Suffering: Key to Francis Thompson

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SUFFERING: KEY TO FRANCIS THOMPSON

BY

VINCENT J. FORDE, S.J.

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Vincent J. Forde, S.J. was born at Dorchester, Mass., May 6, 1925. He graduated from Holy Name Grade School, Birmingham, Michigan, in 1938 and entered the University of Detroit High School, Detroit, Michigan, in the same year. Upon graduation in 1942 he entered the Novitiate of the Society of Jesus at Milford, Ohio. Here he was enrolled in the College of Arts of Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio. In September of 1946 he transferred to West Baden College of Loyola University, from which he received the Bachelor of Arts degree in the following June. He immediately entered the Graduate School of the same University to pursue his studies for the degree of Master of Arts.
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CHAPTER I
SUFFERING AND THE LIFE OF A POET

One of the most interesting problems in the study of poets lies in accurately tracing the predominant thread of inspiration in their works. Each poet has a fountain as personal and individualistic as his poetic creations, from which he draws generously of poetry's living waters. For some, as with a Wordsworth or a Keats, nature in all her glory, her changing moods, her captivating beauty, provides the necessary drink to slake the thirst of mind and imagination. For others, it is beauty, whether abstract and symbolic as with Shelley, or beauty in the ideal woman for Poe, which inspires a central theme for the poet's contribution to literature.

Francis Thompson found his lodestone of song in God. It was to God that he found himself irresistibly drawn, just as the needle of a compass constantly seeks its north. The well-springs from which other poets draw deep draughts of poesy proved only a stepping-stone for Thompson. Nature, for example, with all her wonder and enchantment failed to satisfy him:
Nature, poor stepdame, cannot slake my drouth;
Let her, if she would owe me,
Drop yon blue bosom-veil of sky, and show me
The breasts o' her tenderness:
Never did milk of hers once bless
My thirsting mouth.1 (ll. 99-104)

And again, in an essay entitled Nature's Immortality, Thompson tells us the meaning of nature for himself as a poet:

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.2

Beauty for its own sake never attracted Francis Thompson. Beauty in woman was not to inspire his poetry. The love theme so prevalent in poetry was his theme too, but in a different way. For many writers human love is a magnificent outlet for poetic utterance, but for Thompson it was only another stepping-stone. Of itself it could not satisfy his desires. One critic grieved that Thompson's Narrow Vessel which began so warmly had turned into an unreal allegory. Francis wrote of him:

He could not understand that all human love was to me a symbol of divine love; nay that human love was in my eyes a piteous failure unless as an image of the supreme Love which gave meaning and reality to its seeming insanity.3

We have a poet and a poetic message. How use the one to give the other to the world? Francis Thompson knew that he was called to do a special work. As a "poor thief of song," he termed his own calling "poet of the return to God." But at what a price this was to be achieved! He was no ordinary poet with an ordinary message. Thompson felt that he was consecrated to poetry much as a priest is consecrated to the salvation of souls. Poetry was to be his Mass, his Sacraments, his Priesthood. The priest sacrifices all personal interests to a faithful service of God. The poet too, if he is a dedicated spirit, must be willing to lose much of what the world would deem essential to happiness. Poetry will make terrible demands, and only the selfless poet will have sufficient courage to meet the test. Such a consecration, together with its inevitable price, forms the theory of suffering and poetry which Francis Thompson weaved into his life. In the beautiful Laus Amara Doloris he explains the consequences of this inevitable price:

3 Everard Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, Burns & Oates Ltd., London, 1913, 230. All quotations from this biography refer to the first edition.
Implacable sweet daemon, Poetry,
What have I lost for thee?
Whose lips too sensitively well
Have shaped thy shrivelling oracle.
So much as I have lost, 0 world, thou hast,
And for thy plenty I am waste;
Ah, count, 0 world, my cost,
Ah, count, 0 world, thy gain,
For thou hast nothing gained but I have lost!
And ah, my loss is such,
If thou have gained as much
Thou hast even harvest of Egyptian years,
And that great overflow which gives thee grain —
The bitter Nilus of my risen tears!4 (11. 1-14)

Suffering, then, was the price of Francis Thompson's dedication to poetry. For him by temperament as well as by special call, a life of pain and sorrow was the means selected to effect the successful transmission of his message to men. All greatness is bought at the altar of pain. For a complete consecration there had to be a holocaust. Pain, for Thompson, was God's instrument for fashioning his vocation as poet. Pain held in her store the gift of wisdom. Thompson's "Lady Pain" was "a portress in the gateways of all love,"5 and it was through her garden that he must pass for inspiration.

O great Key-bearer and Keeper
Of the treasuries of God!
Wisdom's gifts are buried deeper
Than the arm of man can go,
Save thou show
First the way, and turn the sod.

5 Ibid., line 102, 229.
The poet's crown, with misty weakness tarnished,
In thy golden fire is burnished
To round with more illustrious gleam his forehead.
And when the sacrifice of costliest cost
On my heart's altar is the Eterne adored,
The fire from heaven consumes the holocaust.
Nay, to vicegerence o'er the wide-confined
And mutinous principate of man's restless mind
With thine anointing oils the singer is designed:
To that most desolate station
Thine is his deep and dolorous consecration.6
(11. 64-80)

The mixture of joy and pain is at the heart of Thompson's poetic theory. The pain is reserved to the poet, while the joy of his poetry is given to the world of men. Thompson was ready for the inescapable companion of poesy. He embraced his "Lady Pain" with fear and trembling. Yet he was upheld by a strong and silent assurance that, come what may, God would care for His poet. Thompson addresses Pain once more and offers himself as victim of song:

O inevitable Pain!
Not faithless to my pact, I yield:— 'tis here,
That solitary and fair,
That most sweet, last, and dear;
Swerv'st thou? behold, I swerve not:— strike,
not spare!
Not my will shudders, but my flesh,
In awful secrecy to hear
The wind of thy great treading sweep afresh
Athwart my face, and agitate my hair.
The ultimate unnerving dearness take,
The extreme rite of abnegation make,
And sum in one all renderings that were.7 (11. 32-43)

6 Ibid., 228-229.
7 Ibid., 228.
Francis Thompson believed that separation from the world of men, a ruthless paring away of all the clinging acquisitiveness for petty pleasures, a sense of divine aloneness, were to be the essentials of "the poet of the return to God." Nor was this belief proper to his own special calling. In his essay on Shelley we read of the necessity of this segregation for all those who would become great poets:

Most poets, probably, like most saints, are prepared for their mission by an initial segregation, as the seed is buried to germinate: before they can utter the oracle of poetry, they must first be divided from the body of men. It is the severed head that makes the seraph.8

It is here that Thompson's theory of pain and poetry is still more clarified. With saints and poets alike the "harvest waves richest over the battlefields of the soul."9 There is one more passage from this same essay which, despite its length, most wonderfully reveals the inner meaning of Thompson's life, of his vocation, of his poetry. He asks us why the greatest poets suffered so much, and then gives us the answer, itself a revelation of his own soul:

Why indeed...should it be that the poets who have written for us the poetry richest in skiey grain, most free from admixture with the duller things of earth - the Shelleys, the Coleridges, the Keats' - are the very poets whose lives are among the saddest records in literature? Is it that (by some

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9 Ibid., 35.
subtile mystery of analogy) sorrow, passion, and fantasy are indissolubly connected, like water, fire, and cloud; that as from the sun and dew are born the vapours, so from fire and tears ascend the 'visions of aerial joy'; that the harvest waves richest over the battlefields of the soul; that the heart, like the earth, smells sweetest after rain; that the spell on which depend such necromantic castles is some spirit of pain charmed at their base? Such a poet, it may be, mists with sighs the window of his life until the tears run down it; then some air of searching poetry, like an air of searching frost, turns it to a crystal wonder. The god of golden song is the god, too, of the golden sun; so peradventure songlight is like sunlight, and darkens the countenance of the soul. Perhaps the rays are to the stars what thorns are to the flowers; and so the poet, after wandering over heaven, returns with bleeding feet...10

We have found that suffering is the keynote of Francis Thompson's inspiration. As we progress in the thesis we will find traces of pain in nearly every aspect of his life. And we shall especially find that this suffering is selfless, that the physical and mental anguish which characterize his life and work are endured not for his own gain, but for others' joy. With genuine truth were the following lines written:

The agony is done,
Her footstep passes on;-
The unchilded chambers of my heart rest bare.
The love, but not the loved, remains;
As where a flower has pressed a leaf
The page yet keeps the trace and stains.

10 Ibid., 35-36.
In this thesis we will attempt to show the predominant influence of pain in the spiritual growth of Francis Thompson. Thompson recognized a certain likeness between himself and the God of his love. Just as Christ had used the instrument of suffering to redeem the fallen race of humanity and restore it to glory, so Francis willingly embraced the proffered gift of suffering in order to translate for this same humanity the message of love which pounded in his heart and brain. The closing lines of *Laus Amara Doloris* depict the similarity of the mission of Christ as Savior of men, and the mission of Francis Thompson as "poet of the return to God:"

For the predestinated Man of Grief,
O regnant Pain, to thee
His subject sway elected to enfeoff;
And from thy sad conferring to endure
The sanguine state of His investiture;
Yea, at thy hand, most somber suzerain,
That dreadful crown He held in fealty;
O Queen of Calvary,
Holy and terrible, anointed Pain!12 (ll. 156-164)

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11 Connolly, "Laus Amara Doloris," Poems, 228.
12 Ibid., 231.
CHAPTER II

WAY OF PURGATION: BEFORE LONDON

Francis Thompson was early acquainted with suffering. As a mere child he experienced great difficulty with his playmates. He suffered from a temperamental inability to see things as most children do, or even to enter into the normal spirit and joy of his fellows. When playing games with his sisters, the game would mean one thing to them and quite another to Francis. His was a private dream world, a kingdom of personal reverie, a castle where none but himself could enter in, for none but he could understand or sympathize with the thoughts dreamed there. From boys, whether of his own age or older, Thompson fled in fear and uncertainty. They were too hard and cruel, too practical and objective. He wrote of his schoolmates many years later:

...these malignant schoolmates who danced round me with mocking evil distortion of laughter - God's good laughter, gift of all things that look back the sun - were to me devilish apparitions of a hate now first known; hate for hate's sake, cruelty for cruelty's sake. And as such they live in my memory, testimonies to the murky aboriginal demon in man.¹

¹ E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, 18.
Reserve is spread over these first years of Thompson's life in broad, glaring letters. His excessive sensitivity was a constant source of misery and grief to him. Unwittingly, perhaps, he has given us a glimpse into his private feelings when he writes of the boy Shelley:

Children's griefs are little, certainly; but so is the child, so is its endurance, so is its field of vision, while its nervous impressionability is keener than ours. Grief is a matter of relativity: the sorrow should be estimated by its proportion to the sorrower; a gash is as painful to one as an amputation is to another. Pour a puddle into a thimble, or an Atlantic into Etna; both thimble and mountain overflow. Adult fools! would not the angels smile at our griefs, were not the angels too wise to smile at them? So beset, the child fled into the tower of his own soul, and raised the drawbridge. He threw out a reserve, encysted in which he grew to maturity unaffected by the intercourses that modify the maturity of others into the thing we call a man.²

Between these lines we read of Thompson's childhood reactions to life and to people. The estrangement and sense of incompatibility with the world around him is as easily found in "the child" who "fled into the tower of his own soul, and raised the drawbridge," as will be found in the man of mature years. He was simply at a loss to speak out his heart in public, and even in his poetry where the poet's soul is laid bare, we find the same shyness, the same sensitivity. Thompson admitted this

to Mr. Meynell in later life, when he wrote in a letter, that "...verse written as I write it is nothing less than a confessional far more intimate than the sacerdotal one."\(^3\) It is almost as if he deliberately disciplined his tongue in order for his pen to write the things he was unable to speak.

