



1944

Francis Thompson: A Metaphysical Poet

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Recommended Citation

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FRANCIS THOMPSON: A METAPHYSICAL POET

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER
OF ARTS IN LOYOLA UNIVERSITY

JANUARY

1944

VITA AUCTORIS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

John Donne's verse holds a secure place in the estimation of literary critics as prototype of that form of poetry which has by an unfortunate accident been classified "Metaphysical."¹ This distinction at once necessitates printing his name in the history of English verse with bold-faced type, and supplying a feasible analysis of his peculiar genius, together with the names of other lyricists equally vigorous who hail him as their progenitor. The nature of the tradition to which his name is given can be said to be "complex...and intellectual as opposed to the simple...and passionate tradition."²

These abstract characteristics have been markedly concretized in the poetic works of Donne and later poets who consciously or unconsciously employed, with greater or less consistency, the same masterful "method of coping with experience." Interest in this most human form of sensibility is seen to be growing nowadays in the ready welcome given new editions of Donne's verses, and in the similarities drawn between our age and his. For

then, as now, poetry felt its beliefs crumbling beneath it. The problem of achieving order out of chaos lay heavily upon its music. A complex and difficult age called

¹ George Williamson, The Donne Tradition, Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, 1930, 58.

² Ibid., 57.

for a complex and difficult poetry that would be adequate and sincere in resolving a troubled mind. Scepticism was cooling the youthful blood of the Renaissance, equivocation was slipping an interval between the mind and the sense, while disillusion was poisoning the emotions and sapping the vital force.³

The poets constituting this metaphysical tradition manifest, in the main, all three leading features of the verse of Donne: his "tough reasonableness," passionate intensity, and mysticism--which George Williamson calls the trinity of Donne's genius and the signs by which poets in the same tradition are identified. They are marks natural to an age through which coursed the turbulent currents of mystical and rationalistic thought.⁴ Credit is due Donne, not for creating something new in his disciples, but rather for stirring in them something latent in human nature as such.⁵ George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, Thomas Carew, Robert Herrick, Abraham Cowley, Andrew Marvell, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Francis Thompson, T. S. Eliot--all spontaneously seize upon sensuous expression as an indispensable outlet for the Reality of which each is, to a greater or less extent, aware. All are stimulated to project intellectual beauty into a metrical form rather highly imaginative and sensuous, for the simple reason that their thought is inextricably linked to the emotion it arouses and the images which the emotion itself spontaneously suggests. In short, they

3 Ibid., 244.

4 Ibid., 235.

5 Ibid., 234.

make the confession--startling at first--that the profusion of imagery is the natural and only vehicle capable of communicating truth vividly realized.

This too seems to be the opinion of authorities in the field. Time and again Herbert J. C. Grierson in his painstaking studies iterates the same. The Metaphysicals can be known, he says, by their combination of two things: the dialectics of medieval love-poetry and the thread of simplicity inherited from the Classics. Their soul and body, he says, were "lightly yoked and glad to run and soar together."⁶ Edmund Gosse suggests that we get nearest to a definition when we say that the object of the Metaphysicals was "an application of the psychological method to the passions,"⁷ that is, an illustration of personal spiritual experience by means of more tangible and intelligible images drawn from common experience. Alexander Chalmers introduces his fifth volume of the Works of the English Poets with the identical judgment:

For those who have experienced, or who at least understand, the ups-and-downs, the ins-and-outs of human temperament, the alternations not merely of passion and satiety, but of passion and laughter, of passion and melancholy, reflection, of passion earthly enough and spiritual rapture almost heavenly, there is no poet and hardly any writer like Donne. They may even be tempted to see in the

⁶ The Background of English Literature, Chatto and Windus, London, 1925, 144.

