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Entre Nous.

FRANCIS THOMPSON'S POETRY.

I.

The Poet.

In his poems Francis Thompson is at first but a shadow. Gradually, as you read, the shadow reveals itself as flesh and blood, a human being who keeps company with you till the end. And the manhood is worshipful; you feel that its true realm is the spiritual world. 'The world knew him not,' has been the thought of many minds.

Francis Thompson died of consumption in November 1907, and was immediately talked of as a wonder, for the intensely sad story of his life had begun to be whispered abroad. Now the proverbial 'nine days' have passed, and he is taken on his merits. Sober judgment but confirms the idea of his being not only one of the greatest of poets, but a man of deeply religious spirit.

He was not a voluminous writer, although in his early London days he scribbled on every available piece of paper: even the discarded account books of Mr. M'Master, his first rescuer, were covered with poetry, and prose. Two moderate-sized volumes of poetry and another of prose papers represent his works.

With the former we would specially deal as more directly revealing Thompson, the man. These poems are so erudite, and at the same time so artistic, that one is filled with amazement at the thought of the author being for a long period almost entirely without books. 'I had no books by me save Æschylus and Blake,' he said in answer to Mr. Wilfrid Meynell's 'You must have had access to many books when you wrote that essay'—'Paganism Old and New,' the first of his work accepted by the editor of *Merry England*.

Where then, or how, did Francis Thompson learn the music of words?—for his song is certainly not of the unpremeditated order. How did he get his mind stored with classic lore to such an extent that the ordinary reader often feels himself unequal to the task of following him? For answer we must go back to the poet's childhood in the house of his father, Dr. Thompson of Preston, and later of Ashton-under-Lyne. One cannot help feeling sorry for the little fellow of Mr. Everard Meynell's biography, who understood girls better than boys, and who never knew 'the technique of being a boy.' His playmates were his sisters; they had common playthings; Frank was even fascinated with their dolls. He made stories about them. 'I dramatized them,' he said long afterwards; 'I fell in love with them; I did not father them; intolerance is justified of her children.' In a sense, it was a lonely childhood, for his father's house was a home of silence and reserve. Reserve early became almost a second nature with Frank. The verses in 'The Fallen Yew' are reminiscent of those far-off days:

Its breast was hallowed as the tooth of eld;
And boys, there creeping unbeheld,
A laughing moment dwelled.

Yet they, within its very heart so crept,
Reached not the heart that courage kept
With winds and years beswept.

And in its boughs did close and kindly nest
The birds, as they within its breast,
By all its leaves caressed.

But bird nor child might touch by any art
Each other's or the tree's hid heart,
A whole God's breadth apart;

The breadth of God, the breadth of death and life!
Even so, even so, in undreamed strife
With pulseless Law, the wife,—

The sweetest wife on sweetest marriage-day,—
Their souls at grapple in mid-way,
Sweet to her sweet may say:

'I take you to my inmost heart, my true!'
Ah, fool! but there is one heart you
Shall never take him to!

The hold that falls not when the town is got,
The heart's heart, whose immured plot
Hath keys yourself keep not![1]

But he was happy. The religion of his home meant a great deal; he felt he had a personal share in it. 'Know you not what it is to be a child?' he asks in the famous essay on Shelley. 'It is to have a spirit yet streaming from the waters of baptism; it is to believe in love, to believe in loveliness, to believe in belief; it is to be so little that the elves can reach to whisper in your ear; it is to turn pumpkins into coaches, and mice into horses, lowness into loftiness, and nothing into everything, for each child has its fairy godmother

[1] *The Works of Francis Thompson*, i. 182.

in its own soul; it is to live in a nutshell and to count yourself the king of infinite space; it is

> To see a world in a grain of sand,
> And a heaven in a wild flower,
> Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
> And eternity in an hour;

it is to know not as yet that you are under sentence of life, nor petition that it be commuted into death. When we become conscious in dreaming that we dream, the dream is on the point of breaking; when we become conscious in living that we live, the ill dream is but just beginning.'[1]

The boy became a dreamer of dreams. A housemaid remembers him on the top of the ladder in the book-cupboard, oblivious to her call to meals; he was making friends with the poets. Referring to those days he says, 'I read Shakespeare, Scott, the two chief poems of Coleridge, and the ballads of Macaulay.' We have his own word for it too that he tried to read Shakespeare for the benefit of his sisters and the servants; but both 'kicked against Julius Cæsar as dry—though they diplomatically refrained from saying so.' If he was then too young to have quite awakened to the poetry of words, 'the beauty of language, the sense of magic in diction, of words suddenly becoming a marvel, and quick with a preternatural life,' those days came later, doubtless at Ushaw Catholic College, to which his father sent him in the hope that he would one day become a priest.