At the age of eleven, Thompson was sent to Ushaw College with the intention of studying for the priesthood. But here once again he was destined to suffer. His awkwardness, his dreaminess, a pronounced natural indolence ("Indolence is one name of many for the abstraction of Francis' mind and the inactivities of his body."\(^4\) that made him unfit for anything practical, all conspired to force a decision of dismissal from superiors at the Seminary. They recognized his poetical qualities and keen imagination, but realized also that his avidity for poetry and solitude would prove too great a hindrance in parish work. No bishop could be expected to undertake the responsibility of such an unpredictable pastor of souls. What was the effect of this spoiled priesthood on Thompson? Terence Connolly, S.J. in the biographical notes prefacing his edition of Thompson's poems has this to say on the point:

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3 E. Meynell, *The Life of Francis Thompson*, 103.
4 Ibid., 32.
When we remember his incurable indolence, his physical weakness and his incredible impracticableness, it is difficult to see how any sane spiritual director without direct inspiration from heaven could have advised him to continue. But the fact that the advice given Thompson was clearly such as he should have received, in no way lessened the depth and permanence of his disappointment at his failure.5

Everard Meynell in his life of the poet states that there is nothing to discredit the common belief of friends and critics that this failure to be a priest was "Francis' life-long trouble" and remained with Thompson until the end of his life "an acute and lasting grief." However, this shock of pain and temporary frustration of his most cherished dream was put to good use by Thompson. It fitted in perfectly with a life of the dedicated spirit and consecrated poet. Theodore Maynard maintains that Thompson's sorrow at this time was intimately connected with his message as "poet of the return to God:"

This defeat of his dearest private hope was itself the inspiration of his loftiest verse. From the bitter waters of suffering he draws the sweetness of his song. Agony and exultation are twined together in almost everything that he wrote. For if he is the poet of the return to God, he consistently points out that pain is the path that must be trod.6

After leaving the Seminary, his father sent Francis to Manchester to study medicine. But instead of attending the

lectures in which there was little to sustain his interest, Thompson squandered long hours in idleness next to the public library's shelves of poetry. Coming home at night he would shut himself in his room, making a passing pretence at study. "His cloister was solitude, and in that painful sanctuary he hid himself from success." 7 Two years of this make-believe and Thompson fell sick of tuberculosis. While under medical care the poet first tasted laudanum. It was during this painful period that Thompson's mother, for no apparent reason, gave him a gift, a copy of DeQuincey's *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. Francis immediately felt a strange attraction and affinity to the literary drug addict. DeQuincey had spent a good deal of time in the same Manchester library. There he had strengthened his vocabulary and developed his English style. There too, he had stumbled headlong down a precipice of despondency. But with Thompson, despite the similarity between them, opium dealt more life than death. Meynell argues convincingly for Thompson:

On the one hand it staved off the assaults of tuberculosis; it gave him the wavering strength that made life just possible for him, whether on the streets or through all those other distresses and discomforts that it was his character deeply to resent but not to remove by any normal courses; if it could threaten physical degradation he was able by conquest to tower in moral and mental glory. 8

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7 E. Meynell, *The Life of Francis Thompson*, 35.
8 Ibid., 49.
Thompson was a perfect target for the temptation of laudanum. His bodily torpor and his consciousness of defeat, as well as the fact that the habit was begun during a period of serious illness, made Thompson an easy prey. Of course opium made any sober career such as medicine quite out of the question, rendering our poet even more impractical than his native endowments had done. And it pressed on his conscience, put himself in constant strife with his better nature, made obligations to family and friends lose their hold upon his otherwise generous loyalty. DeQuincy was surely a boon, even if sorrowful, companion. He was solace for Thompson's haunting loneliness. He too had learned from suffering how to translate the bitter into sweet. As Meynell notes of DeQuincy's influence at this time:

Doubtless it was he who first showed to Francis the profitableness of bitter experiences, and that, if gallant prose might come of weakness, poetry might be sown in the fields of failure, and the crown of thorns be turned to the chaplet of laurel.9

It is still an unanswered question whether Francis ever sat for his medical examination. In any event, six years of pretended study brought home the familiar verdict of failure. Thompson had never told his father of his intense love of poetry. Had he the courage to mention it, his father would undoubtedly have helped him toward a literary career. Instead,

9 Ibid., 50.
Francis allowed the frequent flush of his cheeks to be misjudged for indulgence in alcohol, when opium was the real cause of his heated condition, his moodiness, his demeanor of despair. It is poignant to note his father's later words: "If the lad had but told me!" The suffering which seems to have been so unnecessary was in reality the providential means used in preparing Francis for his vocation.

A final defeat proved to be the turning point in Thompson's life: the army refused to accept him because of physical unfitness. He sold his books and then, like his friend DeQuincey, fled to London. A copy of Blake and Aeschylus were his only companions. "London, of conjectural disaster, drew him from the Manchester of tried and proved failure."

10 Ibid., 60.
11 Ibid., 58.
CHAPTER III
WAY OF PURGATION: LONDON

Francis Thompson had found his vocation at last. The writing of his first poems and essays was done in the most complete isolation. He was an outcast in London streets, befriended by none save his "Lady Pain." She would always be present. For two years her haunting inspiration would weigh heavily on his tired heart. Here in these streets would he learn the frightful price of great poetry, together with the assurance

That from spear and thorn alone
May be grown
For the front of saint or singer any
divinizing twine.¹

Or as one author put it in her biography of Thompson:

This beggar, instead of seeking his daily bread, was in search rather of rare words and new rhythms with which to express complete confidence and Christian candour, like the fervent yet simple words with which the Saints spoke to God.²

With no one to turn to for support, Thompson could do no better than hire himself out as a "collector" of books. This

meant daily tramping of London pavements with a sack of literature on his shoulder. But Thompson with his abstraction and preoccupation was quick to lose a job that required prompt delivery and ready service. Next in odd jobs or "situations" as he called them was a futile attempt to set up a boot-black stand. But the police interfered when a shopkeeper felt that such an addition outside his store would not be a boon to his sales. Holding the heads of horses outside the theatre, selling matches, whatever temporary means to stave off hunger and utter destitution he was able to find, all failed. Rags followed quickly in the wake of discouragement. A brief conversation with Everard Meynell in later years gives us some faint idea of the terrible poverty to which the poet found himself reduced:

No, Evie, you do not spend your penny on a mug of tea. That will be gone very quickly. You spend it, Evie, not on a mug of tea; not, I say, on a mug of tea, but on the tea itself. You buy a pennyworth and make it with the boiling water from the common kettle in the doss-house. You get several cups that way instead of one.3

Until now Thompson had spent his days in the public libraries, and his nights under the archways of bridges or on the embankment of the river. Now with his clothes in tatters he was forbidden access to the library. He was forced to find

3 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 64-65.
shelter with the derelicts of London, with the dregs of a city's slums. He ate with murderers and thieves, listened to their common talk and cheap vulgarity.

It is necessary, however, to make a distinction between the manner of his familiarity with evil and that of Wilde or Dowson or Verlaine. They knew sin by sinning; he by a method no less experimental and productive of compunction but without the same moral guilt. He tramped the crooked streets of London as did Dante the descending spirals of Hell, knowing all sins and participating in them by the consciousness that in himself was the seed of all these fleurs du mal. It was this undoubtedly that enabled him later to rise to the higher terraces of the spiritual life while those who knew sin in another way remained below with only the heavy sense of guilt.  

This was the worst of suffering for Thompson. He might endure with comparative constancy and patience the physical torture of each day's living, with its wearing struggle from meal to meal. He might press forward despite loneliness and the abandonment of family and friends. But to be forced to live with and listen to the lowest filth and immoral conversation of a degraded humanity was nearly more than Thompson could stand. He writes of this moral revulsion:

Their conversation is impossible of report. If you want to know it (and you are every way a gainer by not knowing it, while you

lose what can never be regained by knowing it) go to Rabelais and his like, where you will find a very faint image of it. Nearer you may get by reading 'Westminster Drolleries' and other eighteenth century collections of swine-trough hoggery. For naked bestiality you must go to the modern bete humaine.5

But through it all Francis Thompson never lost his ideals of Catholic living. He never lost hope in the God Who in His terrible mercy had made him a poet. A single line written out for his own comfort tells us of his inner confidence: "Even in the night-time of the soul wisdom remains."6 This wisdom was a spiritual wisdom for Thompson was working toward a spiritual goal. He was to be the channel of a great poetic message. Suffering and agony were not only to be endured, there was need for a generous embrace, for they were the instruments of his final deliverance. Calvert Alexander, S.J. remarks the wonderful fusion of sorrow and joy in Thompson at this time:

Despair, the knowledge of sin, repentance, all the solitary griefs, "agonized hopes and ashen flowers," he knew on the one hand, and on the other the exultant surge of resurrection, not partial, not momentary, as was the case with so many, but a triumphant entering into the full spirit of Catholicism out of which arose his best poetry.7

A benefactor named McMaster turned humanitarian and took

5 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 64.
6 Ibid., 68.
7 C. Alexander, S.J., The Catholic Literary Revival, 150.
Thompson in. Before he also gave up hope in the indolent poet, he had gathered a few interesting memories of Francis. He recalled that Thompson told him he was a Catholic; he recalled the crucifix on the wall of Thompson's room, and the medal around his collarless neck. And habits of prayer which were never lost even in the most dire want impressed this benefactor who knew little of the Church. Francis, he says, "said his Mass - always said his Mass - at night." 8

These few bare facts show us that Thompson was at least trying, despite all opposition from his own infirmities and the cruelty of the world, to prepare himself for his poetry. One writer implies the eminent success of the poet's efforts:

He did not, like his saintly namesake, need to court the Lady Poverty; but only a poet who was something of a saint could have been preserved through those dark days of starvation and drug-taking and cruel exposure. 9

Everard Meynell comments even more convincingly on the spiritual effects of suffering on this outcast of London streets:

The streets, somehow, had nurtured a poet and trained a journalist. He had gone down into poverty so absolute that he was often without pen or paper... Neither his happiness, nor his tenderness, nor his sensibility had been marred, like his constitution, by his experiences. To be the target of such pains

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8 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 73.
as it is the habit of the world to deplore as the extreme of disaster, and yet to keep alive the young flame of his poetry; to be under compulsion to watch the ignominies of the town, and yet never to be nor to think himself ignominious; to establish the certitude of his virtue; to keep flourishing an infinite tenderness and capability for delicacies and gentilezze of love - these were the triumphs of his immunity.10

But such tribute from a sympathetic biographer might be unimpressive to the reader without a proof from Francis Thompson himself. In a poem written during this period of near-despair, Francis writes his most cherished thoughts on pain. He addresses the Queen of Heaven in loving plaint, asking just a crumb of comfort, a ray of light for his darkened soul. In this poem, the same through which Thompson was discovered by the Meynell, he gives us the Catholic attitude regarding the dreadful necessity of pain:

O thou who dwellest in the day!
Behold, I pace amidst the gloom:
Darkness is ever round my way
With little space for sunbeam-room.

Yet Christian sadness is divine
Even as thy patient sadness was:
The salt tears in our life's dark wine
Fell in it from the saving cross.

