to make a comprehensive study of the Hebrew prophets, with the Eastern mythologies in mind, I speedily discovered the systematic use of the dual significance, and the difficulty vanished. 36./

Patmore's reply is an acknowledgment made to an equal, although he had devoted the better part of a long lifetime to the study of symbolism:

Thank you for your very interesting letter, which shows how extraordinarily alike are our methods of and experience in contemplation. 37./
That this tribute was deserved we may gather from a note in Thompson's biography. He had read widely on the subject, but as in almost all other fields, had never ordered his conclusions. They must be sought in the chaos of his note-books. Referring to Thompson's interest in a paint about Egyptian worship, Everard Meynell writes:

The contents of commonplace-books of a somewhat early period suggest a taste for many kindred themes. In one he has entered random "Varia on Magic", accounts of and comments on many heresies, etc. ....; with these are important notes on Certain Myths, the Chaldean Genesis, the Egyptian Crocodile, the Kabbalist Doctrine of the Pre-existence of Souls; some symbols connected with the Incarnation, the Lotus, the ritual of the funeral sacrifice, with transcriptions from the Book of Respirations, the Prayer to Ammon Ra, etc.; .... Still nearer his real concern are the notes on the varieties of the Cross symbol. 38/

If this array is to be found in the earlier note-books, surely it is safe to say that it was no novice in the matter of symbols with whom Patmore had to deal. This varied knowledge, moreover, refined in the crucible of his imagination, found its way into most of the poet's later work. In one poem particularly - the most symbolic of all and, perhaps, the most occult - is found the supreme synthesis. This is The Mistress of Vision. To treat this work adequately is far beyond the scope of this thesis; we may, however, indicate here the theme of the poem and close this section with the quotation of some tributes to Thompson's achievement. As Father Connolly writes:

It has been said that the same theme is here treated mystically, that in The Hound of Heaven is treated religiously and in the Orient Ode, ritually. 39/

He then quotes Mr. Meynell:

........ "Do you wish to fly from God?" cried St. Augustine: then fly to him". This idea which filled the most splendid of Thompson's poems, The Hound of Heaven, was presented in converse
in The Mistress of Vision. There God is no longer the open pursuer but, as in one of the poems of St. John of the Cross, the quarry that the eagle, the soul, follows upon remorseless wings. In that audacious flight, the soul, according to Thompson, as to all Christian mystics, is borne up by pain. 40./

This is the theme of Thompson's song of the secret garden "set in the pathless awe", where

The Lady of fair weeping,
At the garden's core,
Sang a song of sweet and sore
And the after-sleeping;
In the land of Luthany, and the tracts of Elenore. 41./

A detailed commentary is given by Father Connolly (Poems: pp. 429-443); another by the Rev. John O'Connor, S.T.P., is included as an appendix in Mr. Megroz's study. Here it is sufficient to state that the Mistress of Vision is the Queen of the triple realm of Heaven, of Grace, and of Poetry and that the key to the garden where she dwells is renunciation:

Pierce thy heart to find the key;
With thee take
Only what none else would keep; etc. 42./

The temptation is strong to dwell at greater length on the "Lady of fair weeping", who in the poet's words:

So sang she, so wept she,
Through a dream-night's day;
And with her magic singing kept she —
Mystical in music —
That garden of enchanting
In visionary May;
Swayless for my spirit's haunting,

Thrice - threefold walled with emerald from our mortal mornings grey.43/

But we must be content with the facts and quotations already given, together with the following appreciations. There were not wanting among the critics of New Poems, those who included this among the "nonsense verses" of the volume, but the verdict of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch — not always par-
tial to Thompson — is more just:

Of The Mistress of Vision I can only say that it recalls, after many days, the delight and wonder with which as a boy I first read Kubla Khan. 44./

While Mr. Megroz calls

The Mistress of Vision and The Anthem of Earth, two astounding poems to come from the same mind within a few years, — as if Coleridge after writing Christabel had produced the Ode to the West Wind — supreme magic and supreme rhetoric in passionate poetry. 45./

We have now considered at length Thompson's theory of the image in poetry and his sources of imagery. In the following chapter will be treated his achievement — and lapses — in the application of this theory and in the use of these sources.
1. Month - "The Poetry of Mr. Francis Thompson" - E. Gardner - 91:134 (Jan., 1898.)


