

## FRANCIS THOMPSON—A GREAT CATHOLIC POET

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Once, the guiding spirit of poetry was the spirit of the Catholic Church. Then Catholicism cherished a glorious Poesy. Then great poets sprung from her soil. To be readily convinced of this fact we have but to point to such luminaries as Dante and Petrarch, of beautiful Italy; to Lope de Vega and Calderon, of chivalrous Spain; to the author of the "Chanson de Roland" and Chrestien of Troyes, of fair France; to Wolfram von Eschenbach and Walther von der Vogelweide, of romantic Germany; to Caedmon, Cynewulf, Chaucer, Shakespeare and Dryden, of Merry England. All these, with the possible exception of Shakespeare (and the Shakespearian drama is preëminently Catholic in its grandest and purest passages), were not only of the one, holy Faith, but were the preachers also of its truth and its beauty. Science made Catholic doctrine firm, art proclaimed it. And so, the great poem of Dante, in its fundamental analysis, is essentially nothing other than that monumental work of the Church, the "Summa" of St. Thomas, heated afresh in the crucible of a genius' mind and poured through the channels of a fervid and strong imagination into a Byzantine mould of epic poetry. But with the Renaissance, and later with the potent influence of German and English Reformations, poetry in general had fallen into a low paganism. Though Catholic Italy could boast of Tasso, among her grandest singers, as a product of the classical revival, she could not assuredly exult in so many other fallen men of genius, among them Aristotle, who, unlike Tasso, seemed incapable of preaching the Parnassus of antiquity and yet at the same time the superior reign of Christ. Spain, however, during this long period proved a solitary exception. In her greatest works Catholicism ran, pure and vigorous. France, fair daughter of the Church, then, too, imbued with a pagan spirit and infected with the germs of a later Rationalism, was unable to rise to any lasting poem of Christian inspiration. Germany and England, likewise, revelling in Greco-Roman art and learning, robbed of their erstwhile Faith, in consequence bequeathed to the world a literature that is not only Protestant, for the most part, but often also anti-Catholic. Poetry, fallen, was then in a bad way. "Once poetry was, as she should be," says Francis Thompson, "the lesser

sister and helpmate of the Church. . . . But poetry sinned, poetry fell; and, in place of lovingly reclaiming her, Catholicism cast her from the door to follow the feet of her pagan seducer.”\*

Great poetry, then, for the last few centuries has been largely non-Catholic. But “there is a change of late years,” Francis Thompson further on assures us, “the Wanderer is being called to her Father’s house.” Most especially has this change come upon England. England has awakened from a cold and grey winter. In poetry, as in religion, there has come a “Second Spring.” Names are familiar, and of those that come to the mind—Newman, Faber, De Vere, Patmore, Johnson, Meynell, Thompson—the last indisputably holds the highest poetical position.

From all that is positively known of him, Francis Thompson died, as he had lived, a very good and devout Catholic. But what about his poetry? Is it destined to stand in greatness? Is Thompson to rank among the greatest poets of the English language? Critics have expressed their opinions, but, on the whole, criticism is slow to determine his final place. Time alone will eventually tell.

George Saintsbury, an eminent critic, some years ago placed Thompson in the rank of a second-class poet. Here he is generally put, but we have more than enough evidence to prove that this is not his fitting place. We would have him on a higher seat; we would hear the words: “Friend, go up higher.” If Wordsworth, in the Scotch critic’s judgment, holds the fifth place in the order of first-class poets, the high-water mark of English poetry (a bold assertion though it be), Thompson sits hard by his side. If quality of poetry, not quantity, be the criterion of its worth, will not Thompson’s greatest work endure with the greatest of the “Poet of Nature”—“The Hound of Heaven” ode for instance, with the “Ode on the Intimations of Immortality”? The quality of Thompson’s art, with his Catholic fellow-poets’, has the marks of a grave thoughtfulness, a pure and lofty emotion and a vivid and bold imagination. His verse, indeed, is best described in his own words concerning Shelley’s “It is attar of poetry.”

In the “Illustrated London News,” some years ago, Gilbert K. Chesterton gave in proof of Francis Thompson’s greatness

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\*Essay on Shelley.

two reasons, which in his inimitably paradoxical way he styled "infirmities." He said: "Great poets are obscure for two opposite reasons; now, because they are talking about something too large for any one to understand, and now, again, because they are talking about something too small for any one to see." For exemplification of the former, he mentioned that monstrous figure from "A Corymbus for Autumn," where Thompson, in describing the evening earth, with its mists and fume and fragrance, calls it a censer swung by some gigantic spirit before the throne of God:

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

For the exemplification of the latter, a case of the image too small to be seen, Chesterton made reference to two lines toward the end of "An Anthem of Earth," where Thompson, apostrophizing Death, comes presently to a wonderful climax, saying:

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

Chesterton says that about ten historical and theological puns are couched in that one word, "Pontifical":—"That a priest means a Pontiff, that a Pontiff means a bridge-maker, that death is certainly a bridge, that at least priest and bridges both attest to the fact that one thing can get separated from another thing—these ideas, and twenty more, are all tacitly concentrated in the word 'Pontifical.'" In conclusion, he said: "In Francis Thompson's poetry, as in the poetry of the universe, you can work infinitely out and out, but yet infinitely in and in. These two infirmities are the mark of greatness; and he was a great poet."