Bitter the bread of our repast;
Yet doth a sweet the bitter leaven:
Our sorrow is the shadow cast
Around it by the light of Heaven.

10 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 93.
O light in Light, shine down from Heaven;\(^\text{11}\) (11. 27-39)

One final episode and Thompson's outcast days in London will draw to a close. It happened when Francis was on the point of starvation, when the opium he was taking to keep alive was ravaging his body. He was in the last extreme. And just when the end had apparently come, he was befriended by a girl of the streets who took pity on him and "gave out of her scant and pitiable opulence, consisting of a room, warmth, and food, and a cab thereto."\(^\text{12}\) In one of his poems Thompson describes this friendship and immortalizes in his poetry the charity of the unfortunate girl:

Once - in that nightmare-time which still doth haunt
My dreams, a grim, unbidden visitant -
Forlorn, and faint, and stark,
I had endured through watches of the dark
The abashless inquisition of each star,
Yea, was the outcast mark
Of all those heavenly passers' scrutiny;
Stood bound and helplessly
For Time to shoot his barbed minutes at me;
Suffered the trampling hoof of every hour
In night's slow-wheeled car;
Until the tardy dawn dragged me at length
From under those dread wheels; and, bled of strength,
I waited the inevitable last.
Then there came past
A child; like thee, a spring-flower; but a flower
Fallen from the budded coronal of Spring,
And through the city-streets blown withering.
She passed, - O brave, sad, lovingest, tender thing!
And of her own scant pittance did she give,

\(^{12}\) E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 81.
That I might eat and live:
Then fled, a swift and trackless fugitive.13
(Pt. I, ll. 275-296)

These two outcasts sat and marvelled that they could share joys and sacred thoughts. For her Thompson was a new experience, so vastly different from the men she had known before. At his hands she knew humility for the first time and a reverence, a confidence in herself despite the fact that she was "a flower fallen from the budded coronal of Spring." And for Thompson this friendship with a street-girl was the only consolation which God afforded him during two years of terrible trial in the labyrinths of London. It was a simple friendship, a brother-sister love, pure and free from all suspicion, yet it had stirred in the poet a yearning for the love which had always been denied him. In the same poem quoted above Thompson addresses Sylvia, one of the Meynell sisters, and tells her that the kiss she had given him as a child reminds him of this street-girl's friendship, reminds him of its tenderness, its purity, its "innocency:"

Therefore I kissed in thee
The heart of Childhood, so divine for me;
And her, through what sore ways,
And what unchildish days,
Borne from me now, as then, a trackless fugitive.
Therefore I kissed in thee
Her, child, and innocence,
And spring, and all things that have gone from me,
And that shall never be;
All vanished hopes, and all most hopeless bliss,
Came with thee to my kiss.14 (Pt. I, ll. 297-307)

14 Ibid.
Then came discovery through publication of Thompson's poem *The Passion of Mary*. The Meynells had recognized true literary greatness in an essay which Thompson sent to Mr. Meynell, then editor of *Merry England*. But with his rescue came more suffering for the poet. The girl of the streets whose affection had been thoroughly unselfish, feared that her association with Thompson might stand in the way of his success.

Everard Meynell has a very enlightening and sympathetic paragraph which, I believe, is well worth quoting in full:

> Her sacrifice was to fly from him: learning he had found friends, she said that he must go to them and leave her. After his first interview with my father he had taken her his news. "They will not understand our friendship," she said, and then, "I always knew you were a genius." And so she strangled the opportunity; she killed again the child, the sister; the mother had come to life within her - she went away. Without warning she went to unknown lodgings and was lost to him. In "the mighty labyrinths of London" he lay in wait for her, nor would he leave the streets, thinking that in doing so he would make a final severance. Like DeQuincy's Ann, she was sought but never found, along the pavements at the place where she had used to find him. 15

And so the London nightmare was over. The physical pain of it was done, but the mental anguish would remain as an indelible stamp on his memory. The phantasms of his night of the soul when "The very streets weigh upon me. Those horrible streets, with their gangrenous multitude blackening ever into

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lower mortifications of humanity;"16 the ache in his soul when he recalled "These lads who have almost lost the faculty of human speech: these girls whose very utterance is a hideous blasphemy against the sacrosanctity of lover's language;"17 the spiritual sadness at the degradation of a humanity so dear to his heart when he says sorrowfully, "We lament the smoke of London:- it were nothing without the fumes of congregated evil."18 And again, "In our capitals the very heavens have lost their innocence. Aurora may rise over our cities, but she has forgotten how to blush."19 All these sorrows would remain with Thompson as the constant gift of his "Lady Pain." They purified his soul and made it ready for great poetry. The time of enlightenment was at hand:

The finest songs of suffering are scarcely ever composed in the hour of complete atrophy, but rather when peace and equilibrium have been recovered, at the dawn of hope. They spring, not from the bottom of the pit but from the first rungs of the ladder which is being imperceptibly mounted; for all poetry worthy of the name is the child of salvation.20

Francis Thompson had experienced the "bottom of the pit," and now at the "dawn of hope" this "poet of the return to God" was prepared to pen his message of love to the world.

16 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 77.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
20 Agnes De La Goree, Francis Thompson, 44.
CHAPTER IV

RESCUE AND POEMS OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Wilfrid Meynell's discovery and rescue of Francis Thompson gave birth to the poetry which had lain in the poet's intellect during the pain-filled months in London streets. But despite his spiritual and intellectual fertility, Thompson was battered physically. Mr. Meynell, therefore, sent him to a private hospital in an attempt to overcome the ravages of opium. A negative diagnosis did not prevent Francis from fighting a sharp struggle with wonderful constancy, and to the doctor's surprise he emerged triumphant over the despised addiction. Thompson's biographer notes the effect which this moral victory had on the poet:

The renunciation of opium, not its indulgence, opened the doors of the intellect. 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 overflowingly during the pains of abstinence.1

Thompson's first famous poetic work was written at the Storrington Priory where he was staying with the monks. Ode to the Setting Sun gives evidence both of the splendor of his poetic powers, but still more important for this thesis, of the

1 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 95.
sincerely Catholic outlook on nature and suffering, which had characterized him from the first.

From the very depths of the sorrow that he suffered through his own indolence and romantic temperament, he extracted the secret of a spiritual ascent which is revealed to us in his works. Poetry taught him detachment. The prodigal son with his fits of ill-humour was transformed into a pilgrim guided by a single star. And rather than photograph the misery with which he was associated, he preferred to hold up to it a mirror of the other world in which it should be transfigured. 2

The circumstances of the poem are noted by Thompson: "Ode to the Setting Sun, begun in the field of the Cross, and under the shadow of the Cross, at sunset; finished ascending and descending Jacob's ladder (mid or late noon?)." 3 The Cross to which he refers was a large cross raised on a mound and dominating the Field of the Cross inside the priory grounds. Thompson sits in the shadows and contemplates the glorious scene, ever old yet ever new, of "a bubble of fire" dropping "slowly toward the hill." The music of three street musicians heard in the distance inspires the first few lines:

The wailful sweetness of the violin
Floats down the hushed waters of the wind,
The heart-strings of the throbbing harp begin
To long in aching music. Spirit-pined,

In wafts that poignant sweetness drifts, until
The wounded soul ooze sadness. The red sun,
A bubble of fire, drops slowly toward the hill,

2 Agnes De La Gorce, Francis Thompson, 23.
3 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, footnote, 95.
While one bird prattles that the day is done.4
(ll. 1-8)

In its downward flight the sun passes behind the tall Cross, and Thompson, "his soul stirring with the first signs of his spiritual resurrection; his ears drinking in the 'wailful strains' of passing music..." finds "suddenly within his soul's depths a strange passion stirred, - a feeling of the awful likeness between the setting sun and the mystery of the Cross of Christ."5 Thompson addresses the sun for whom "this music wakes not:"

Yet, in this field where the Cross planted reigns,
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!

For worship it is too incredulous,
For doubt - oh, too believing-passionate!
What wild divinity makes my heart thus
A fount of most baptismal tears? - Thy straight

Long beam lies steady on the Cross. Ah me!
What secret would thy radiant finger show?
Of thy bright mastership is this the key?
Is this thy secret, then? And is it woe?6 (ll. 17-29)

The poet has discovered in the daily phenomenon of a sunset a similarity to one of the most cherished memories of Catholic hearts, a likeness to Calvary. He has also found in the setting of "the burning curls" an application of the Christian paradox that there is untold joy in death, that there is sweetness in all that is sad: The Ode opens,

4 Connolly, S.J., "Ode to the Setting Sun," Poems of F.T., 82.
5 Ibid., Notes, 372.
6 Ibid., 82-83.
Alpha and Omega, sadness and mirth,
The springing music, and its wasting breath -
The fairest things in life are Death and Birth,
And of these two the fairer thing is Death.
Mystical twins of Time inseparable,
The younger hath the holier array,
And hath the awfuller sway:
It is the falling star that trails the light,
It is the breaking wave that hath the might,
The passing shower that rainbows maniple.⁷

Thompson then proceeds to trace the glories of the sun through all ages, beginning with Adam and continuing through the eras of paganism and Christianity. At the close of this great poem the brilliance of the poet's vision shines forth in its most Catholic manner when he likens the sun to Christ Who set on this poor earth of ours and arose in Heaven:

If with exultant tread
Thou foot the Eastern sea,
Or like a golden bee
Sting the West to angry red,
Thou dost image, thou dost follow
That King-Maker of Creation,
Who, ere Hellas hailed Apollo,
Gave thee, angel-god, thy station;
Thou art of Him a type memorial.
Like Him thou hang'st in dreadful pomp of blood
Upon thy Western rood;
And His stained brow did vail like thine to night,
Yet lift once more Its light,
And, risen, again departed from our ball,
But when It set on earth arose in Heaven.⁸

And so Christ has given a lesson to the world that by the delivery of His own Beauty into the hands of death, the seed of a new life, His birth in Heaven, was planted. Thompson does not

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⁷ Ibid., 83.
⁸ Ibid., 88-89.
fail to recognize the eminent place afforded pain in this Christian dispensation. The poet of the return to God sets down in telling imagery the heart of this beautiful teaching:

Thus hath He unto death His beauty given;  
And so of all which form inheriteth  
The fall doth pass the rise in worth;  
For birth hath in itself the germ of death,  
But death hath in itself the germ of birth.  
It is the falling acorn buds the tree,  
The falling rain that bears the greenery,  
The fern-plants moulder when the ferns arise.  
For there is nothing lives but something dies,  
And there is nothing dies but something lives.  
Till skies be fugitives,  
Till Time, the hidden root of change, updries,  
Are Birth and Death inseparable on earth;  
For they are twain yet one, and Death is Birth.  

In the After-Strain of the Ode, Thompson applies the message of the poem to his own life. Himself a poet by the special choice of Christ, and with a message of joy and love, albeit mixed with pain, he must suffer and pay the price of that message. Certain victories will be his, like the triumph over despair in "the mighty labyrinths of London," and his victory over the opium habit. But suffering is inevitably to be his portion in life. Thompson sees the value of pain, the need of it in his own life, the will of God for him:

Now with wan ray that other sun of Song  
Sets in the bleakening waters of my soul:  
One step, and lo! the Cross stands gaunt and long  
'Twixt me and yet bright skies, a presaged dole.

9 Ibid., 89.
Even so, O Cross! thine is the victory.
Thy roots are fast within our fairest fields;
Brightness may emanate in Heaven from thee,
Here thy dread symbol only shadow yields. (ll. 1-8)

... ... ... ... ...