⁷ More Books on the Table, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1923, 309.

strangely mixed and flawed character of his style, an index and reflection of the variety and rapid changes of his thought and feeling. ...To express infinity no doubt is a contradiction in terms. But no poet has gone nearer to the hinting and adumbration of this infinite quality of passion, and of the relapses and reactions from passion, than the author of the Second Anniversary, and The Dream, of The Relique and The Ecstasy.⁸

Such is the genius peculiar to all those poets classified as "metaphysical" who in greater or less degree reflect the features of Donne. Grierson, then, needs no apology for himself when he defines metaphysical poetry as a poetry "inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and of the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence."⁹

We may call certain poets "sons of Donne" by reason of radical similarities in their verse. Who, for instance, will question this when he reads Carew's Elegy for Donne written "in so thoroughly Donnean a fashion"?¹⁰ Who cannot help but trace Donne in Crashaw, whose "manifest points would seem to be his spirituality, his ingenuity, and his sensuous emotion"?¹¹ Who can evade Donne in Marvell, whose "most conspicuous and important characteristics are his intensity of feeling, his originality, and subtlety of thought"?¹² Do we not revert to the seventeenth

8 Whittingham, London, 1810, xxxiii.

9 Grierson, 115.

10 Williamson, 204.

11 Katherine Bregy, The Poets' Chantry, Herder, St. Louis, 1912, 49.

12 Pierre Legouis, Donne the Craftsman, Didier, Paris, 1928, 5.

century when we observe in T. S. Eliot such tenuous "distinction between seriousness and levity...striking subtlety and flexibility of tone, and complexity of attitude"?¹³ Do not modify the inference, then, when we see the same evidence in the works of Francis Thompson

...who could gather with full hands all the treasures of his country's song from Shakespeare to Coleridge, and from Donne to Coventry Patmore, breathe into them the spirit of his time and the breath of his own individuality, and give them to the eager, tremulous, questioning twentieth century as a heritage and a hope.¹⁴

Before going into the details of metaphysical poetry, it will be useful to have handy a definite concept of poetry in general. In the words of philosophy, poetry is properly a "divination of the spiritual in the things of sense, which will also express itself in the things of sense."¹⁵ Poetry glimpses an idea "in the flesh, by the point of the sense sharpened by the mind." It searches for the more ultimate reality, "which it is content to touch in any symbol whatsoever." It creates "the mystery of a form, in the metaphysical sense of the word, a radiance of intelligibility and truth, an irradiation of the primal effulgence."¹⁶ This, according to Jacques Maritain, is

13 F. R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry, Chatto and Windus, 1938, 76.

14 Elizabeth Pullen, "Francis Thompson," The Catholic World, CXXVII (Apr. 1928), 38.

15 Jacques Maritain, Art et Scholastique, transl. by J. F. Scanlan, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935, 96.

16 Ibid., 124.

the task of the true poet, the true artist.¹⁷

Needless to say, the job can be undertaken only by a whole man. For only the whole man actually possesses the required gigantic proportions and simplicity of vision, and only he can actualize all the marvelous and, in a sense, divine potential with which his omnipotent Creator has endowed him. For

...the virtue of art, which resides in the intellect, must not only overflow into the sensitive faculties and the imagination, but also require the artist's whole appetitive faculty, his passions and his will....The artist must be in love, must be in love with what he is doing; so that his virtue becomes in truth, in St. Augustine's phrase, ordo amoris, so that beauty becomes connatural to him, bedded in his being through affection, and his work proceeds from his heart and his bowels as from his lucid mind.¹⁸

Only when beauty issues in this way--from the whole man--when beauty has become "connatural" to him, only then will the spirit find its tongue. The result will be genuine poetry which perforce, by reason of its intellectual and passionate charm, demands surrender. For such poetry appeals at once to "the whole man in the integral and indissoluble unity of his double nature, the spiritual and the carnal."¹⁹

Far from confusing the issue with too much philosophy (the very thing for which Johnson takes the metaphysical poets to

17 Ibid., 125

18 Ibid., 48, 49.

19 Ibid., 120, 121.

task), these considerations make the real distinction between poetry and metaphysics reasonably clear. As opposed to the constitutive notes of poetry just enumerated, Maritain offers the galaxy of notes peculiar to metaphysics:

Metaphysics...keeps to the line of knowledge and the contemplation of truth...snatches at the spiritual in an idea, by the most abstract intellection...enjoys its possession only in the secluded retreat of the eternal regions...attains a super-reality in the nature of things...pursues essences and definitions...isolates mystery in order to know it.²⁰

Metaphysics obviously differs, then, from poetry not so much in matter as in manner and purpose. For both incline to the roots of the knowledge of Being,²¹ but in different ways. Metaphysics considers Being as Being; poetry considers Being as Beautiful. This is the reason why Bergson calls poetry "une metaphysique figuree." So the adequacy with which metaphysical poetry fulfills the requirements of genuine poetry is not difficult to see.