Francis Thompson, well has it been said, was the lyrical poet, Richard Crashaw born again—but born greater. All the godly vision, all the originality of thought, all the bold and fanciful

imagery, and even some of that strange mixture of spontaneous passion and studied conceit so characteristic of Crashaw and his age, were reproduced, but in a more beautiful way. Crashaw sang the praises of the Child Jesus through the mouth of shepherds; Thompson, out of the mouth of infants. Crashaw sang of a holy nun; Thompson, of a band of steadfast martyrs. Witness, on the one hand, "The Flaming Heart," and on the other, the ode "To the English Martyrs"; witness the "Hymn of the Shepherds on the Night of the Nativity" and "Ex Ore Infantium." Here, as elsewhere, their enthusiasm is the rapture of poets' souls under the spell of religious beauty. Thompson is the profounder and by far the simpler. He is both man and child. And when he abounds in richness of figure that sometimes savors of artificial display, it is not, as with Crashaw, so much for its own sake as for the higher object in view—to exalt and solemnize the ennobled subject of the song he sings; like a child, indeed, he stops by the way to cull a flower, but no so much to rejoice in and contemplate the flower itself, as, in his childlike way, beautifully to deck the statue of his crowning.

And herein it is that the poetry of Thompson most clearly resembles the poetry of Shelley. If Crashaw is sometimes styled "The Religious Shelley," how much more is not the epithet applicable to Thompson! Few, perhaps, will thank us for connecting the name of Thompson with that of the erratic and atheistic child of song. So true is this, nevertheless, that in studying both authors a cautiously observing reader cannot fail to perceive the almost identical purpose the imagery plays in most of their compositions. Both toy with imagery, like the Metaphysical School of Poetry whose highest exponent is Crashaw, but not to such an extent as to lose sight of its ultimate proper purpose and design. With them it is a means to an end. They are what the Metaphysical School should have been.

There is still another pronounced similarity between the poet-atheist and the poet of the return to God. And it is this: As just seen, both singers in their manner of employing imagery stand on almost common ground; and, again, in the kind of imagery itself there is a notable likeness. Were it possible, while reading the great lyrics of Shelley, for one to pay, for long, the strictest attention to the texture of his cloth of gold without recurring to the sense, such a one would feel instinctively a some-

thing peculiarly Thompsonian about Shellean verse. It is the imaginative intensity of both poets flowing, as it were, from a mutual childlike spontaneity. Than Shelley no poet, not even Shakespeare in his finest lyrical songs, is more spontaneous. Keats in his very best ode, "To the Nightingale," Coleridge, in his "Kubla Khan," Wordsworth, in his "Daffodils" and "Intimations," and Thompson in his finest compositions, alone, of all lyrical singers in the whole of English literature, show anything in this respect that can compare to the shorter inspirations of Shelley. In a later day, Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Algernon Swinburne, Matthew Arnold and William Morris, contemporaries of our poet, have courted a mighty muse; but theirs is a more conscious, premeditated art, and not in an extraordinary degree the spontaneous bubbling-over of intensely poetical souls. Thompson gives us most poetry written in purely Shellean, skiey grain. Shelley, we know, was always essentially a child. Thompson, grown to manhood, was never more than half a man, and could write without false pretence:

"Pass the crystalline sea, the Lampads seven:—  
Look for me in the nurseries of Heaven."

His imagination, like a child's, is swift and free. Like a rocket shot in air, his imaginative thoughts ascend into the empyrean itself and burst in purple and gold.

Of the two poets it would be difficult to say which one possesses the greater emotional intensity. But putting aside the degree and coming to the kind of emotion, it is not so hard to determine. Here it is that we may draw the line of demarcation between the poetry of these great singers. Thompson's poetic emotion surely is guided by more deep, more sane and more noble thought. This can be better felt than expressed. And in the following exclamation from Shelley:

"O World! O Life! O Time!  
On whose last steps I climb,  
Trembling at that where I had stood before,—  
When will return the glory of your prime?  
No more—oh, never more!"

contrasted with this from Thompson:

"O world invisible, we view thee,  
O world intangible, we touch thee,  
O world unknowable, we know thee,  
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!"

we have epitomized, respectively, the different nature of the passionate effusion which flows from all their verse. If not in the degree, at least in the kind (if, indeed, the intensity and the nature of poetic feeling may be considered apart) readers cannot fail to perceive the superiority of Thompson's emotion over the emotion of Shelley. Percy Bysshe Shelley—vacillating, erring youth, without a belief in a personal God, with a vague undying hope, however, in some better thing that is to come; poor warrior with this our material world, at feud with Church and State and society, with a preposterous view to utopian reform; nature's child, soaring and flying and floating with "Skylark," "Westwind" and "Cloud"—could no more feel the congruency of a higher, a better, a spiritual world, than Thompson, child of grace, knight fiery with love for his fellow-man and God, could, in the other glorious extreme, conceive of a smallest "field-flower" or a tiniest "snowflake" that did not have as maker its God. At Francis' touch the merest and greatest conceptions don the garb of Christian regeneration.