Yet woe to him that from his burden flees,
Crushed in the fall of what he cast away. (ll. 15-16)

... ... ... ... ...

Oh, this Medusa-pleasure with her stings!
This essence of all suffering, which is joy!
I am not thankless for the spell it brings,
Though tears must be told down for the charmed toy.

No; while soul, sky, and music bleed together,
Let me give thanks even for those griefs in me,
The restless windward stirrings of whose feather
Prove them the brood of immortality.10 (ll. 29-36)

A second poem written within the monastery gates at Storrington takes up where the Ode to the Setting Sun left off. The Sere of the Leaf is an intimate revelation of how Thompson's "soul, sky, and music bleed together," and a clearly honest portrayal of "this Medusa-pleasure with her stings!" The poet is suffering from advancing consumption and a mental cloud accompanies the physical torture. A letter written to Wilfrid Meynell a short time before the composition of this poem reveals how intimate the confessional of poetry was for Thompson, and the torture that such self-revelation exercised on his life-long sensitivity:

_____________________________________________________________________
10 Ibid., 89-90.
...I beguiled the four ill nights I have spoken of, while the mental cloud was somewhat lifted, by writing the verses I here-with send you. If there be no saving grace of poetry in them they are damned; for I am painfully conscious that they display me, in every respect, at my morally weakest. Indeed no one but yourself...would I have allowed to see them; for often verse written as I write it is nothing less than a confessional far more intimate than the sacerdotal one. That touches only your sins, and leaves in merciful darkness your ignominious, if sinless, weaknesses. When the soul goes forth, like Anderson's Emperor, thinking herself clothed round with singing-robés, while in reality her naked weakness is given defenceless to the visiting wind, not every mother's son would you allow to gaze on you at such a time. The fact is my nerves want taking up like an Atlantic cable, and recasing. I am sometimes like a dispossessed hermit-crab, looking about everywhere for a new shell, and quivering at every touch. Figuratively speaking, if I prick my finger I seem to feel it in my whole body.11

The poem is addressed to Miss Katherine Tynan on the occasion of her visit to London in 1889. Thompson had never met the woman and so quite naturally felt that he might "have taken a perhaps unwarrantable liberty in apostrophising her."12 A reassuring letter from Miss Tynan did away with the poet's fear. The first six stanzas are exquisitely descriptive, but it is in stanza seven that Thompson again refers to pain. It seems that the terrors of London were never to be purged from his memory. He writes,

11 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 103-104.
12 Ibid., 102.
'And hast thou thy content? Were some rain of it besprent
On the soil where I am drifted to and fro,
My soul, blown o'er the ways
Of these arid latter days,
Would blossom like a rose of Jericho.

'I know not equipoise, only purgatorial joys,
Grief's singing to the soul's instrument,
And forgetfulness which yet knoweth that it doth forget;
But content - what is content?
For a harp of singeing wire, and a goblet dripping fire,
And desires that hunt down Beauty through the Heaven
With unslackenable bounds, as the deep-mouthed thunder-hounds
Bay at heel the fleeing levin,-
The chaliced lucencies
From pure holy-wells of eyes,
And the bliss unbarbed with pain I have given.13

(11. 73-88)

Terence Connolly, S.J. comments on this passage with clear insight into Francis Thompson and his message:

To a soul such as his, content can only come in replacing "a goblet dripping fire," with "chaliced lucencies," caught, not in hunting down "Beauty through the Heaven," but from contemplation of "pure holy-wells of eyes" and in purging "bliss" of the remorse his soul feels at the memory of his failure in life and the pain it has given others. It was the realization of his failure in life that made the instrument of Thompson's song "a harp of singeing wire."14

The next stanza reads like a plea for companionship in the poet's "uncompanioned ways." He asks Miss Tynan whether

14 Ibid., Notes, 412.
she too, like himself, is "Girt with a thirsty solitude of soul,"15 whether in writing her poetry, her touch, like "my touch, to golden poesies turning life's bread, is bought at hunger's price."16

'Tis - 0 framed to suffer joys! - thine the sweet without alloys
Of the many, who art numbered with the few?
And thy flashing breath of song, does it do thy lips no wrong,
Nor sear them as the heats spill through?
When the welling musics rise, like tears from heart to eyes,
Is there not a pang dissolved in them for thee?
Does not Song, like the Queen of radiant Love, Hellene,
Float up, dripping from a bitter sea?
No tuned metal known
Unless stricken yields a tone,
Be it silver, or sad iron like to me.17 (ll. 89-99)

Miss Tynan's early work is well summed up in the words "sweet without alloys." Thompson is glad for her sake that "the rhymes still roll from the bell-tower of thy soul, though no tongued griefs give them vent."18 She was not intended to suffer as was he, and yet "if my joy be sceptered sadness, I am glad, yet, for thy content."19 This was only another difference, another peculiarity that set Thompson apart from the world. His

15 Ibid., "Sister Songs," Part II, l. 58, 32.
16 Ibid., ll. 137-138, 34.
18 Ibid., ll. 100-101.
19 Ibid., ll. 102-103.
lot was simply to live apart. Men could not understand him, and Thompson found himself unable to adapt his own life to their ways. Whether in ordinary daily affairs or in the deeper recesses of his vocation, Thompson was to live alone, "Cozening my mateless days." The poet goes on to describe his calling and the prominent place that his "Lady Pain" held in the inspiration of his poetry:

"The heart, a censered fire whence fuming chants aspire,
Is fed with oozèd gums of precious pain;
And unrest swings denser, denser, the fragrance from
that censer,
With the heart-strings for its quivering chain.
Yet 'tis vain to scale the turret of the cloud-uplifted
spirit,
And bar the immortal in, the mortal out;
For sometime unaware comes a footfall up the stair,
And a soft knock under which no bolts are stout,
And lo, there pleadeth sore
The heart's voice at the door,
"I am your child, you may not shut me out."

In this beautiful stanza Thompson pictures himself and the nature of his poetic vocation, terming his heart a censer which contains the white-hot coals of love. The censer typifying the poet's heart is suspended by the "heart-strings" of mankind, their needs and sensitivities are its "quivering chain." The fire of love in the poet is fed "with oozèd gums of precious pain" and from this burning, this suffering, a song of praise to God constantly ascends as "fuming chants aspire." But what

21 Ibid., "The Sere of the Leaf," 129.
is the function of this "precious pain" in the heart of the poet? It is this that inspires the poetry by swinging the censer of his heart, "And unrest swings denser, denser, the fragrance from that censer." There are two interpretations of the next seven lines. One commentator writes:

It is vain for a soul (such as Miss Tynan's), raised to the very clouds of spiritual exaltation and joyousness, to lock herself and kindred mortals within the lofty tower where her spirit abides, while barring it to a mere mortal (a saddened soul like Thompson's). For, one day his footfall will mount the stair of that tower, his "soft knock under which no bolts are stout" will be heard upon its door, and his "heart's voice," heard in his poems will cry: "I am your child (a poet), you may not shut me out" from the company of the immortals. Thus it is with resolute humility that Thompson presses his claim to immortality.22

On the other hand, with it seems to me, a clearer penetration into the sentiments of Thompson, a second author prefers this interpretation:

One might read in these pathetic lines a deeper personal allusion and give a wider interpretation to his longing for communion not only with the singers of life's joy and mystery but with the Source of all their inspiration. The claim is for admittance to the joys and satisfactions of life in the Holy Presence. "I am your child, you may not shut me out."23

22 Ibid., Notes, 413.
This second interpretation has, it appears, more foundation in the light of Francis Thompson's vocation, and more particularly in the light of his attitude toward suffering. To consider, as Father Connolly would have us do, that Thompson felt vastly inferior to Miss Tynan, seems a bit awry. If Thompson believed that great poetry is bought only at the price of great pain, "No man ever attained supreme knowledge, unless his heart had been torn up by the roots," why should he bow down to a poet who wrote "rhymes...though no tongued griefs give them vent."

Secondly, for the poet of the return to God whose message, figuratively speaking, was to be penned only with his blood, a lofty tower of spiritual exaltation and joyousness where pain had no place was quite foreign and beyond his grasp, at least in this life. It were vain to mount the stair or knock on the door of that tower. Rather, Thompson, after describing in the first four lines the nature of his calling, admits that the "turret of the cloud-uplifted spirit" were vain for him to scale. And yet the surety that this was not for him could not and did not kill the desire in his heart for happiness and exaltation. The pathetic lines "And lo, there pleadeth sore the heart's voice at the door" show clearly the loneliness of Thompson for communion with the Source of these joys. And, ever the child, Francis pleads for admittance into the Holy Presence, "I am your child, you may not shut me out."

A third poem which traces forcibly the distinctive place of suffering in the life of a poet is Thompson's *A Judgement in Heaven*. Here with growing spiritual enlightenment Thompson makes evident the difference between the true poet and a mere rhymer or artificial maker of verse, yet shows that a man's real worth is proved not in the "woof of song," but in the "woof of life." This poem is typical of Francis Thompson in that it is at once a revelation of his humility, for he is the poet in question, and a bid for the immortality which he felt sure was to be his heritage as "poet of the return to God." The first lines begin with a description of the Poet pacing "with his splendid eyes" the "Paradise-verdure he stately passes." The angels are playing in the fields of Summer, pelting "each other with handfuls of stars." Then the "warden-spirits with startled feet" rise "hand on sword, by their tethered cars." The Poet passes on "To where on the far crystalline pale of that tran-stellar Heaven there shone the immutable crocean dawn effusing from the Father's Throne." There "in the heart of His aged dominions" the Poet comes upon Mary and the Triune God. "Roseal-chapleted, splendent-vestured" the Poet stands where "God's light lay large." Suddenly a dingy creature clings to the glories of the Poet, hoping thereby to gain entrance into the Holy Presence. It is the Rhymer. Thompson describes the scene:
Hu, huj a wonder! see, * clasping the Poet's glories clings

A dingy creature, even to laughter * cloaked and clad in patchwork things,

Shrinking close from the unused glows * of the seraph's versi-coloured wings.

A Rhymer, rhyming a futile rhyme, * he had crept for convoy through Eden-ways

Into the shade of the Poet's glory, * darkened under his prevalent rays,

Fearfully hoping a distant welcome * as a poor kinsman of his lays.

The angels laughed with a lovely scorning: * -

'Who has done this sorry deed in

The garden of our Father, God? * 'mid his blossoms to sow this weed in?

Never our fingers knew this stuff: * not so fashion the looms of Eden!'

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

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

The hallowed harpers were fain to frown * on the strange thing come 'mid their sacred crew.

Only the Poet that was earth * his fellow-earth and his own self knew. 25 (ll. 28-40)

Thompson as the Poet knew himself as well as his "fellow-earth."

He had felt the "lucent gazes" of God penetrate into the deepest recesses of his heart, and knew that nothing was hidden from His knowledge. In the next lines we see what Francis Thompson really thought of his gift of song, its relation to his own life and to the lives of others:

Then the Poet rent off robe and wreath, * so as a sloughing serpent doth,

Laid them at the Rhymer's feet, * shed down
wreath and raiment both,
Stood in a dim and shamed stole, * like the
tattered wing of a musty moth.