7. Life - p. 211.


16. Life - pp. 171-172.

17. Life - p. 172.


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CHAPTER IV
Splendor and Excess

In an earlier chapter it was said, following the opinion of Francis Thompson himself, that the imagery of a poet must be evaluated not only according to range but also according to fecundity. This latter quality — easily the more important of the two — is an almost constant attribute of the images used by Thompson.

In this sense we may speak of the evocative power of Thompson's imagery. The word, evocation, as used here, should not be taken in the sense in which Alice Meynell employed it: namely, of the power of lines devoid of imagery to evoke a profound emotional response. By the power of evocation we mean that the images are far richer in suggestion than in the picture they express, though the latter be striking in itself. A few examples will illustrate this point. At the close of Chapter III, mention was made of the Kubla Khan atmosphere which accompanies the enchanting music of The Mistress of Vision. There are lines which for this type of evocative power are almost one with Coleridge's: "Ancestral voices prophesying war"; such, for example, are:

All its birds in middle air hung a-dream, their music thralled; 1.

and of the secrets of the eyes of the Mistress:

As fringe'd pools, whereof each lies
Pallid dark beneath the skies
Of a might that is
But one blear necropolis
And her eyes a little tremble in the wind of her own sighs; 2.

and, toward the end, this masterly understatement:
Her voice had no word
More the thunder or the bird. 3./

The air of awe and mystery suggested and maintained by the imagery of The Mistress of Vision is also magnificently achieved in this passage from The Hound of Heaven:

I dimly guess what Time in mists confounds;
Yet ever and anon a trumpet sounds
From the hid battlements of Eternity;
Those shaken mists a space unsettle, then
Round the half glimpse'd turrets slowly wash again.
But not ere him who summoneth
I first have seen, enwound
With glooming robes purpureal, cypress-crowned;
His name I know and what his trumpet saith. 4./

This same power of evocation or depth of suggestion is a concomitant of almost all Thompson's poetry. Here, however, the following few quotations, which further exemplify this power, must suffice. In Contemplation we are told:

This morning saw I, fled the shower,
The earth reclining in a lull of power. 5./

Again, in the first of his great odes to the sun, the poet recalls to "candid Hyperion", the sights on which he has gazed, among which was the battle between the Titans and the gods of Olympus, when

........... wide o'er rent-trampled night
Flew spurned the pebbled stars. 6./

While the real heaven is thus pictured:

Before the living throne of Whom
The Lights of Heaven burning pray. 7./

Lastly, there is the introduction to From the Night of Forebeing: An Ode After Easter, which is too long for quotation here but which flows on in a marvelous continuity of images culminating in:
For lo, into her house
Spring is come home with her world-wandering feet

Fecundity, however, is but one of the important factors in Francis Thompson's imagery, an equally important factor is the daring of the poet in his choice of images.

Some one has said that the greatest poets are often in their choice of images like gamblers, who stake all on a single throw of the dice. They are great because almost always their choice is supremely successful. But when they fail, the result is deplorable, Francis Thompson was among those who dared; and his marked successes completely overshadow a few regrettable failures.

In what is generally recognized as his greatest poem, Thompson sings the pursuit of the soul by God. The application of the hound-symbol would in the hands of a lesser craftsman have inevitably led to bathos or worse. So skilfully, however, does the poet of The Hound of Heaven stress the qualities which apply to that awe-inspiring pursuit — swiftness, tirelessness, persistence, and so completely does he exclude all the other attributes of the symbol chosen, that none is found to question the aptness of the metaphor. It were difficult to imagine a more vivid representation of the insistent love of God for souls, than is had in the soul's flight

From those strong feet that followed, followed after.
But with un hurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat — and a Voice beat
More instant than the feet—
"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me".