The presence of these constituents of true poetry in the songs and sonnets of the typical metaphysical poet, Donne, is verified by a simple analysis. For his works, as all great poetry, were the issue of intense preoccupation with life, love, and death; as the productions of the greater spirits of the Romantic revival, his poetry is "tout traverse de frissons metaphysiques."²² In so concentrated a state are the elements

20 Ibid., 96, 97.

21 Ibid., 228.

22 Grierson, 166.

of poetry jelled in the verse of Donne that, as Grierson says, even the majestic strain of Milton seems faulty beside "the "subtle qualities of vision, rare intensities of feeling, and surprising felicities of expression, in the troubled poetry of Donne."²³ His "endeavour to wed passion and imagination to erudition and reasoning,"²⁴ and the actual success of his endeavour --a tenor of poetry "witty, passionate, weighty and moving"²⁵-- are not alien to the endeavours and achievement of the greatest masters. His are exact exemplification of the requisite poetic qualities. For, as George Saintsbury sees it,

...by far the greater part of his [Donne's] verse is animated by what may be called a spiritualized worldliness and sensuality. ...Always in him are the two conflicting forces of intense enjoyment of the present, and intense feeling of the contrast of that present with the future. He has at once the transcendentalism which saves sensuality and the passion which saves mysticism.²⁶

This is not so true of his satires as it is of his love-lyrics profane and sacred--"strange frontier regions, uttermost isles where sensuality, philosophy, and devotion meet, or where separately dwelling they rejoice or mourn over the conquests of each other."²⁷

For obvious reasons, then, authorities are in agreement in

23 A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, "John Donne," CHEL, MacMillan Co. New York, 1932 IV, 256.

24 Ibid., 255.

25 Ibid., 254.

26 "Introduction," The Poems of John Donne, ed. by E. K. Chambers, Routledge and Sons, London, n. d., xvi-xviii.

27 Ibid., xxiii.

censuring Johnson's censure of Donne and metaphysical poetry.

Williamson, for instance, says pointedly:

Dr. Johnson tried to describe Donne's poetry by its defects, and criticism down to Courthope has tended to follow this path. Metaphysical wit and the conceit get a large share of this condemnatory criticism, which fails to account for the power of Donne and his growing vogue with lovers of poetry.²⁸

Gosse²⁹ and Felix E. Schelling³⁰ are also explicit in disagreement with Johnson.

John Dryden, and not Johnson, is the man responsible for first mis-applying the term "metaphysical," although the latter is commonly accredited with it. Gosse says that Johnson

...borrowed the epithet, no doubt unconsciously, from a great writer who lived with the poets he described, and in his youth had been one of them.³¹

This was Dryden, who "had written that Donne 'affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses.'"³²

What either understood by the term is open to dispute, but the majority of interpreters seem to think that they opposed it to natural fancy. The ancient critics censured Donne's ingenuity, subtlety, and what Johnson brands "the watch for novelty."³³

28 Williamson, 21.

29 Gosse, More Books on the Table, 307.

30 "Introduction," Seventeenth Century Lyrics, Ginn and Co., Boston, 1899, xxiv.