(The Poet addresses his Maker)
'Thou gav'st the weed and wreath of song, *
the weed and wreath are solely Thine,
And this dishonest vesture * is the only
vesture that is mine;
The life I textured, Thou the song: * - my
handicraft is not divine!'26 (ll. 41-46)

It is God, the Giver of all gifts, Who merits all the praise
and honor of the Poet's gift of poetry. God gave the "weed"
to the Rhymer and the "wreath" to the Poet. Thompson then at-
tributes to himself the only thing that was truly his, "this
dishonest vesture," the vesture of his life's works, "is the
only vesture that is mine." Thompson turns to the Rhymer and
strips from him the patchwork of his inferior verse, "that
garmenting which wrought him wrong." The Rhymer then stands
clothed in the beauty of the life he had textured; his handi-
craft was not poetry but the goodness of his life:

(The Poet addresses the Rhymer)
He wrested o'er the Rhymer's head * that
garmenting which wrought him wrong;
A flickering tissue argentine * down drip-
ped its shivering silvers long: -
'Better thou wov'st thy woof of life * than
thou didst weave thy woof of song!'27
(ll. 47-49)

At this all the saints and angels turned toward the brillian
cof the Rhymer's "flickering tissue argentine" with its "shiver-

26 Ibid., 123.
27 Ibid.
ing silvers long." All the saints, that is, save two:

Never a chief in Saintdom was, * but turned
him from the Poet then;
Never an eye looked mild on him * 'mid all
the angel myriads ten,
Save sinless Mary, and sinful Mary * - the
Mary titled Magdalen.²⁸ (11. 50-52)

The humility and sanctity of the Poet were recognized at their
ture worth by these two Marys. His own self-depreciation at
the sight of "this dishonest vesture," together with the exalt-
ation of the Rhymer clothed in his argentíne "woof of life,"
had led the heavenly ones to abandon the "dim and shamed stole"
for the beautiful and promising exterior of the Rhymer's life.
But Magdalen, herself an apostle of humility and suffering,
knew of the hidden sorrows of the Poet. She bids the angels
and saints:

'Turn yon robe,' spake Magdalen, * 'of torn
bright song, and see and feel.'
They turned the raiment, saw and felt * what
their turning did reveal -
All the inner surface piled * with bloodied
hairs, like hairs of steel.

'Take, I pray, yon chaplet up, * thrown down
ruddied from his head.'
They took the roseal chaplet up, * and they
stood astonished:
Every leaf between their fingers, * as they
bruised it, burst and bled.

'See his torn flesh through those rents; *
see the punctures round his hair,
As if the chaplet-flowers had driven * deep
roots in to nourish there -

²⁸ Ibid.
Lord, who gav' st him robe and wreath, * what
was this Thou gav' st for wear? (II. 53-61)

Thompson paints in these lines a touching picture of what his
vocation as a poet has meant to him. The "bloodied hairs" and
"ruddied chaplet" are symbols of his suffering life. Every
step of his way, whether at home as a child, or a failure at the
Seminary, or an outcast in London streets, has been a "leaf
between their fingers," and as each was bruised by the trials
of his vocation, it "burst and bled." And it was all necessary.
Out of pain the sweetest songs arise, and for Francis Thompson
the "chaplet-flowers" of his poetry "had driven deep roots in
to nourish there."

The heavenly Father together with the two Marys knew the
sincerity and humility of the Poet. Terence Connolly comments
on the line "What was this Thou gav' st for wear?"

It was the "dim and shamed stole" which in
the Poet's own humble opinion was an appro-
priate symbol of his life. But both Poet
and Rhymer were in God's sight greater
than their own humility permitted them to
realize, great enough to be clothed in a
"Paradisal garb" at the command of God the
Father and to be received into the good
graces of Princess Mary. This, after all,
is only an instance of the heavenly fulfil-
ment of Christ's promise: "...everyone
that exalteth himself shall be humbled:
and he that humbleth himself shall be
exalted."30

29 Ibid., 123-124.
30 Ibid., Notes, 408.
The closing lines bear out Father Connolly's analysis:

'Fetch forth the Paradisal garb! * spake
the Father, sweet and low;
Drew them both by the frightened hand *
where Mary's throne made irised bow -
'Take, Princess Mary, of thy good grace, *
two spirits greater than they know.'31
(ll. 62-64)

In the Epilogue to this poem Thompson gives his own interpretation of what Heaven's judgment signified. In the second of the three stanzas he reiterates the "many mansions in My Father's house" theme of the Gospel:

Heaven, which man's generations draws,
Nor deviates into replicas,
Must of as deep diversity
In judgement as creation be.
There is no expeditious road
To pack and label men for God,
And save them by the barrel-load.
Some may perchance, with strange surprise,
Have blundered into Paradise.
In vasty dusk of life abroad,
They fondly thought to err from God,
Nor knew the circle that they trod;
And, wandering all the night about,
Found them at morn where they set out.
Death dawned; Heaven lay in prospect wide: -
Lo! they were standing by His side!32

It is a noteworthy fact that Francis Thompson, despite all the horrors he had lived through up to this time, can so easily and unaffectedly stress the healing mercy and goodness of God toward His creatures. The poet with his newly-found insight into spiritual things, gained at the price of his loyalty to

31 Ibid., 124.
32 Ibid., (Epilogue), 125.
"Lady Pain," sees that Heaven not only treats men as individuals, judging each separately according to his dispositions, but more especially that Heaven is willing for as many as possible to "blunder into Paradise," that God's mercy is eager to find all men "standing by His side!" In the last stanza, Thompson again becomes personal and applies the general truths learned in the first two stanzas to Poets and Rhymers, with perhaps a tinge of hope that he may have part in the "immortal fruits:"

The Rhymer a life uncomplex,
With just such cares as mortals vex,
So simply felt as all men feel,
Lived purely out to his soul's weal.
A double life the Poet lived,
And with a double burthen grieved;
The life of flesh and life of song,
The pangs to both lives that belong;
Immortal knew and mortal pain,
Who in two worlds could lose and gain,
And found immortal fruits must be
Mortal through his mortality.
The life of flesh and life of song!
If one life worked the other wrong,
What expiating agony
May for him, damned to poesy,
Shut in that little sentence be -
What deep austerities of strife -
'He lived his life.' He lived his life.33

Our prime purpose in this chapter has been to show to the best of our ability the enlightenment given to Francis Thompson after his misery in London. The three poems chosen to reveal this spiritual advance, Ode to the Setting Sun, The Sere of the Leaf, and A Judgement in Heaven, are among the first poems

33 Ibid., (Epilogue).
written by our poet after his successful combat against the habit of laudanum. Only the first of the three may be termed "better" among the many poetic achievements for which Thompson is remembered, but all three are helpful to this thesis because of the clearly stated attitude which they contain of his reaction to suffering, his estimate of himself as a man and as a poet. The purgatorial effects of London were for Francis Thompson a night both to his senses and his spirit. It was only after the dross and rough edges of his character had been burned away, that his spirit was made smooth and ready for the impress of God's message. Now it is a Thompson who does not shudder at the sight of pain, who is even eager for the chafings of God. A simple little verse and one full of a world of meaning for those acquainted with the past griefs of the poet, gives a glimpse of this spiritual insight:

'Why do you so clasp me,  
And draw me to your knee?  
Forsooth, you do but chafe me,  
I pray you let me be:  
I will be loved but now and then  
When it liketh me!'

So I heard a young child  
A thwart child, a young child  
Rebellious against love's arms,  
Make its peevish cry.

To the tender God I turn: -  
'Pardon, Love most High!  
For I think those arms were even Thine,  
And that child was even I.' 34

It is a Thompson who has found something better than family or friends, something bought at the counter of loneliness and anguish bordering on despair. It is a Thompson who has found the true worth of suffering, the hidden value of a hidden life, the Light that shines on darkness of spirit. As it was expressed by one author:

When he threw himself into the arms of God, like a child into the arms of a father, his transports were so much the more filial because of his knowledge of lands laid waste and because of his struggle against the shadows.35

We read these sentiments of an illumined spirit in one of Thompson's short poems, together with the answer of Our Lord Who offers Francis the "red pavilion" of His Sacred Heart:

Now while the dark about our loves is strewn,
Light of my dark, blood of my heart, O come!
And night will catch her breath up and be dumb.

Leave thy father, leave thy mother
And thy brother;
Leave the black tents of thy tribe apart!
Am I not thy father and thy brother,
And thy mother?
And thou - what needest with thy tribe's black tents
Who hast the red pavilion of my heart?36 (ll. 7-16)

The next chapter will show how completely Francis Thompson accepted this invitation, and how, strengthened with His strength, our poet became in the fullest sense "the poet of the return to God."

35 Agnes De La Gorce, Francis Thompson, 122.
CHAPTER V
LAST DAYS AND POEMS OF UNION

Following his stay at Storrington, Francis Thompson spent four years in London near the home of the Meynells. Then, after composing the immortal *Hound of Heaven*, he journeyed to a Capuchin monastery in Pantasaph, Wales. For the next four years he lived under the guidance of the monks who took care of all his needs "from boots to dogma." It was here that Thompson's intimate friendship with Coventry Patmore was begun, cultivated, and ended only with the latter's death in 1896. Here too, Thompson's last and greatest poems were composed and later published under the title *New Poems*.

While it is not our intention in this thesis to treat of the mysticism of Francis Thompson, or to determine whether or not he was a genuine mystic in the Catholic sense of the term, still, we can hardly sidestep the issue entirely when treating of these poems of union which best reveal the spiritual heights to which he attained in his life and poetry. Even the title of these last poems was originally planned as *Mystical Poems*, and changed only because "As Catholic and thinker, he feared associ-

ation with a label which means anything from mystification to 'refined and luxurious indolence.'” Two of the three poems we will consider in this chapter are contained in the group called Sight and Insight. The title chosen by Thompson clearly indicates the theme of the poems: poetry which is worthy of the name is the outpouring of a seer, one with sight as well as insight into hidden meanings of things. Terence Connolly, S.J. comments:

In a Catholic poet such a gift leads to that deeply spiritual insight that sees in all external things a 'sacrament,' an external sign of inward grace, an external manifestation of the presence of God, with power to draw the poet nearer to Him.  

More explicitly with reference to Francis Thompson and the poems we are to consider, Connolly continues:

It is this Catholic mysticism that permeates the poetical utterances of Thompson in Sight and Insight, whether his theme is external nature, life, love, prayer, or God Himself. His vision is clear with the clarity of the illuminative way that has been attained by the purgative in the free choice of Calvary and the rejection of Chaos. His love is pure with the purity of refined silver from which the fire of suffering has burned the least trace of sin's alloy until the silver, symbol of man's life, reflects the clear image of God.

2 Ibid., 198.  
3 Connolly, S.J., Poems of Francis Thompson, Notes, 425-426.  
4 Ibid., 428.
We will, therefore in this chapter consider the unitive poems of Francis Thompson without explicit reference to "this Catholic mysticism that permeates the poetical utterances." One caution, however, we will leave with the reader:

Sometimes mysticism is indeed but the garment of Thompson's poetry... At other times mysticism is the soul of his poetry, or rather its disembodied spirit flying meteorlike to God. Oftenest poetry and mysticism are so combined, so lose themselves in one another, that separation means annihilation.5

The Mistress of Vision is a portrayal of the Queen of the triple realm of Heaven, Grace, and Poetry. At first reading one might be inclined to pass it over as mere phantasy. In reality it is Thompson's "gospel of stark renunciation."6 As his biographer writes:

The poem is a masque in which Thompson and his Muse observe the formalities of dialogue; but before the poem is finished the truth is out; as when, dawn breaking upon dancing lovers, their steps cease, and for a moment their embrace is real. So in the poem: the phantasy is not maintained; the masque is up. Christ, before one is aware, is treading the land of Luthany, is walking on the waters.7

The first ten stanzas are a description of the Lady and the Garden. The Lady is Mary with the triple title of Queen of Heaven, Grace, and Poetry; the Garden is Heaven, or the sinless

6 Connolly, S.J., Poems of F.T., Notes, 429.
7 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 221-222.
state, or the state of poetic excellence. Thompson describes the difficulties of setting down the whole revelation contained in Mary's song, then begins:

Wrap my chant in thunders round;
While I tell the ancient secrets in that Lady's singing found.