There he was described as 'a timid, shrinking little boy.' He earned no distinction in his classes although he performed his prescribed tasks with more than average success. But there was a certain indolence about him which made itself noticeable, due, one can believe, to the languor that is often a characteristic of the phthisical temperament. It is pathetic beyond speech to read that in the trembling hand of the last months 'he wrote out in big capitals on pages torn from exercise books such texts as were calculated to frighten him into his clothes. "Thou wilt not lie a-bed when the last trump blows"; "Thy sleep with the worms will be long enough," and so on. They were ineffectual. His was a long series of broken trysts—trysts with the sunrise, trysts with Sunday mass, obligatory but impossible; trysts with friends.'[2]

After seven years he returned home from Ushaw, a disappointment to his parents. Wisely gauging the situation, the President wrote to his father that owing to Frank's increasing nervous timidity he felt compelled to concur in the opinion of his director and others that 'it is not the holy will of God that he should go on for the priesthood.' At the same time he recognized Frank's ability, an ability which, but for a certain indolence, would, he felt sure, bring him success in any career. Yet in his walks at Ushaw he saw the sunsets which suggested his 'Ode to the Setting Sun,' and at the sight of a daisy 'all his paths would be strewn with white and gold.' Above all he loved Ushaw's Chapel. *A.M.D.G.*—'To the Greater Glory of God'—was already his pen's motto. It was inscribed on his exercise books, and meant, we believe, an honest dedication.

Next he tried Owens' College, Manchester, and the study of medicine. But the years he spent there certainly did not go to the making of a doctor, for he hated the work. The Manchester years, in fact, make a story of failure and increasing loneliness, for a habit of silence and reserve continued to grow upon him. He did not work; but he read poetry in the public library, and often visited the picture galleries. There he trained for an actor in unreal realities. Long afterwards, he recalled a statue, 'which thrilled my youth in a passion such as feminine mortality was skill-less to instigate. . . . Thither each evening, as twilight fell, I stole to meditate and worship the baffling mysteries of her meaning: as twilight fell, and the blank noon surceased arrest upon her life, and in the vaguening countenance the eyes broke out from their day-long ambuscade. Eyes of violet blue, drowsed-amorous, which surveyed me not, but looked ever beyond, where a spell enfixed them,

> Waiting for something, not for me.

And I was content. Content; for by such tenure of unnoticedness I knew that I held my privilege to worship: had she beheld me, she would have denied, have condemned my gaze. Between us, now, are years and tears; but the years waste her not, and the tears wet her not; neither misses she me or any man. There, I think, she is standing yet; there, I think, she will stand for ever: the divinity of an accident, awaiting a divine thing impossible, which can never come to her, and she knows this not. For I reject the vain fable that the ambrosial creature is really an unspiritual

[1] *The Works of Francis Thompson*, iii. 7.
[2] E. Meynell, *The Life of Francis Thompson*, 32.

compound of lime, which the gross ignorant call plaster of Paris. If Paris indeed had to do with her, it was he of Ida. And for him, perchance, she waits.'[1]

Constitutionally he was phthisical, and borne down by an abnormal languor; his disinclination to do ordinary work grew stronger and stronger, his world was a world of dreams. After an illness during his medical course, de Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater* was put into his hands by his mother. It was her last present to him, for she died soon afterwards. Making the acquaintance of de Quincey through his *Confessions*, Francis Thompson fell under his spell. Love and admiration for the writer led him to taste the drug, and once beginning he had to 'dree his weird.' The case is presented in all fairness by his sympathetic biographer. 'Opium,' he says, '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. On the other hand, it dealt with him remorselessly as it dealt with Coleridge and all its consumers. It put him in such constant strife with his own conscience that he had ever to hide himself from himself, and for concealment he fled to that which made him ashamed, until it was as if the fig-leaf were of necessity plucked from the Tree of the Fall. It killed in him the capacity for acknowledging those duties to his family and friends which, had his heart not been in shackles, he would have owned with no ordinary ardour.'[2]