Thompson is a great poet; but what is more, he is a Catholic. In the poetry of that group of Catholics to which our poet belongs there is a grave thoughtfulness that escapes the affected profoundness of the pedant, while it remains thoroughly human. This thoughtfulness on the part of each proceeds from a common Faith. They sing what their mother the Church teaches them. And, indeed, the Church, itself, as Cardinal Newman asserts, "is the most sacred and august of poets. . . . She is the poet of her children."\* and, it may be added, especially of these her poet-children. Her glorious legacy of truth so beautifully expressed in psalms and canticles, in signs and symbols, she has willed to them particularly. And how gratefully Thompson has received them at her hand his poems can best say. Not only the most beautiful of her teachings and maxims has he transmitted to poetry, but even much of her ritual as well. Of the group of Catholic poets, it is perhaps especially peculiar of him to have employed most extensively the liturgy of the Church as a source for metaphors, making the cosmic elements serve as incense and thurible, monstrance and tabernacle and altar, acolyte and priest. This the above excerpt from "A Corymbus for Autumn" and the

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\*Vol. II, Essays Critical and Historical—John Keble.

following opening lines from the "Orient Ode," to beautiful to be omitted, will show:

"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 featly  
 Of twilight, violet-cassocked acolyte,  
 His sacerdotal stoles unvest—  
 Sets, for high close of the mysterious feast,  
 The sun in august exposition meetly  
 Within the flaming monstrance of the West."

Only a mind imbued with Catholic thought could produce these lines; only a childlike simplicity could keep them so thoroughly human.

Thompson somewhere says: "To be the poet of the return to Nature is somewhat, but I would be the poet of the return to God." And how fully he realized this ideal his poetry reveals. But he has not merely sung a devotional song; there are times when his verses ascend into regions mystical. Like Richard Crashaw and Coventry Patmore, Thompson drew much of his inspiration from the fountain-head of the mystic saints. Their writings were his mature meditations and paved the way to his greatest compositions. How well he received and executed the trust given him by Patmore, "I look to you to crush all this false mysticism"—a mysticism so prevalent among nineteenth century poets—is now manifest. Throughout the mystical poems which form so large a portion of his work (among others, the group of poems deliberately called "Sight and Insight," the "Ode to the Setting Sun," "the Hound of Heaven") there runs a very poignant message. For example, from "The Mistress of Vision":

"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.

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"Learn to water joy with tears,  
 Learn from fears to vanquish fears.

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

Incidents might be multiplied; but it is in "The Hound of Heaven," his greatest poem, perhaps the greatest ode in the English language, that he drives home the all-important lesson that in this life Nature, alone, is insufficient to bring man a lasting peace, and that the greatest peace and happiness come not to him who flies from God, but to him who flies towards Him. The sinner is fleeing his Love, God, and Love pursues. The opening lines echoing doom are tremendous:

"I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
 I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
 I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
 Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears  
 I hid from Him, and under running laughter.  
     Up vistaed hopes I sped;  
     And shot, precipitated,  
 Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,  
 From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.  
     But with unhurrying chase,  
     And unperturbèd pace,  
 Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
 They beat—and a Voice beat  
 More instant than the Feet—  
 'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'"

The sinner, venturing farther from his Lover, seeks peace on every side. Is there anything that can compare to this passage in sweep of imagination?—

"Across the margin of the world I fled,  
 And troubled the gold gateways of the stars,  
 Smiting for shelter on their clangèd bars;  
     Fretted to dulcet jars  
 And silvern chatter the pale ports o' the moon."

The sinner strays farther and farther still, turning now to man, now to maid, to the little children, to Nature, for happiness; but in vain:

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

He realizes that without Him suffering is but his lot and he exclaims:

"Ah! must—  
 Designer infinite!—  
 Ah, must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst limn with it?"



And the chase continues till the All-loving holds the sinner in His arms :

“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.’”

Such, then, is the Wanderer again returned to her Father's house. This is the poetry which for the last few centuries has been practically dead and has come to life again. It is a poetry that is in spirit, at least, akin to that of a former day, the day of Dante and Chaucer and Calderon. Its thought, its philosophy of life is theirs, even though it has taken on a modern form of expression. The more deeply one delves into the poetry of Thompson, the more one is convinced that it will endure through the years—that it is really great. Francis Thompson will hardly be a popular poet; but he will always, we think, be beloved by the average lettered Catholic and by the non-Catholic literary elite. Already we see the partial fulfilment of the lines :

“The sleep-flower sways in the wheat its head,  
Heavy with dreams, as that with bread:  
The goodly grain and the sun-flushed sleeper  
The reaper reaps, and Time the reaper.

“I hang 'mid men my needless head,  
Any my fruit is dreams, as theirs is bread:  
The goodly men and the sun-flushed sleeper  
Time shall reap, but after the reaper  
The world shall glean of me, me the sleeper.”

—Bro. Gabriel Knauff, O. P.