XIII

On Ararat there grew a vine;
When Asia from her bathing rose,
Our first sailor made a twine
Thereof for his prefiguring brows.
Canst divine
Where, upon our dusty earth, of that vine a cluster grows?8

(11. 84-91)

The deluge over, Noe's ark rested on Mount Ararat. "Our first sailor" crowned his head with a vine that grew there. It was a crown of joyousness, though Thompson sees in "his prefiguring brows" a type of Christ. This is clear from the next two stanzas:

XIV

On Golgotha there grew a thorn
Round the long-prefigured Brows.
Mourn, 0 mourn!
For the vine have we the spine? Is this all the Heaven allows?

XV

On Calvary was shook a spear;
Press the point into thy heart -
Joy and fear!
All the spines upon the thorn into curling tendrils start.9

(11. 92-99)

9 Ibid.
Here again we find Thompson's clear doctrine on the value and worth of pain. Christ bore a crown of thorns for love of us, the joyousness of the prefiguring crown being turned to sadness by the spine of our sins. But we can repair what we have done by pressing the point of Calvary's spear into our own hearts; that is, by accepting the pain of life in the spirit of Christ, which is the spirit of love. Joy and fear will immediately follow from this: joy in the freedom of God's children, and fear of offending the God of love. If we are willing to suffer the sorrows of this life with Christian resignation, then we lessen the pain of Christ, for with our love "all the spines upon the thorn into curling tendrils start." Thompson continues:

XVI

O dismay!
I, a wingless mortal, sporting
With the tresses of the sun?
I, that dare my hand to lay
On the thunder in its snorting?
Ere begun,
Falls my singed song down the sky, even the old Icarian way.

XVII

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

For the front of saint or singer any divinizing twine.10

(11. 100-112)

In his humility Thompson wonders how he could dare, he a mere mortal, to sing of the rays of the glory of God, of His Voice's

10 Ibid., 154-155.
thunder. Hardly does the poet begin his song, when, like Icarus of old, approaching too near the divinity, Thompson also falls down the sky with his "singed song." And "from the fall precipitant" only a few "dim snatches" of Mary's chant remain with him: the assurance that only through sufferings borne in the spirit of her son will either saint or poet scale the heights to which he is called by God. The "divinizing twine" can only come from the "spear and thorn" of Christ on His cross.

XVIII

Her song said that no springing
Paradise but evermore
Hangeth on a singing
That has chords of weeping
And that sings the after-sleeping
To souls which wake too sore.

'But woe the singer, woe!' she said; 'beyond the dead his singing-lore,
All its art of sweet and sore,
He learns, in Elenore!' 11 (11. 113-121)

Terence Connolly, S.J. has a paraphrase of this stanza:

Her song said that there is no supreme happiness (Paradise) for either saint or poet, except that attained by a joyous life (a singing), that has its sorrows (chords of weeping); a true life that reminds souls that suffer beyond the powers of mere human endurance, that there is a life hereafter (the after-sleeping). "Woe is the singer," she said, "for the wisdom of his art lies beyond death to self. All its sadness and its sweetness he learns in Elenore." 12

Thompson asks where this land of Luthany, this tract of Elenore is to be found. "I am bound therefor." Mary answers him:

11 Ibid., 155.
12 Ibid., Notes, 439.
'Pierce thy heart to find the key;
With thee take
Only what none else would keep;
Learn to dream when thou dost wake,
Learn to wake when thou dost sleep;
Learn to water joy with tears,
Learn from fears to vanquish fears,
To hope, for thou dar'st not despair,
Exult, for that thou dar'st not grieve;
Plough thou the rock until it bear;
Know, for thou else couldst not believe;
Lose, that the lost thou may'st receive;
Die, for none other way canst live.
When earth and heaven lay down their veil,
And that apocalypse turns thee pale;
When thy seeing blindeth thee
To what thy fellow-mortals see;
When their sight to thee is sightless;
Their living, death; their light, most lightless;
Search no more -
Pass the gates of Luthany, tread the region Elenore.'¹³

(11. 125-145)

In this stanza we find the soul of Francis Thompson's renunciation. The passage reads like Saint John of the Cross' doctrine of stripping the soul. To find the key to Luthany Thompson must first pierce his heart: the key is love, Calvary's spear is the way to find it. "With thee take only what no one else would keep;"

Take with you life's humiliations, sorrows and pains. It has been wisely said that it is not what we take up, but what we give up that makes life truly worth living.¹⁴

The poet must learn to dream God's dreams in the hours of waking, must pray even in hours of dryness and desolation. He must in-

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¹³ Ibid., 155-156.
crease joy with the tears of repentance for past infidelity, must cast off lesser fears for the one fear of God. It is this one fear which will teach hope instead of despair, happiness instead of grief. The poet must gather good works from ploughing his heart to rawness, digging out the illicit love of creatures. Then the Christian paradox: He only saves his life who loses it, lives only because he dies, finds fulfillment. "When earth and heaven lay down their veil" is thus interpreted by Connolly who is quoting the *Magna Moralia* of Coventry Patmore:

The true Temple has veil within veil, and one is rent for the ingress of God every time the soul dies upon the Cross, that is, resists interior temptations, even to despair. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His Saints;" and every soul which is destined for Sanctity dies many times in this terrible initiative caress of God.15

"When earth and heaven lay down their veil," what will Francis Thompson see? The "apocalypse" will turn him pale. The vision of God, now hidden behind the veil, will blind him with Its brilliance. All that is natural and material will be as nothing to him. The things which men live for, the creatures of this world, themselves and all satisfactions, all will be sightless to the poet, will be death and lightless. When he has found all this in his heart - then - "Search no more." He will have found Luthany, will "tread the region Elenore." Thompson again asks

---

Mary where he may find the Land of Luthany and the region of
Elenore: "I do faint therefor."

XXI

'When to the new eyes of thee
All things my immortal power,
Near or far,
Hiddenly
To each other linked are,
That thou canst not stir a flower
Without troubling of a star;
When thy song is shield and mirror
To the fair snake-curled Pain,
Where thou dar' st affront her terror
That on her thou may' st attain
Persian conquest; seek no more,
O seek no more!

Pass the gates of Luthany, tread the region Elenore.'16
(11. 149-162)

Thompson will have found Luthany and Elenore only when to the
"new eyes" of his spirit all things shall seem linked together
by immortal power. The simple stirring of a flower on earth
will then move a star in heaven; the inspiration of his poetry
will be both a shield to his spirit and a mirror in which he can
safely gaze at life's Pain, conquer it, and know himself secure
in the friendship of God. It is the same theme as Thompson
writes in his essay on Shelley: poetry is safest when born of
the pain of Calvary.

This beautiful, wild, feline poetry, wild
because left to range the wilds, restore
to the hearth of your charity, shelter
under the rafter of your Faith; discipline
her to the sweet restraints of your house­
hold, feed her with the meat from your

16 Ibid., 156.
table, soften her with the amity of your
children; tame her, fondle her, cherish
her - you will no longer then need to
flee her. Suffer her to wanton, suffer
her to play, so she play round the foot
of the Cross.17

In Orient Ode Francis Thompson reveals himself as the
champion poet of Catholic liturgy. Meynell notes in his bio-
ography of the poet that "The ritual of the Church ordered his
unorderly life...he was priestly...his muse was obedient and
circumspect as the voice that proclaims the rubrics."18 Thompson
makes the Catholic Church and the world about him one in their
ritual:

He had grasped the reality behind the sym-
bolism of the ritual, he had seen how Christ
the Pontifex, the bridge-builder between
heaven and earth, has raised up that which
was cast down, and had united things long
disparate and warring; he had had a clear
vision of a Christocentric universe. It was
this that made him a liturgical poet, this
and the decision to apply to all things the
language of the Sacrifice which made real
this surpassing unity and oneness of all
things.19

Christ, as referred to in Scripture, is the true Orient. In the
opening lines of this luxuriant ode. Thompson likens the rising
of the sun to the Blessed Sacrament raised in Benediction. This
Benediction service is near to the hearts of all Catholics.

Terence Connolly, S.J. describes the service:

18 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 33.
In this service, the priest vested in cope, surplice and stole, and accompanied by acolytes, enters the sanctuary, kneels for a moment, and then ascends the steps that lead up to the altar. There he opens the tabernacle, removes the Sacred Host, and places it in a golden monstrance for the veneration of the faithful, for, as Catholics believe, beneath the appearances of a little round wafer of unleavened bread there is present the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ.20

Thompson takes the various elements of this devotion and sustains with power and assurance his analogy with the rising of the sun:

Lo, in the sanctuaried East,
Day, a dedicated priest
In all his robes pontifical exprest,
Lifteth slowly, lifteth sweetly,
From out its Orient tabernacle drawn,
Yon orbèd 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 feately
Of twilight, violet-cassocked acolyte,
His sacerdotal stoles unvest -
Sets, for high close of the mysterious feast,
The sun in august exposition meetly
Within the flaming monstrance of the West.21

From these lines we see at once the great facility of Francis Thompson in likening the ordinary phenomena of nature to some great spiritual fact. "To be the poet of the return to nature is somewhat," Thompson notes, "but I would be the poet of the return to God." And he was. Next, continuing the figure,

20 Connolly, S.J., Poems of F.T., Notes, 452.
21 Ibid., "Orient Ode," 163-164.
Thompson speaks of the Annunciation. The moon is taken as Eve after the fall. The sun is told to leave her and gaze upon the Earth as God looked upon His future mother. The Earth, Mary, conceived and brought forth the Son of God. Nature conceives and brings forth all the beauties of the world. The "gazes" of God confer "desirable allures" and "happy comeliness" on Mary, just as the rays of the sun beautify the flowers of earth with quickening power. Finally, the humility of the handmaid of Nazareth finds prefiguration in the dawn as Earth waits in "lowly loveliness" for the "plumes" of the sun to "shiver against the conscious gates of morn;" the poet addresses the Host (the sun):

O salutaris hostia,
Quae coeli pandia ostium!
Through breached darkness' rampart, a
Divine assaulter, art thou come!
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.
The moon, O leave, pale ruined Eve;
Behold her fair and greater daughter
Offers to thee her fruitful water,
Which at thy first white Ave shall conceive;
Thy gazes do on simple her
Desirable allures confer;
What happy comeliness rise
Beneath thy beautifying eyes!
Who was indeed, at first a maid
Such as, with sighs, misgives she is not fair,
And secret views herself afraid,
Till flatteries sweet provoke the charms they swear:
Yea, thy gazes, blissful Lover,
Make the beauties they discover!
What dainty guiles and treacheries caught
From artful prompting of love's artless thought
Her lowly loveliness teach her to adorn,
When thy plumes shiver against the conscious gate
of morn!