31 Gosse, 308.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

There is truth in Johnson's statement that the metaphysical poets were learned men, creative, probing, and subtle; "but when he says that they could not move the affections, we must vigorously disagree. As regards Johnson's other censures, Williamson assures us that, if the Metaphysicals were wanting in sublimity, "they had a very good substitute;" they admittedly departed from nature sometimes, but only nature as Johnson conceived it; they did not scruple at times to sacrifice elegant and 'fine' diction, because they knew that was not the only criterion for language. In a word, concludes Williamson,

...this is only to say that we know that metaphysical poetry cannot answer to the standards of the neo-classical tradition. It does, however, answer to the broader standards of poetry as a form of art.³⁴

Dissatisfaction over the name "metaphysical" is not an entirely idle complaint, when we see how little justification can be adduced for using it, and how great odium is attached to it. Genuine poetry at its best needs no additional name. But if an adjective is desirable, "ontological" seems to be more accurate and less weirdly connotative, inasmuch as this poetry in the Donne tradition deals with real Being and not chimeras or phenomena. Williamson solves the problem by grouping these poets into what he calls the "Donne tradition," for, as he explains, "after all, affecting the metaphysics is a perilous trait by which to distinguish a group of writers of English

³⁴ Williamson, 238, 239.

poetry."³⁵ It is surprising that other critics, despite Dr. Johnson's mislead, have not arrived at such solid opinion, and acted upon it long before now!

Some contemporaries of Donne understood his genius better than Johnson. "An Elegie upon the Death of the Deane of Pauls" is evidence that the poet Carew "penetrates the secret which Johnson misses altogether."³⁶ It is an estimate of Donne's poetry volunteered by one who was at once sympathetic with Donne's genius and familiar with classical restraint. Thomas Carew mourns over Donne, as though Poetry were widowed by his death; for the prelate-poet's soul

...shot such heat and light,
As burnt our earth, and made our darkness
bright;

he did

...the deepe knowledge of darke truths so
teach,
As sense might judge, what phansie could
not reach;

and by him

...the Muses' garden with pedantique weedes
O'rspred, was purg'd...
And fresh invention planted;

his was not "a mimique fury," nor Anacreon's nor Pindar's, but his very own; he has

...open'd us a mine
Of rich and pregnant phansie, drawne a line

35 Williamson, 227, 228.

36 Ibid., 54.

Of masculine expression;

he refused to "stufte" his lines and "swell the windy page;" so deserving the epitaph:

Here lies a King, that rul'd as hee thought
fit
The universall monarchy of wit;
Here lie two flamens, and both those, the
best,
Apollo's first, at last, the true God's
priest.³⁷

The noteworthy features in Donne's poetry (typical metaphysical poetry) according to Carew are:

sensuous thinking, his revolt against Elizabethan imitation, his introduction of new subject-matter and sources of imagery, his astringent intellect and its masculine music, his fire and giant fancy and subtle verse.³⁸

With this catalogue of merits Carew awards Donne's poetry (and metaphysical poetry, too) "an abler and more modern analysis than either Dryden or Johnson achieved."³⁹

Other contemporary critics of Donne are for the most part non-committal on major issues. As Gosse notes, they restricted their attention to details of scant literary importance and less modern interest. Readers in the seventeenth century, he says, didn't see in "Lycidas," Marvell's "Garden," or in "They Are All Gone into the World of Light," or even in "The Pulley," what we see now.⁴⁰ His opinion is drawn from the early critics'

³⁷ Donne's poetical Works, ed. by Herbert J. C. Grierson, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1912, 346-349.

³⁸ Williamson, 56.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Gosse, 307.

insistent inquiries into the "Epaenitick" or "Bucolick" nature of verses, and their oversight of questions of beauty of expression and sublimity of thought. "There was apparently such universal public insensibility to these finer qualities," he remarks, "that I have sometimes asked myself what it was that encouraged the poets to go on writing so well, and in such multitudes."⁴¹ The only approach to genuine literary criticism seems to have been made in the form of encomiastic introductions written by friends of the poet in an edition of his work.⁴²

But today the state of affairs is different, particularly as regards Donne. His fame for the last hundred years, says Pierre Legouis, has been growing steadily--as if making up for lost time--because of considerable effort spent in eradicating false notions and substituting correct estimates of the poet's talent.