In the same ode are two other images which illustrate the poet's successful daring. He confesses that:

Even the linked fantasies, in whose blossomy twist
I swung the earth a trinket at my wrist,
Are yielding; cords of all too weak account
For earth with heavy griefs so overplussed.
Here again his audacity triumphs — audacity which in one less capable
would have resulted only in an idle and far-fetched conceit. He continues,
addressing God:

Ah! is thy love indeed
A weed, albeit an amaranthine weed,
Suffering no flower except its own to mount! 11./

The love of God for man a weed! Here is boldness, if ever poet was bold.
Yet no reader is repelled, for whatever is obnoxious in the ordinary wild
growth of the garden has been excluded. We think only of the Love that is
unwithering and demands for its sustenance all the moisture of which our
heart is possessed, so that no other flower may be nourished therein. Time
and again, as some of the examples given in earlier chapters witness,
Francis Thompson dared with like success. The limited scope of this paper
prevents a further catalogue of illustrations, but his daring had also its
failures and of these we must now say a word.

Sometimes in the image chosen is what one might term "border-
line"; as, e.g.:

Too soon fails the light, and the swart boar, night,
Gores to death the bleeding day. 12./

For the use of this figure, the poet might appeal to precedent, for Father
Connolly notes that:

the imagery of these lines is found in both Hindu and in ancient
Irish literature, where a great boar dominates the sky and roots
up the light with its snout. 13./

But the following lapses are less excusable:

If even burst yon globe'd yellow grape
(Which is the sun to mortals' seale'd sight)
Against her staine'd mouth; 14./
and of the Milky Way:

A beaten yolk of stars; 15./

and, spoken of himself:

A speck upon your memory, alack!
A dead fly in a dusty window crack; 16./

and of the sun:

When thou didst bursting from the great void's husk,
Leap like a lion on the throat o' the dusk; 17./

and, again of the sun:

Or like a golden bee
Sting the West to angry red. 18./

It may seem that this list of images, boldly but not too happily chosen, cancels out the examples of successful daring given above. This is not true. Thompson's lapses of taste have been deliberately stressed, that a fair picture may be presented. No one, who with an open mind reads the poems — for the first or for the fiftieth time — can refuse to acknowledge that Thompson's supreme success on so many occasions more than counter-balances, indeed renders insignificant in comparison, these few but regrettable failures. In this respect, Thompson is somewhat akin to Wordsworth. We may devoutly wish that the latter had destroyed many of his later verses and that he had from the beginning ridden his theories less hard, but we do not for all that deny him greatness.

Nor would one be deceived by Thompson's seemingly careless power of creating images. It were easy to state that his poems are the random out-pourings of genius, brilliant but uneven. Such a statement is easily refuted from the testimony of his biographer and other commentators. All bear witness — and quote the poet's note-books and manuscripts in proof — to
the painstaking care with which he corrected and revised and polished the lines which are memorable in his verse. Mr. Megroz quotes several interesting specimens of Thompson's revisions, but a single example given by Father Connolly will serve to illustrate the point. A passage from the Ode to the Setting Sun, which is quoted in the earlier chapter, first appeared in the periodical, Merry England, as follows:

Thou sway'st thy sceptred beam
O'er all earth's broad loins teem,
She sweats thee through her pores to verdurous spilth;
Thou art light in her light,
Thou art might in her might,
Fruitfulness in her fruit and foison in her tilth —

What there is of imagery in these lines may certainly be included in the failures of daring. But should not the revision in justice be included among daring's great triumphs? For one reads:

Thou sway'st thy sceptred beam
O'er all delight and dream,
Beauty is beautiful but in thy glance:
And like a jocund maid
In garland flowers arrayed,
Before thy ark Earth keeps her sacred dance.