The one self in him saw and realized the beauty of a life in communion with God, and continually sought after it; the other was like a prisoner bound by chains, powerless to free himself. If under normal constitutional conditions St. Augustine speaks of the truly spiritual life as hard to attain to because of his divided self, what must it have been in the case of Francis Thompson? 'The thoughts wherein I meditated on Thee,' says St. Augustine in his *Confessions*, 'were like the efforts of such as would awake, who yet overcome with a heavy drowsiness, are again drenched therein. Nor had I anything to answer Thee calling to me, "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." And when Thou didst on all sides shew me, that what Thou saidst was true, I, convicted by the truth, had nothing at all to answer, but only those dull and drowsy words, "Anon, anon," "presently," "leave me but a little." But "presently, presently" had no present, and my "little while" went on for a long while; in vain I "delighted in Thy law according to the inner man, when another law in my members rebelled against the law of my mind, and led me captive under the law of sin which was in my members."'[3]

Failing to pass his medical examinations, and lacking the courage necessary to discuss his affairs with his father, he drifted to London. There, if he wrote no tragedy, he enacted one of the deepest. But the self in him that made for righteousness survived, and although cast for a time among the very lowest, Francis Thompson never ceased to feel himself equal to the highest.

So low did he fall that it was as he writes in one of the "Sister Songs":

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 barbèd minutes at me;
Suffered the trampling hoof of every hour
In night's slow-wheelèd car;
Until the tardy dawn dragged me at length
From under those dread wheels; and, bled of strength,
I waited the inevitable last.[4]

God's love never ceased to pursue him. Strangely diverse were the helpers that crossed his path. A kindly Christian bootmaker took him to his home, and gave to the mysterious wanderer not only food, but a home and work. But Francis Thompson proved a failure as a worker. He had grown even more indolent than in the earlier days, for the opium held him with a grip of iron. His benefactor showed great patience with him, but at last, after about four months' service, his hopeless apprentice was dismissed. Again Thompson wandered the streets to suffer an outcast's hunger, and to realize in all its intensity the truth of

[1] E. Meynell, *The Life of Francis Thompson*, 38.
[2] *Ibid.* 156.
[3] *The Confessions of S. Augustine*, 156.
[4] *The Works of Francis Thompson*, i. 36.

General Booth's *In Darkest England.* No wonder the review he wrote of it later was a masterly one.

In all literature there is nothing more touching than the story of how he was befriended by a poor unfortunate girl of the streets. Quoting Mr. Meynell's words: 'When the streets were no longer crowded with shameful possibilities, she would think of the only tryst that her heart regarded, and, a sister of charity, would take her beggar into her vehicle at the appointed place and cherish him with an affection maidenly and motherly, and passionate in both these capacities. Two outcasts, they sat marvelling that there were joys for them to unbury and to share.' 'Weakness and confidence, humility and reverence, were gifts unknown to her except at his hands, and she repaid them with graces as lovely as a child's, and as unhesitating as a saint's. Her sacrifice was to fly from him: learning he had found 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.'[1]

To Mr. and Mrs. Meynell we, in a sense, owe the gift to the world of Francis Thompson the poet. As we read of their rescue of him, and the love and care bestowed upon this 'moth of a man,' it seems natural to believe with James Hinton in the intimate relation of all that happens to the Divine care for us. 'I can see nothing,' he says, 'in all nature but the loving acts of spiritual beings, and know no reason for disbelieving anything that it should be conformable to love to do. It is a glorious world; I do delight in it.'

Mr. and Mrs. Meynell discovered that neither Francis Thompson's happiness, nor his tenderness, nor his sensibility had been marred like his constitution by his experience. 'He will not live,' said the doctor they consulted, 'and you hasten his death by denying his whims and opium.' 'Paganism Old and New,' which led to Mr. Meynell's discovery of him in 1887, was but the beginning of his work. He lived until 1907. Under the direct supervision of his kind guardians he renounced opium, and for the greater part of the years left to him he kept writing for magazines, sometimes prose papers, but more frequently his wonderful poems. The atmosphere of his poems is that of the world beyond the sun, and the language of them, as distinctive as that of Thomas Carlyle, is startling in its strange and musical fitness. A few years before his death, in very weariness he again took to using the drug; he felt that he could not live without it.