Even the more abstruse and forbidding of his prose works are reprinted, and his poetry has lost much of its proverbial 'obscurity' since fortune, at last kind, provided it with such editors as Professor Norton, Sir Edmund Chambers, and, above all, Professor Grierson. ...More than justice has been done to his earnestness on the one hand, to his extensive and thorough acquaintance with medieval philosophy on the other hand, but the transmutation of both personal experience and recondite learning into lyrical poetry has not been paid its due share of attention.⁴³

41 Ibid., 308.

42 Ibid.

43 Pierre Legouis, 9, 10.

CHAPTER II
METAPHYSICAL POETRY

Before an accurate and comprehensive estimate of metaphysical poetry can be made, and a reliable application to the works of Francis Thompson, a close study of typical metaphysical verse is necessary. To this end we may profitably present the evidence from the works of Donne, the typical metaphysical poet, in three divisions, corresponding to the three elements which authorities have discovered are essential to the poetry of this tradition: logic, passionate intensity, and mysticism.

A consideration of the logic, or "tough reasonableness," in the verse of Donne immediately presupposes that our notion of the relation between logic and beauty in general be clear and correct. For all art and beauty is intellectual inasmuch as "its activity consists in impressing an idea upon a matter."¹ To regale the intellect is a formal constituent of beauty, not only a property, explains Maritain in Art and Scholasticism:

St. Thomas, who was as simple as he was wise, defined the beautiful as what gives pleasure on sight, id quod visum placet. The four words say all that is necessary: a vision, that is to say, an intuitive knowledge, and a joy. The beautiful is what gives joy, not all joy, but joy in knowledge; not the joy peculiar to the act of knowing, but a joy superabounding and overflowing from such an act because of the object known.²

1 Maritain, 9.

2 Ibid., 23.

This fact can be further explained in light of the three conditions assigned to beauty by St. Thomas: integrity, proportion, and brightness or clarity of intelligibility. "So, to say with the Schoolmen that beauty is the splendour of form shining on the proportioned parts of matter is to say that it is a lighting of mind on a matter intelligently arranged."³ It is the mind, continues Maritain, which rejoices in the beautiful, "because in the beautiful it finds itself again, recognizes itself, and comes into contact with its very own light."⁴ Beauty, in fact, is nothing less than the complement of knowledge. For merely to know is sterile, but to know and relish--that is the source of production and truly human activity. "The perception of the beautiful is related to knowledge, but by way of addition 'as its bloom is an addition to youth;' it is not so much a kind of knowledge as a kind of delight."⁵ That is the reason why the perception of the beautiful is, in a sense, proportionate to acuity of intellect, so that "however beautiful a created thing may be, it may appear beautiful to some and not to others, because it is beautiful only under certain aspects which some discover and others do not see."⁶

Of still greater interest is the relationship between Beauty and Being. "Like the one, the true, and the good, it

³ Ibid., 24, 25.

⁴ Ibid.;

⁵ Ibid., 26.

⁶ Ibid., 29, 30.

[Beauty] is being itself considered from a certain aspect...it is being considered as delighting, by the mere intuition of it, an intellectual nature."⁷ So, since where there is being there is also beauty, "beauty belongs to the transcendental and metaphysical order."⁸

Accordingly, without aesthetic logic there simply is no true beauty nor art. Art to be art must be "steeped in logic... in the working logic of every day, eternally mysterious and disturbing, the logic of the structure of the living thing, and the intimate geometry of nature."⁹ Applied to the works of Donne and the other metaphysical poets, aesthetic logic is what is meant by the term "tough reasonableness" or rugged intellectualism. Since, then, the joy produced in the heart by artistic contemplation is "before all intellectual,"¹⁰ there is no ceiling to the intellectual heights to which poetry can soar. For, summarily, it is the office of beauty to actualize the power for enjoyment latent in the intellect.¹¹ That is why every artist to be great must be a genius--supreme beauty requires supreme intellectual content.