In this discussion of Thompson's boldness in the use of imagery, some of the examples given, such as the likening of the earth to a trinket swung at one's wrist, have also illustrated a favorite device of the poet, which merits separate treatment.

This is the compiling of great things with small. In an article written shortly after Thompson's death, Alice Meynell quotes the passage which contains the image last mentioned and continues:

Who has laid down the law that a simile should dignify the thing for which comparison is sought, that this thing should be ennobled by a likeness to something greater and that the converse is bad poetry? Such a rule is defied by nothing more significantly than by
Francis Thompson, in this passage last cited, unless it be in the Scriptural stars that fall from heaven, "as a fig-tree sheddeth her untimely figs." I think that the greatest imagery of Francis Thompson's poetry has this terrible or tender trick of likening great things to small. For mere greatness of beauty, without the passion of the other examples, take this comparison of the earth to a ship:

This labouring, vast Tellurian galleon,
Riding at anchor off the orient sun,
Had broken its cable, and stood out to space
Down some frere Arctic of the aerial ways:
And now, back warping from the inclement main,
Its vaporuous shroudage drenched with icy rain,
It swung into its azure roads again.

But, it may be asked, is there any particular significance in Thompson's frequent and felicitous use of this device? Yes; it is intimately connected with this theory of imagery. It is the carrying out of his belief that a great synthesis of all created things is possible precisely because of the hidden unity of creation. Not only are there obvious and surface likenesses, he would seem to say, but beneath the surface the most apparent extremes are in reality related. Through imagery the "seer" hints at this unity, at the "indulging analogies, the secret subterranean passages." As Thompson sings: "all things ..... near or far" so

Hiddenly
To each other linke'd are
That thou canst not stir a flower
Without troubling of a star.

And in An Anthem of Earth:

Linking such heights and such humilities
Hand in hand in ordinal dances,
That I do think my tread,
Stirring the blossoms in the meadow-grass,
Flickers the unwithering stars.

Of course, "these compilings of the great and small", as Eward Meynell
remarks, "not always so sweetly reasonable as that set between the flower and the star, sometimes need apology." Among the examples of lapses of taste given earlier in this chapter are to be found some of these failures, e.g.; the comparison of the starry heavens to a beaten yolk, the picturing of the setting sun as a bee that stings the west to angry red, etc. Nor are all the examples of this device which the poet employed successfully drawn entirely from the great and small in external nature; many are arbitrary rather than natural images. But in both cases they have been used with brilliant success. Many passages already cited to illustrate other aspects of Thompson's imagery might be requoted here. Such, e.g., is the image of the sun of the mystic gard·en as a silver thurible. But such repetition may be dispensed with, since the poems are so rich in examples. With a few of the more striking of these, this section may fittingly close.

The following are from *Sister Songs*—a poem which wrung from Alice Meynell this reluctant confession:

*Sister Songs* is, in both its parts, piled high with imagery so beautiful as almost to persuade us that imagery is the end and goal of poetry.

Ere shadowy twilight lashes, drooping, dim
Day's dreary eyes from us.

And, of the multicolored sky at sunset:

Ere all the intertangled west
Be one magnificance
Of multitudinous blossoms that o'errun
The flaming brazen bowl of the burnished sun
Which they do flow·er from.

From the poet's later work these two may be cited:

From sky to sod,
The world's unfolded blossom smells of God.
and this tremendous image in an address to Earth:

........ It is long
Since Time was first a fledgling;
Yet thou mayst be but as a pendant bulla
Against his stripling bosom swung. 31./

Here may end the present treatment of Thompson's favorite device in the formation of images.