22 Ibid., 164.
The next lines treat of Mary's acceptance of the motherhood of God. Then follows a lengthy description of the great powers of the sun, the counter-attractions and forces of planets, all analogies of Christ who was called in the Apocalypse (V, 5) "the lion of the tribe of Juda." Thompson imagines the sun as the incarnation of light, as Christ incarnate was the "true Light which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world." (John, I, 8-9) Light and darkness is the "double potence of the black and white" attributable to both Christ and the sun; both bring "terror" and "loveliness, and purging, the deathfulness and the lifefulness of fire." The story of Sampson's battle with the lion also finds place here. The sun is a "Burning Lion," consuming yet giving life, strong yet producing the sweetness of the glories of Nature. Christ too is the "lion of the tribe of Juda," burning with desire for the love of men. From Him "comes the honey of all sweet," for, even as He consumes men's hearts, He "the Eater," feeds them with Himself in the Holy Eucharist: "And out of thee, the Eater, comes forth meat." Thompson writes:

Thou art the incarnated Light
Whose Sire is aboriginal, and beyond
Death and resurgence of our day and night;
From him is thy vicegerent wand
With double potence of the black and white.
Giver of Love, and Beauty, and Desire,
The terror, and the loveliness, and purging,
The deathfulness and the lifefulness of fire!
Sampson's riddling meanings merging
In thy twofold sceptre meet:
Out of thy minatory might,
Burning Lion, burning Lion,
Comes the honey of all sweet,
And out of thee, the Eater, comes forth meat.23

(11. 78-91)

It is from Christ that Thompson draws not only his spiritual nourishment, but even the inspiration of his song, his poet's message. It is Christ, likened here to the sun, Who teaches His poet how to clothe the glories of Heaven in the garb of earth, how to "incarnate" Heaven's truth in the "sweet disguise" of earthly speech. As poet of the return to God it is part of Thompson's message to "translate passing well" the "dulcet psalter of the world's desire:"

Knowest thou me not, O Sun? Yea, well
Thou know'st the ancient miracle,
The children know'st of Zeus and May;
And still thou teachest them, O splendid Brother,
To incarnate, the antique way,
The truth which is their heritage from their Sire
In sweet disguise of flesh from their sweet Mother.
My fingers thou hast taught to con
Thy flame-chorded psalterion,
Till I can translate into mortal wire -
Till I can translate passing well -
The heavenly harping harmony,
Melodious, sealed, inaudible,
Which makes the dulcet psalter of the world's desire.24

(11. 105-118)

Beautiful as is the sun in her wondrous splendor and life-giving warmth, Thompson does not adore this "bubble of fire" as others have done:

23 Ibid., 165-166.
24 Ibid., 166.
Not unto thee, great Image, not to thee
Did the wise heathen bend an idle knee;
And in an age of faith grown frore
If I too shall adore,
Be it accounted unto me
A bright sciential idolatry.  
(11. 130-135)

For Thompson, the sun as all of nature's glories, was valuable only in so far as it reminded him of God, could lead his poetry Godward:

Lo, my suit pleads
That thou, Isaian coal of fire,
Touch from yon altar my poor mouth's desire,
And the relucent song take for thy sacred meeds.  
(11. 152-155)

Meynell in his biography of Thompson sets down in a few lines the full extent of the sun's symbolism for Francis:

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.  

Nearing the end of the poem, Thompson acknowledges the source of all his "longing verse." It is not from himself or nature or his fellow-men, but "Beats but with the fire which first thyself didst give."

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

25 Ibid., 167.
26 Ibid.
27 E. Meynell, *Life of Francis Thompson*, 211.
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 the fire which first thyself didst give,
To thee, O Sun - or isn't perchance to Christ?28
(ll. 187-195)

The closing lines give us the essence of Thompson's message.
Like the Hound of Heaven, this Orient Ode ends in an embrace with Christ. The poet has traced the signs of His love "through all the windy earth about," has written of the insufficiency of Nature alone to satisfy the search of the Christian spirit. It is in the unitive embrace of these final lines that we see the extent of Thompson's spiritual vision. "Here is the ecstasy of faith that does not see the veiled image of God beyond nature, but rather consumes visible nature in the intensity of its own heat and sees the apocalypse of God Himself."29

Ay, if men say that on all high heaven's face
The saintly signs I trace
Which round my stoled altars hold their solemn place,
Amen, amen! For oh, how could it be, -
When I with winged feet had run
Through all the windy earth about,
Quested its secret of the sun,
And heard what things the stars together shout, -
I should not heed thereout
Consenting counsel won: -
'By this, O Singer, know we if thou see.
When men shall say to thee: Lo! Christ is here,
When men shall say to thee: Lo! Christ is there,
Believe them: yea, and this - then art thou seeer,
When all thy crying clear
Is but: Lo here! lo there! - ah me, lo everywhere!'30
(ll. 196-211)

29 Ibid., Notes, 459.
30 Ibid., 168-169.
The Hound of Heaven has received magnificent treatment at the hands of countless authors. The purpose in writing of it here is to show the summit of Thompson's love of God. This poem, embracing as it does the whole of humanity's experience, is particularly revealing when we consider Thompson's personal spiritual development. If Thompson found in Christianity "an endless elaboration of Christ, so that he turns and wonders at himself for standing at all in the mirk of ordinary daylight," then surely in this poem his Christ has brought him out of that mirk into the glorious light of His Presence. The title itself shows that the poet has discovered an essential truth of sanctity namely, that true holiness is had at the expense of God's pursuit of the soul far more than the soul's searching after its God. The latter has too much of complacence in it. The soul in search of God can organize its search in a leisurely way, but the far more terrible thing is for God to come relentlessly after the soul: there is no leisure in that. The theme of this great poem was compressed by Thompson in a short verse entitled Rejected Lovers which does not appear in the collected works of the poet. For the sake of clarity, since the exigencies of space do not permit a full treatment of the Hound of Heaven in this thesis, we quote the shorter poem:

31 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 213-214.
"Poeta - 'I have loved women - they have paid my pains!
I have loved Nature - rather clasp the sea!
I have loved children - look not there for gains:
I have loved much, but I have not loved Thee.
And yet when all these loves were loved and proved,
None have loved me, but Thou, divine Unloved!

"Christus -
'Thou ask'st; I ask, and have not at thy hand.
All ways hast sought, and hast thou found no ways?
Ah child! and dost thou yet not understand,
And in thine own, beholdest not My case?
O little love! does no man pity thee? -
Lo, it is writ, that none has pity on Me:"32

The haunting thought is of the soul's disillusionment in the
love of creatures which fail to satisfy its thirst for happiness. Only in the "divine Unloved" will the poet find rest and spiritual peace. Fear of the Pursuer must yield to love. Only in His embrace is the pursued assured of perfect love.

In the opening lines of The Hound of Heaven Thompson describes a soul in flight. Stark terror forces it "Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears" headlong in its one maddening desire to escape the "Deliberate speed, majestic instancy" of the Pursuer. Thompson begs as an outlaw both from God's love and the love of his fellows to be allowed to evade the demands of "this tremendous Lover:"

    I pleaded, outlaw-wise,
    By many a hearted casement, curtained red,
    Trellised with intertwining charities;
    (For, though I knew His love Who followed,
    Yet was I sore adread
    Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside.)

32 Francis Thompson, "Rejected Lovers," Catholic World, LXXXVI (1908), 629.
But, if one little casement parted wide,
The gust of His approach would clash it to:
Fear wist not to evade, as Love wist to pursue.33

(11. 16-24)

It is a common fear for those beginning to find God, though an erroneous one, that "having Him, I must have naught beside."
The poet is "sore adread," not because he doesn't want the love of God, but because he fears its consequences: the sacrifice and suffering which such love requires. Day is too long for such a soul in flight, and night is drawn out and foreboding:

I said to Dawn: Be sudden - to Eve: Be soon;
With thy young skiey blossoms heap me over
From this tremendous Lover -
Float thy vague veil about me, lest He see;34

(11. 30-33)

Tempting "all His servitors" avails nothing, for Thompson finds only his "own betrayal in their constancy." The Hound carries on the chase relentlessly: "Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me."

Thompson next seeks his solace in little children. He who was always a child felt sure that "they at least are for me."

I sought no more that after which I strayed
In face of man or maid;
But still within the little children's eyes
Seems something, something that replies,
They at least are for me, surely for me!
I turned me to them very wistfully;

34 Ibid., 77-78.
But just as their young eyes grew sudden fair
   With dawning answers there,
Their angel plucked them from me by the hair.35
(11. 52-60)

Childhood was always something divine for Francis Thompson.

"Know you what it is to be a child?" he asks in his essay on Shelley. "It is to be something very different from the man of today. It is to have a spirit yet streaming from the waters of baptism; it is to believe in love, to believe in loveliness, to believe in belief."36 Men have forgotten how to be children.

In the same essay Thompson remarks:

We, of this self-conscious generation, sentimentalize our children, analyse our children, think we are endowed with a special capacity to sympathize and identify ourselves with children; we play at being children. And the result is that we are not more child-like, but our children are less child-like. It is so tiring to stoop to the child, so much easier to lift the child up to you.37

But Thompson himself was always a child. Even within a few years of his death when he was physically exhausted and ravaged by disease his spirit was young and simple as a child's. Miss Katherine King wrote to Thompson in these later years:

When you were by your little genius's' -
Harry's - bed, and the baby boy Percy with the white shoes was at your knee, that was to me a revelation! I think of you now with that infant's serious, confiding face up-

35 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
turned to you. It was all so natural. To some people a child is a pretty ornamental addition. Your personality now seems incomplete without the child as the natural and exquisite finish to the whole man.38

For a soul as sensitive as Thompson's, the suffering of the withdrawal of children when "their angel plucked them from me by the hair" would necessarily be very keen. In his Poems on Children we note this same sadness, both because Thompson felt estranged from the simplicity of childhood by his age, and because even the purity of an unspoiled child's affection could not satisfy the yearnings of his heart. The Hound of Heaven would permit no creature to take His place in the chosen poet's affections.

Next it is nature that fails the fleeing soul of the poet. Perhaps here a refuge may be found?

I triumphed and I saddened with all weather,
    Heaven and I wept together,
And its sweet tears were salt with mortal mine;
Against the red throb of its sunset-heart
    I laid my own to beat,
    And share commingling heat;
But not by that, by that was eased my human smart.
In vain my tears were wet on Heaven's grey cheek.

... ... ... ... ... ... ...

Nature, poor stepdame, cannot slake my drouth;
    Let her, if she would owe me,
Drop yon blue bosom-veil of sky, and show me
The breasts o' her tenderness:
Never did milk of hers once bless
    My thirsting mouth.39 (ll. 88-95; 99-104)

38 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 250-251.
The chase continues, "Lo! naught contents thee, who content'st not Me." Nature is too mortal, too changing, too unsympathetic, to draw the heart of Thompson. He tells us this in an essay:

You speak, and you think she answers you. It is the echo of your own voice. You think you hear the throbbing of her heart, and it is the throbbing of your own. I do not believe that Nature has a heart; and I suspect that like many another beauty, she has been credited with a heart because of her face. You go to her, this great, beautiful, tranquil, self-satisfied Nature, and you look for sympathy? Yes; the sympathy of a cat, sitting by the fire and blinking at you. What indeed does she want with a heart or a brain? She knows that she is beautiful, and she is placidly content with the knowledge; she was made to be gazed on, and she fulfills the end of her creation.40

Flight is senseless! God will have His way in the end. The poet stops, trembles, and awaits the approach of the Hound:

Naked I wait Thy love's uplifted stroke! My harness piece by piece Thou hast hewn from me, And smitten me to my knee; I am defenceless utterly.41 (ll. 111-114)

The cry is of a soul completely surrendered to God. God has demanded piece by piece the heart of the poet, demanded that all else be sacrificed without reserve. It is the price of Thompson's share in Divine Love, as well as the price of his vocation as poet. "...the gates of the beatific Love are guarded by the purgatorial Love."42 And it is precisely here that

Thompson plumbs the depths of Catholic doctrine on pain. All men, from the spiritual weakling to the greatest mystic have known that suffering was the one price of their desired sanctity. "I never found any" says Thompson

...so religious and devout that he had not sometimes a withdrawing of grace. There was never Saint so highly rapt and illuminated, who before or after was not tempted. For he is not worthy of the high contemplation of God who has not been troubled with some tribulations for God's sake.43

From experience bitter to the flesh but sweet to the spirit, could Thompson write:

Ah, is Thy love indeed
A weed, albeit an amaranthine weed,
Suffering no flowers except its own to mount?
Ah! must -
Designer infinite! -
Ah! must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst limn with it?