All along he remained the man of the 'divided self.' In those later years, if he spent an evening explaining that last August was hot, but this was hotter, his cry really was, 'Where is my laudanum?' 'Nor,' adds Mr. Meynell, 'was his need only physical, his soul too was crying, "Where is my God, my Maker, who giveth songs in the Night? Who teacheth us more than the beasts of the earth, and maketh us wiser than the fowls of Heaven?"' He was the man who in his lodgings in Elgin Avenue called down the kitchen stair for his porridge and his beer, and at the same time the lodger whose prayers the landlady often heard; the poet too who wrote:

> The angels keep their ancient places;—
> Turn but a stone and start a wing!
> 'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangèd faces,
> That miss the many-splendoured thing.
>
> But when so sad thou canst not sadder
> Cry;—and upon thy so sore loss
> Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
> Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.
>
> Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,
> Cry,—clinging Heaven by the hems;
> And lo, Christ walking on the water
> Not of Gennesareth, but Thames![2]

We would hear what such a man has to say of life as he saw it, whether side by side with children, as he often found himself, or in the company of a pure womanhood. We would know also with what eyes he looked upon Nature, and in doing so we shall discover what were his thoughts about God and His Son Jesus Christ.

RECENT POETRY.

Susan Miles.

There does not at first sight seem to be much poetry in *Dunch*, by Susan Miles (Blackwell; 2s. 6d. net). But poetry is not according to length of line or law of rhyme. The sense of fellowship is here, and imagination—the imagination that sees the

[1] *The Life of Francis Thompson*, 83.

[2] *The Works of Francis Thompson*, ii. 226.

general in the particular, the significance of the insignificant. The following lines fairly express the character of the book, though there are deeper notes.

DESPATCHES.

You know everything,
Or nearly everything.
You can do everything,
Or nearly everything.
At least you know all things that I am conscious
Of not knowing,
And can do all things that I would like to do
And cannot do.
You are grown up,
Or nearly grown up,
For they have cut off your curls,
And provided you with stockings
That cover your knees.
My Mother is sad
Because your curls are gone.
She says that they were fine
And golden,
And that your head has now
The appearance of a bullet.
She says that your knees are dimpled
And that stockings
Hide the dimples.
But I am not sad
Because your curls are gone,
Or because your dimples are hidden.
I am proud and exultant
Knowing that you are a man,
Or very nearly a man.
Are you not five years old?
And I, being in myself contemptibly young,
Namely three,
Am yet of an importance,
Seeing that I have a brother
Who is five,
Whose curls have been cut off,
Whose knees are covered
By seemly stockings.

You know everything.
There can be no doubt of it.
Our Nurse has taken us to Church.
We have sat near the back of the Church,
Behind the school children.
The Curate has asked strange questions
And the children have answered them,
Or have not answered them.
The Curate has asked,
'Who was crucified with the Lord Jesus?'
And you have answered boldly
And clearly;
Your voice has rung through the Church
And caused all the school children
To turn in their seats
And gaze at you;
You have answered without a blush,
Without a tremor,
'Two thieves.'
And now we are running home,
Tugging at Nurse's hands,
To find Mother
And tell her what you have done.
You are all wise,
All knowing,
And I, though contemptibly young,
Namely four,
Am yet of an importance,
Seeing that I am, most blessedly,
Your sister.

And why am I, whose own knees have been covered
With seemly stockings these thirty years,
Why am I three years old again this morning,
Or four years old?
It is because you have been mentioned
In despatches.

E. J. Thompson.

Though Mr. E. J. Thompson calls his volume by the homely title of *Waltham Thickets* (Kelly; 3s. 6d. net), there are in it songs of other lands. Three rivers are well known to him—the Thames, the Hugli, and the Tigris. And there are vivid pictures of them all. Take this of the Indian river.

SEPTEMBER, 1914.

A crescent moon o'erhead;
Lightning leapt on the water;
And thought of England's dead
And my brethren called to slaughter
Troubled me, as I went
Over the rain-flushed bent.

Here, it was dusk and dew,
And dark in heaven's hollow
The big fruit-foxes flew,
And the little Indian swallow,
Poised on the waters grey,
Dipt and swooped on her prey.

But from where a wind of death
Through distant fields was blowing
Came waft of a bitter breath,
And crimson Hugli's flowing
I saw, with eyes that swam,
I, even the ghost I am.

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