This chapter is entitled "Splendor and Excess." The examples of poetical lapses already given, which sufficiently illustrate Thompson's failings, are in every case faults of excess. As Alice Meynell notes in the article quoted above: "his usual fault is the splendid offense of excess." 32./ The poet realized this defect — he speaks of his "wasteful more" — and endeavored to correct it. Although his efforts were not crowned with entire success, the later poems manifest a chastened splendor: a retention of power without the fever and excitement which marked much of his earlier work. In addition to the examples already given, many passages of the Ode to the Setting Sun may be consulted as illustrations of this feverish tendency, the result of which has been well termed "riches heaped too close."

But there was never question even in the earlier poems of excess overshadowing legitimate splendor. This true magnificance — always more or less exuberant — marked Thompson's earliest and latest works. Sister Songs, for example, revealed such images as these:

Who weep, as weep the maidens of the mist
Clinging the necks of the unheeding hills 34./;

and, of the mysterious future, that it

Is gated under slow-revolving changes,
Manifold doors of heavy-hinge'd years; 35./
When the stars pitch the golden tents
Of their high encampment on the plains of night.

In another of the early poems, the Ode to the Setting Sun, one reads of the first dawn:

And the First Morn knelt down to thy visage of thunder;

or hears the poet question the dying day:

And why not dirges thee
The wind, that sings to himself as he makes stride
Lonely and terrible on the Andean height?

The same image-maker is at work to the end, as may be seen in the latest poems. In his "most magnificent ode", An Anthem of Earth, the opening picture is of the earth through its orbit:

That clear'st with deep-revolving harmonies
Passage perpetual, and behind thee draw'st
A furrow sweet, a cometary wake
Of trailing music;

while toward the close is had an address to death, the great bridge-builder:

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

This chapter might end at this point, were it not for the fact that its contents— for the most part lines wrenched from their contexts— may engender the opinion that Francis Thompson's poetry is no more than a tissue of splendid passages. It is to correct such an impression that we include here a brief treatment of The Hound of Heaven.

The poems of Francis Thompson, though built upon images, complicated and often startling, manifest in every case a truly remarkable unity. This is not to say that the marvelous continuity of images with which The Hound of Heaven opens, is maintained unbroken to the end. The poet's vision
is too vast for that. It is the theme, the underlying thought, which gives the unity. As Alice Meynell writes:

..... The Hound of Heaven..... sings the flight of a soul from the menace of the divine love that has marked it down and hunts it across the world. ..... the theme of this poem ..... is, besides, absolutely unmistakable in every thought and image; and that imagery, though immense, elaborate, and of the most abrupt grasp, is so whole, so fortunate, so perfect, that imagination rises up in answer to such a call. It is a poem to bestow imagination. 42/:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him; and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasme'd fears.43/.

This is supreme imagery. It cannot be claimed that there is a like unifying conception in Thompson's other odes, nor can such a claim be made even for the whole of this one poem. But there is in this and in the other odes a unifying factor of varying efficacy, namely, the theme. What Mr. Megroz says truly of The Hound of Heaven, applies also to all Thompson's longer poems:

..... the marvellous continuity of symbols flowing one out of another cannot be maintained unbroken through the whole length of the Ode; the current of inspiration cannot keep its pressure because the embanking argument widens out suddenly; the imagination after "Naked I wait Thy love's uplifted stroke!" is spread out over such sundered conceptions as are suggested by the sword image; the robbery during sleep; the pillar-shaking Samson; the conflagration of accumulated time; the burst bubbles on the stream of life; etc. 44/.

The observation which precedes the examples drawn from The Hound of Heaven is true, more or less, of all Thompson's odes and longer poems. Mr. Megroz however, sees the unity of the poem "perilously endangered" 45/.
if the fine fluency of metaphors be no more than "reiterated illustrations of the argument". The rhythm ultimately, according to this critic, saves the ode:

The Hound of Heaven is a rhytmical masterpiece burying under its movement many aesthetic flaws. This final comment is true, especially true of the ode in question with its powerful refrains. But we need not discount the power of the theme to bind the poem into the necessary unity, and we may, in this poem and the others, look on the rhytm as the natural concomitant of theme and mood.