The question now to be settled: did Donne enjoy an exceptional intellect, and give evidence of it in his typically

7 Ibid., 30.

8 Ibid., 32.

9 Ibid., 51, 52.

10 Ibid., note 55.

11 Ibid., note 56.

metaphysical creations? His biographers readily testify that he did. In fact, he was thought to be another Pico della Mirandola, who is said rather to have been born wise than made so by study. Donne's was an extraordinarily gifted family and an exceptionally privileged academic education. Grierson significantly remarks that Donne was studious as well as gallant, and even in his early years wrote satires--"harsh, witty, lucid, full of a young man's scorn of fools and low callings, and a young thinker's consciousness of the problems of religion in an age of divided faiths, and of justice in a corrupt world."¹² In these years also his love-songs began to go the rounds of the court.

Williamson draws a sketch of this early period of Donne's life, noting especially the duplex character of his fertile mind. "The most puzzling collision in Donne's mind," he says, "is not that between the old and the new learning, but rather that between the spirit of the Renaissance and the spirit of the Reformation."¹³ Travel in the Latin countries accounts for his sympathy with the pagan sensuality of the Renaissance, whereas his pursuit of theological and philosophical studies explains the other element. In the same sense in which Elizabeth Drew says that the whole social and intellectual force of the Restoration period seems to be incarnated in John Dryden, it can be

¹² Grierson, Background..., 121.

¹³ Williamson, 16.

said that the social and intellectual force of the later Renaissance is concentrated and concretized in Donne.¹⁴

Bearing as a torch the neo-Platonism from Cambridge, he was groping, says one commentator, for "the mystic knowledge, which transfigures without marring everything human, and in his later work he at least glimpses it."¹⁵ The Cambridge School of neo-Platonists "laid special emphasis on the doctrine of the interdependence of soul and body, whence resulted their belief in the religious quality of love."¹⁶ The doctrine is preeminently evident in the works of Donne where religious language and stress of physical detail are fused in his expression of human love.

J. E. Leishman also sees in Donne this tendency to transfiguration, and a little more. Since Donne is a poet, he expresses truth imaginatively, "but, if I may so put it, his imagination always seems to take fire from his intellect."¹⁷

Williamson notes the same phenomenon:

His was one of those prodigious intellects which take all learning for their province, and one of those even rarer minds whose very thinking is poetical. How organic his thinking was appears again in the way in which the most abstract thought becomes a concrete or sentient thing in his poetry, acquires a

14 Discovering Poetry, Norton and Co., New York, 1933, 190.

15 Blanche Mary Kelly, The Well of English, Harper and Bros., 1936, 109, 110.

16 Ibid.

17 The Metaphysical Poets, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1934, 32.

sensuous habitation and a name, and is perceived by us through the lattices of eyes and the labyrinths of ears.¹⁸

As if this were praise not high enough, Williamson says that Donne surpasses even Milton in learning, and "deserves to stand nearest to Shakespeare."¹⁹ Love and religion were the fields in which he ploughed--a soil at once peculiar to this earth and native to heaven also; in those very subjects "which try the understanding most" he "went deepest."²⁰

In his mental expenditures he spent most on the best things, that is, he stressed the intellectual, the finer psychologically expressed conceit, the subtler image, the rarer fusion of passion and feeling with thought and ratiocination.²¹ Obviously, then, Donne's reputation for a masculine line of poetry is based on fact. His whole apperceptive mass of thought and emotion he brought to bear as best he could on each poetic inspiration:

The profound unity of his sensibility is a condition of his amazing power to see resemblances, because the whole content of his mind, so various and extraordinary, is indissolubly one and incredibly connected. Associated with this power, the breadth of his knowledge accounts for those hyperboles which are not prompted by strong feeling or the spirit of paradox. This imaginative distance is what startles us in his conceits and hyperboles, or makes us pause to consider the figure in itself and thus provoke the thought of self-consciousness. The nature of his mind, with its unity in variety,

18 Williamson, 49, 50.

19 Ibid., 47.

20 Ibid.

21 Grierson, The Background..., 118.

also conditions his use of images drawn from daily experience or scientific knowledge.²²