.............

Such is; what is to be?
The pulp so bitter, how shall taste the rind?44
(11. 130-135; 141-142)

All through his own life it had been a constant charring, a painful desolation, loneliness, or sense of abandonment by men and God alike. Thompson knew the laws of love. He knew too that all great love issues forth in union. He experienced this union in himself, the union of humility with Humility, of love with Love:

43 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 225-226.
Now of that long pursuit
Comes on at hand the bruit;
That Voice is round me like a bursting sea:
 'And is thy earth so marred
Shattered in shard on shard?
Lo, all things fly thee, for thou fleest Me!
Strange, piteous, futile thing!
Wherefore should any set thee love apart?
Seeing none but I makes much of naught' (He said),
'And human love needs human meriting:
How hast thou merited -
Of all man's clotted clay the dingiest clot?
Alack, thou knowest not
How little worthy of any love thou art!
Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,
Save Me, save only Me?
All which I took from thee I did but take,
Not for thy harms,
But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.
All which thy child's mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:
Rise, clasp My hand, and come!' Halts by me that footfall:
Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?
'Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom thou seekest!
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me.' 45

(11. 155-182)

Christ was the only deep love Francis Thompson ever knew on earth. His only love was a divine romance. "...the most terrible romances are inward, and the intolerableness of them is that they pass in silence...The sole beautiful romances are the Saints', which are essentially inward." 46 It was Christ Who dominated Thompson's poetry as we can easily see for ourselves. It was Christ Who dominated the poet's mind and heart in his

45 Ibid., 81.
46 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 345-346.
last days on earth, as witnesses often testified:

His gentle eye proved that not all his silent thoughts were troubled; and often his gaze would climb to some invisible and fair peak of contemplation, resting there content in silence.47

Alfred Hayes gives us a brief reminiscence of Thompson when the poet was a guest at his home:

I was struck, as were the few intimate friends who once met him at my house, with a strange other-worldliness about him, as if he were conscious of making a hasty sojourn on earth in the course of an illimitable journey.48

Finally, the biographer of the poet tells us:

I used to see him in his room, propped against pillows, with candles burning and his prayer-book in his hand far into the night; and his light would still be bright when the stars had begun to grow faint...49

Francis Thompson died at dawn on November 13, 1907, fortified by the last sacraments of the Catholic Church. Having suffered alone with God during life, in death he escaped alone with Him. It is strangely fitting that Thompson the child had come to die on the feast of a child (Saint Stanislaus), and had written for his own epitaph: "Look for me in the nurseries of Heaven."

47 Ibid., 314.
48 Ibid., 249.
49 Ibid., 347.
CHAPTER VI
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We have endeavored to trace in these chapters the spiritual advance and development of Francis Thompson. In his vocation as poet, the general theme of suffering as the price of his greatness led him to the added title "poet of the return to God." We have seen him in childhood before the agony of London. We have studied him in detail while he suffered in the "mighty labyrinths." As a result, we know that the child in him saved him from bitterness and resentment, but not from the sorrow that was so necessary to purify his soul. This pain was God's way of assuring the supernatural growth of His poet. The pain-filled message of Thompson had to be a thing of deep personal experience, and this despite the fact that his great sensitivity made quite ordinary sorrows doubly painful:

Of all men the least fit to endure physical suffering, he endured it forgetfully and even light-heartedly unless, his spiritual assent being thwarted, he felt the chills of estrangement from God.1

It was the generosity of a true Christian that made Thompson willing to accept the great fact from the hand of God:

1 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 272.
Therefore must my song-bower lone be,
That my tone be
Fresh with dewy pain alway. 2 (Pt. II, 11. 92-94)

It was characteristic of Francis Thompson that he be lonely:

He walks through the valley of the great Shadow; and what wonder that his brows are bound with thorn as well as cypress? It was nowise possible that Thompson should have escaped melancholy - intense and aching melancholy, that scourge of every sensitive mind. Yet his was, ultimately, a cheerfulness such as merely cheerful men may never know. 3

As a child Francis had felt estranged from others; in London he was befriended by only one person in two years of torture, and she an outcast like himself. In later years when one would expect the poet to be at ease with his fellows, he writes:

I have suffered from reticence all my life... The power of communication in oneself is conditioned by power of receptiveness in others. The one is never perfect; neither, therefore can the other be. For entire self-revelation to another, we require to feel that even the weak or foolish impulsive things we may let drop, will be received without chill, - nay, even with sympathy, because the utterer is loved...But such an 'other' is not among men. 4

Loneliness, human and divine, was part of the price of his poetic dedication. It was his part all the way through life to love without love in return, whether it be his love of nature, of women, or of little children. "0 Christ the Just, and can

4 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 297 and 299.
it be I am made for love, no love for me?"5 There was a love for him, but like the love of the Saints it came not from creatures but from God. His was a reserved heart, reserved for special love, reserved for special pain. He knew it, fondled it, embraced it: "Inwardly I suffer like old Nick; but the blessed mountain air keeps up my body, and for the rest - my Lady Pain and I are au mieux."6

We may be tempted to ask whether all this suffering was really necessary, whether Thompson did not exaggerate the place of pain in his own life. A passage from his commentary on Saint Francis offers clear reply to any like objection. In these lines we find the idea of consecration, of great love only through great sorrow, of pain as an instrument of gladness; all of which have their rightful claim in the message of this "poet of the return to God:"

Pain, which came to man as a penalty, remains with him as a consecration; his ignominy, by a divine ingenuity, he is enabled to make his exaltation. Man, shrinking from pain, is a child shuddering on the verge of the water, and crying, 'It is so cold!' How many among us, after repeated lessonings of experience, are never able to comprehend that there is no special love without special pain? To such St. Francis reveals that the Supreme Love is itself full of Supreme Pain. It is fire, it is torture; his human weakness accuses himself of rashness in provoking it, even while his

5 Ibid., 296.
6 Ibid., 129.
soul demands more pain, if it be necessary for more Love. So he revealed to one of his companions that the pain of his stigmata was agonizing, but was accompanied by a sweetness so intense as made it ecstatic to him. Such is the preaching of his words and example to an age which understands it not. Pain is. Pain is ineradicable. Pain may be made the instrument of joy. It is the angel with the fiery sword guarding the gates of the lost Eden. The flaming sword which pricked man from Paradise must wave him back.7

This beautiful passage gives us one of the most concise pictures of Thompson's attitude toward a deep mystery. It helps us to understand his words that "Deep grief or pain, may, and has in my case, found immediate outlet in poetry."8 And this same poetry was the cause of his other-worldliness. It made him a dismal failure in the world of men, at least in the eyes of those who had not his abiding vision.

Thompson existed in this world of ours - but he lived in another with his mistress, poetry. For her sake he was content to be judged a fool - as the world judges. For her sake he went down into the valley of renunciation...As a man, Thompson was a failure. But out of his failure as a man was born his success as a poet. For poetry he sacrificed all...Poetry weaned him from the world, only to bring him nearer to God.9

Strange that he who lived with "Lady Pain" only that men might glean from his suffering the true wheat of his poetic utterance,

7 Ibid., 296-297.
8 Ibid., 305.
should be rejected by those for whom he dedicated his spirit.
Thompson was a wafer in this world, and as helpless, or unwilling, to protect himself from its chilly blasts, as Christ was in His own earthly days or is even now as the Wafer of our altars. A Work had been given him to do. A Vision had been given him for guidance. It was that vision which contained the message of his life, the message of his poetry, for our uncourageous day. He teaches that a return to nature is not enough, that we must look beyond her beauty till we see the beauty of God. The perpetual desire of men to avoid suffering is likewise not enough. We must learn to embrace the cross that is given us to carry, knowing that by this alone will true happiness be attained.

He knew that the way is long and that we arrive, not by choosing our path but by treading the thorns and briars of the road on which our feet have been set. He was a man who felt in every ripple of a stream, in every yielding of the earth, in every tint of the sky, in every call of the wind, in the splendor of sunset and in the glamor of moonrise the operations of a conscious, unseen Power that is craving audience and converse with His creation.10

The same writer continues by analysing Thompson's vocation in its wider scope:

Catholic in his manner, Catholic in his matter, Thompson taught that man's true food is immortal bread and wine, that "in Christ centres and is solved that supreme

10 H. A. Allen, "The Poet of the Return to God," The Catholic World, CVII (June, 1918), 292.
problem of life - the marriage of the Unit with the Sun?" since "in Him is perfectly shown forth the All for one, and One for all..." and hence that only in a universal union of men with their Mother, the Church, shall the world ultimately find salvation. Such, viewing his work in its larger aspect, is his message, and we have read it in vain unless the memory of his lily-filled thought comes, with a strong and tender impetus, to pour over the whole of life with its harsh unrest, its uncompassionate fret, its empty strivings in a baffled maze, the precious ointment of his vision.11

Francis Thompson had surrendered himself entirely to the God of poetry. God in turn had given him special thoughts to write for the world. Meynell tells us that Thompson's poems were all inspired by the same Fount of Wisdom,

...every stanza was an act of faith; every stanza a declaration of good-will. It is optimism that compels the poet to give the superfluity of his inner song to the world. He knows, perhaps against all common-sense, that the world will some day be fit for it.12

Having attained a special union with God by the generous acceptance of his life of pain, Thompson knew that he was a success, whatever his immediate generation might think. His poetry might not be accepted yet, but Time would reap the profit of his verses, as he tells us himself:

11 Ibid., 290-291.
12 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 312.
I hang mid men my needless head,
And my fruit is dreams, as theirs is bread:
The goodly men and the sun-hazed sleeper
Time shall reap, but after the reaper
The world shall glean of me, me the sleeper.13

(II. 68-72)

And the world has gleaned of this poet's dreams. Francis Thompson, in tattered coat and sleeveless shirt, struggling through the streets of London in every weather, oblivious of the men and women who passed him by, his heart set on the Unseen things of the other world, has left to men the glorious sight of "Jacob's ladder pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross," and the still more fascinating vision of "Christ walking on the water not of Gennesareth, but Thames."14 We can close our thesis and our consideration of Francis Thompson in no more fitting or deserved fashion than to quote the lines of his friend, Wilfred Whitten:

Interested still in life, he was no longer intrigued by it. He was free from both apathy and desire. Unembittered, he kept his sweetness and his sanity, his dewy laughter, and his fluttering gratitude. In such a man outward ruin could never be pitiable or ridiculous, and, indeed, he never bowed his noble head but in adoration. I think the secret of his strength was this: that he had cast up his accounts with God and man, and thereafter stood in the mud of earth with a heart wrapt in such fire as touched Isaiah's lips.15

15 E. Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 254.
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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Vincent J. Forde, S.J. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

March 2, 1949
Date

Rev. J. B. Conrath, S.J.
Signature of Adviser