If explanation be required for the space devoted to this "closing word", we need only recall that the vindication of splendor over excess is not a sufficient guarantee of true beauty - of poetry; unity must also be vindicated to the work. For then only is had "splendor ordinis."

(Note : The reactions to Thompson's poetry were as varied as they were pronounced. His daring use of imagery and the liberties he took with the English language drew comment from many of his peers. Cf. Appendix II : Francis Thompson in The Judgment of His Peers and the Major Critics.)
NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

17. Poems - 84/62-63.
19. Megroz - p. 64; Appendix IV - pp. 280-281.
23. Poems - 14/1-7.
26. Life - p. 207.
34. Poems - 32/69-70.
35. Poems - 38/308-309.
37. Poems - 85/70.
38. Poems - 87/164-166.
41. Poems - 226/348-349.
43. Poems - 77/1-8.
44. Megroz - p. 70.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Megroz - p. 71.
CHAPTER V

Conclusion

In the introduction to this thesis, it was stated that the purpose of the study is, not to prove Francis Thompson's theory of the function of the imagination in poetry, but rather to give an exposition and some amplification of that theory as we may hope to have done in Chapter I; to discuss the chief sources of the poet's imagery, since imagery is his primary concern as a poet — and this has been attempted in Chapters II and III; and finally, to illustrate his success as an image-maker, success which merits for him a place among the major English poets. Since this aim has been realized in the foregoing chapters, these concluding words may be very few.

As has been seen, the function of poetry according to Thompson is

to see and restore the Divine idea of things, freed from the disfiguring accidents of the Fall. 13

The poet must be a "seer"; his gaze must be as that of a child to whom wonder is not yet lost. To such a gaze the underlying interrelation of things is laid bare; and the realization and artistic expression of this interrelation is poetry. Imagery, according to Thompson, is the poet's chief instrument in the restoration of the Divine idea of things." With the distinction made in Chapter I, this view may be accepted without further comment. This is not to exclude the great isolated lines, bare of imagery, which are undeniably true poetry. Nor is it to deny that many — perhaps, most — great poets have been more sparing of images than Thompson. But the latter's opinion is, as we have seen, sound; imagery is the instrument he
claims it to be. As F. H. Pritchard says so well in his volume, *Training in Literary Appreciation*:

But whether their use be prodigal or sparing, figures are valuable most of all because they open our eyes to unsuspected glories. They help us to see correspondence of which we should never have dreamed, and so lead us naturally to a conception of the unity underlying all outward differences.

Certainly these words are verified in Francis Thompson's poetry. The same critic then introduces a quotation, which might well have been uttered by Thompson himself and echoed by all to whom his great odes have revealed the symbolism of the sun:

"What", asked William Blaks, "when the sun rises, do you see? A round disc of fire, something like a guinea! Oh, no, no. I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying: Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty!"

Such linkage of the natural and supernatural was always present to Francis Thompson; he was ever "the poet of the return to God." And it is this fact, more than any other, which prevents his work from becoming only a riot of magnificence. His realization of nature and his realization at the same time of nature's God has given to Thompson's work a serving simplicity, without which it would fall far short of greatness. This thought has been aptly — if somewhat perферidly — expressed by the author of *The Eighteen Nineties*. With his words this study may be brought to a close:

There was hardly anything abnormal about his taste, but everything he worshipped became distinguished and strange by the wonder-maiden imagery of his genius. .... No other poet of his time possessed such jewelled endowment, and few of any other time equal him in this gift. Nowhere in English song are there poems so heavily freighted with decoration of such magnificence; and no poems approaching, however remotely, their regal splendor have the power of suggesting such absolute simplicity. Sometimes his "wassail of orgiastic imageries" becomes the light conceit of his time, but never for long. Francis Thompson soared
high above literary flightiness. His very luxuriance of expression was austere; it was not the young delight of a Keats in sheer physical beauty, it was the transmutation of sense into spirit by the refinement of sense in vision.
NOTES TO CHAPTER V.