Like Bacon, he "took all knowledge for his province, but he has little interest in knowledge as such."²³ Even as the ancient Greeks, he saw things steadily and saw them whole--and responded to them steadily and wholly, with a body shot through with mind. "His love of woman, and later his love of God is knit up with the whole of his apprehension of the sensuous and intellectual worlds."²⁴ It is linked substantially with everything else: the physical universe, the court, law, the church, trade, the sciences, cynicism and ecstasy, lust and mystical passion, anger, fear, jealousy, disgust, and perfect peace.²⁵ We see, then, there is no exaggeration in Gosse's brief summation that "the mental force beneath the rough mode of expression is Titanic."²⁶

Writers of elegies at his death seem to be obsessed with the outstanding sharpness of his mind:

He must have wit to spare....
He must have learning plenty.²⁷

The world witless now that Donne is dead.²⁸

Prodigy of wit and piety.²⁹

Rich soul of wit and language.³⁰

22 Williamson, 49, 50.

23 Drew, 188.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 The Life and Letters of John Donne, Dodd, Mead and Co., New York, 1899, I, 333.

27 Dr. C. B. of O, "On Dr. Donne," Works of the English Poets, ed. by Alexander Chalmers, Whittingham, London, 1810, V, 211.

28 Henry Valentine, "An Elegy...", ibid.

When wit and he took flight
 On divine wings, and soared out of your
 sight.

...temptingly sugared all the health he gave.³¹

Appraisals such as these indicate why Williamson makes consistent reference to the "argument," the "dialectic of passion," the "close intellectual structure," the "tough evolution of thought which marks Donne," and concludes that "there is no more striking trait of the metaphysical lyric than the brain work evident in its images and structure."³² Elsewhere he says that "the reasoning soul of Donne's verse is...the principal source of its peculiarities, its glories, and defects."³³

Grierson, not content merely to mention Donne's unusual intellectual fibre, probes into its causes and properties. Donne's "deep reflective interest in the experiences of which his poetry is the expression, and the new psychological curiosity with which he writes of love and religion" partially explain his metaphysical bent, as well as does his scholasticism.³⁴ His works are nothing more rare than "Epicurus or St. Thomas passionately apprehended and imaginatively expounded."³⁵ To the European fashion of elaborating images Donne "brought not only a full-blooded temperament and acute mind, but a vast and growing store of the same scholastic learning, the same Catholic theo-

29 Sidney Godolphin, "Elegy...", ibid., 213.

30 H. K., "To the Memory...", ibid., 210.

31 Chudleigh, "On Dr. John Donne...", ibid., 213.

32 Williamson, 241, 242.

33 Ibid., 46.

34 Grierson, The Background..., 116.

35 Ibid.

logy, as controlled Dante's thought, but jostling already with the new learning of Copernicus and Paracelsus."³⁶ These and the additional fact that Donne trafficked in a court where to produce "erudite and transcendental, subtle and seraphic compliments"³⁷ found favor with nobility and royalty, and was an almost necessary means of insuring one's rank, account somewhat for the character of his mental growth and the tenor of his expression.

Such, then, is the nature of Donne's intellectual power, according to his biographers and research scholars of that period of English literature. In his poetry, as we shall now see, he actually offers to the public the science he has tracked --immediately experienced reality of things and their eternal nature.

His extraordinary intellectual power Donne put to deliberate use against the chicanery in Elizabethan verse. Because his intellectual energy was naturally at odds with the customary Elizabethan facility, "he represents the reaction against the euphuistic sentimentality of the Elizabethans."³⁸ To be sure, he played with thoughts, as Sir Walter Scott complains, but not as the Elizabethans had played with words; in his play he had to think. Not mere embroidery, his images were intrinsic to his

36 Ibid., 124.

37 Ibid., 161.

38 Sidney Dark, Five Deans, Harcourt, Brace and Co., New York, 1928, 65.

feeling and ratiocinations. They are the inevitable vehicle of his wit which "produces the astringent effect which draws to his verse the epithets of harsh and rugged; this astringency was part of the natural response of his mind to the ever fatal facility of Spenserianism."³⁹ Intellect and meaning were so paramount with him that only his intense emotion was able to transform this astringency, as with a magic wand, into his lilt-ing love-song.⁴⁰ How contrary is this criticism to that of Johnson! He condemned the Metaphysicals for wanting merely to display their learning.⁴¹ What is true is that Donne was, as is said of Proust, "a writer who has pushed analysis to the point when it becomes creative."⁴²