3. Ibid.
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APPENDICES
APPENDIX I

IMITATION IN THE POEMS OF THOMPSON.

"Since to such sweet Kingdom comest,
Remember me, poor Thief of Song." ---"Assumpta Maria". (11.99-100)

Some parallels:

1. Thompson: "He threads securely the far intricacies

With brede from Heaven's wrought vesture overstrewn"
(\textit{"Sister Songs": Part II-11.641-2.})

Keats : "O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede

Of marble men and maidens overwrought" (\textit{"Ode on a Grecian Urn"})

2. Thompson: "Forever the songs I sing are sad with the songs

I never sing,

Sad are sung songs, but how more sad the songs
we dare not sing!" --- (\textit{"Memorat Memoria"}:
11.10.II.)

Keats : "Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard

Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes play on."
(\textit{"Ode on a Grecian Urn"})

3. Thompson: "As the vintages of earth

Taste of the sun that riped their birth,

We know what never cadent Sun

Thy lamped clusters throbbed upon,

What plumed feet the winepress trod;

Thy wine is flavorful of God."
(\textit{"To a Poet Breaking Silence"}: 11.62-67.)
APPENDIX I (cont'd)

Keats: "O for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth."
("Ode to a Nightingale")

4. Thompson: "Ode To The Setting Sun" - Lines 128-154:

"Who made the splendid rose
Saturate with purple glows; -- etc.

Keats: Compare the selection cited above with:

"To Autumn" (entire)

and "Ode to A Nightingale" (stanza ii & v.)

5. Thompson: "Pass the crystalline sea, the lampads seven:

Look for me in the nurseries of Heaven."
(Closing lines of "To My Godchild")

Coleridge: "Revealed to none of all the Angelic State,

Save to the Lampads Seven

That watched the throne of Heaven!"
(Closing lines of "Ne Plus Ultra")

6. Thompson: "Destroyer and preserver, thou

Who medicinest sickness, and to health

Art the unthanked marrow of its wealth."
("Orient Ode: 11.160-162.

Shelley: "Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;

Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!"
("Ode to the West Wind")

7. Thompson: "At all the sadness in the sweet,

The sweetness in the sad." ("Daisy": 11.51-52.)

Crashaw: "Sweetness so sad, sadness so sweet." (The Weaver)
Browning: "Its sad in sweet, its sweet in sad." (Dis Aliter Visum)

8. In "Sister Songs" Thompson had written:

"For Spring leaps in the womb of the young year!"

(Proem: line 15)

Later Thompson wrote:

One image in the Proem was an unconscious plagiarism from the beautiful image in Mr. Patmore's St. Valentine's Day:

O baby Spring
That flutter'st sudden 'neath the breast of Earth,
A month before the birth!

Finding I could not disengage it without injury to the passage in which it is embedded, I have preferred to leave it, with this acknowledgment to a Poet rich enough to lend to the poor. (Poems: 319/15)

N. B.: For further interesting examples of imitation, together with some commentary, confer:

Megroz: pages 55-60; 89-91; 194-195.

Life: "Chap. VIII: Of Words; of Origins; of Metre."
APPENDIX II

FRANCIS THOMPSON
in
THE JUDGMENT OF HIS PEERS AND OF THE MAJOR CRITICS

GEORGE MEREDITH: "A true poet, one of the small band". (Life - p. 51)

ROBERT BROWNING: "Both the verse and prose (speaking of Thompson's very earliest works) are indeed remarkable...It is altogether extraordinary that a young man so naturally gifted should need incitement to do justice to his conspicuous ability.

(Letter to Wilfred Meynell, dated Oct. 7, '89 and quoted: Megroz, p. 275; Life, p. 120)

ARNOLD BENNETT: "I declare that for three days after this book ("Sister Songs appeared, I read nothing else. I went about repeating snatches of it - snatches such as
The innocent moon, which nothing does but shine,
Moves all the labouring surges of the world.
My belief is that Francis Thompson has a richer natural genius, a finer poetical equipment, than any poet save Shakespeare...I fear that in thus extolling Francis Thompson's work, I am grossly outraging the canons of criticism...Well, please yourself what you think, but, in time to come, don't say I didn't tell you."

(Written July 3, 1895. Quoted: Life pp. 150-151)

HUGH WALKER: "extreme and almost fanatical admiration for" Coventry Patmore is one of Thompson's great faults.
"Sometimes...his majestic English seems the perfect garment of fervid and weighty thought; when inspiration fails, the result is deplorable." (The Victorian Age in English Literature: pp. 608-609)

GEORGE SAINTSBURY:
It is a question "whether he ever became entirely free from his various imitation and attained the true 'minesiss'." The Hound of Heaven is "irregular Pindaric of a thoroughly 17th Century kind. The opening stanza is undeniably fine; it is the best following of Crashaw in his 'Sainte Theresa' vein that has ever been achieved, and the rest is not too unequal to it."

But it "too often approaches the fatal 'frigidity', as in: 'Across the margin of the world I fled,' etc."


WILLIAM ARCHER: Thompson is "a man of imagination all compact, a seer and singer of rare genius." (Life - P. 241-242.)
E. K. CHAMBERS: "He showers out obsolete words or at will coins new ones, with a profusion that at times becomes extravagant and grotesque....His freaks and speech rarely prove anything but ugly linguistic monstrosities." (Written 1895; quoted in Life - page 154)

EDMUND GOSSE: Thompson is "the defiler of the purity of the English language."

G.K. CHESTERTON: Thompson "rediscovered the music of sky-scraping humility."

RICHARD LE GALLIENNE: (Of Sister Songs) "Passion, in its ideal sense, has seldom found such an ecstatic, such a magnificently prodigal expression....It is the poet's love of love in the abstract, revealed to him symbolically in the tender youth of two little girls...." (Life - p.145-Note)

SIR A.T. QUILLER-COUCH: Complaining that due to the "precipitate and defiant eulogies of his friends" (the old refrain of the "Meynell coterie"), Thompson "is not being given a fair chance of correcting his excesses", Q. says in another place, "...On the other hand, to be stung into denying that he is a poet, and an extraordinarily fine one, is to lose one's head just as wildly and less pardonably." (Life-pp.153;241)

LIONEL JOHNSON: accused Thompson of corrupting English "as much as the worst American journalists"

(Tsk, tsk! Was it not another Johnson - the great Doctor, also a rigid classicist - who declared that Shakespeare had tried by every art to debase the English language?) (De La Gorce - page 132)

COVENTRY PATMORE: in 1894 gave a balanced and penetrating critical analysis of Thompson's Poems. (Life-pp. 146-147) "A new poet, one altogether distinct in character from that of the several high-class mediocrities who, during the past twenty years or so have blazed into immense circulation...."

Again: "He is of all men I have known, most naturally a Catholic". (Life - p.200)
ALICE MEYNELL called Thompson's poetry: "resplendently colored art with riches heaped too close."

"No lack was among his faults. Where he might be charged or questioned was in his commission, not in his omission—his commission of the splendid fault of excess."

"As to the fate of his poetry in the judgment of his country, I have no misgivings. For no reactions of taste, no vicissitude of language, no change in the prevalent fashions of the art, no altering sense of the music of verse, can lessen the height or diminish the greatness of this poet's thought, or undo his experience, or unlive the life of this elect soul, or efface its passion."

(This last quotation is from the Dublin Review for Jan., 1908.)
The thesis, "Francis Thompson: Poet of the Image," written by Joseph Francis Murphy, 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 P. Burke, S.J.  
July 24, 1938

Rev. Burke O'Neill, S.J.  
July 24, 1938