Nor did he ever sacrifice unity of structure and mood to analysis. The seventeen lines of "The Apparition," as Pierre Legouis notes, are proof of that:

Donne never wrote anything stronger than 'The Apparition,' and one could well contend that the strict economy of words ensured by the close-fitting metrical garment is the chief secret of its strength. Any syllable added anywhere, metri gratia, would make it less tense.⁴³

His verse is almost syllogistic in its sequence of thought and stanza.⁴⁴ Consider, for example, "Sweetest Love I Do Not Go,"

39 Williamson, 42, 43.

40 Ibid.

41 Samuel Johnson, The Lives..., Bentley, London, 1823, VI, 19.

42 Ibid., 39.

43 Pierre Legouis, 28.

44 Williamson, 105.

where he analyses leave-taking.⁴⁵ No wonder Williamson says that the thought of Donne gives an almost "mathematical basis to the music of his emotions."⁴⁶ "The Extasie" is another instance:

Except for the implied personification of the body regarded apart from the soul, the language is free from figure; there is no confusion of thought. There is the distinctively Donnean employment of ideas derived from physical and speculative science.⁴⁷

Donne provides one example after another "of analytic thought achieving poetic synthesis."⁴⁸ As Williamson says:

We shall not be wrong if we conclude that the conceit is one of the principal means by which Donne chained analysis to ecstasy. ...The nature of the minor term in his Radical Image made the ugly and trivial available for poetry, and opened a mine of realistic possibilities which his contemporaries too often were unable to fuse into a compelling metaphorical relation.⁴⁹

In "The Canonization" also impassioned subtlety is the rule, for "here Donne the lover turns to good account the learning of Donne the schoolman."⁵⁰ The main thing to remember is that Donne deliberately used his thought as an organic constituent of his verse; that it was a substantial part of his art, and not accidental as Johnson would have us believe. One critic gives the good example, "A Valediction: of Weeping." In this

45 Ibid., 39, 40.

46 Ibid.

47 Felix E. Schelling, 17th Century Lyrics, Ginn, Bost., xxx.

48 Williamson, 34.

49 Ibid.

50 Pierre Legouis, 55-61.

...his round tears are coins because they bear her image reflected in them,--they bear his whole world reflected in them, therefore they are worlds; they are globes made by a map-maker, and his tears are the sea drawn up by her the moon; and if she weeps too there will be too much sea and this world will be drowned....The whole thing explodes with a passionate outcry and a familiar image: 'O more than moon!'⁵¹

There is scarcely any poem of Donne's which has not a magnificent opening, lucid evolution of thought, and logically aesthetic finish. How does this evidence square with the judgment of Johnson?⁵² Of course later imitators, Abraham Cowley for example, have not all the intellectual and passionate intensity which recommends Donne. "The long wrestle between reason and the imagination has ended in the victory of reason, of good sense,"⁵³ but for this decadence Donne is in no wise to blame.

At this juncture of the thesis begins a detailed account of the intellectual quality of Donne's verse, that is to say his wit and his use of the conceit, as typical of the intellectual quality of all metaphysical poetry.

To begin with, the wit of Donne is definitely poetic--"a profound sweep of passion and imagery and imaginative surprise" to an underlying metaphysical reality.⁵⁴ In the estimation of Grierson, as in that of De Quincey, Donne's "combination of

51 J. E. V. Crofts, "John Donne," ESEA, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1937, XXII, 142.

52 Johnson, 21, 22.

53 Grierson, The Background..., 164, 165.

54 Williamson, 155.

dialectical subtlety with weight and force of passion" is fresh, pungent, rugged at times, and exceptionally felicitous in expression.⁵⁵ His wit is generally flavored by his engaging fancy, as, for example, in "The Anniversarie." He allows that all kings and beauties and even the sun pass with time and "to their destruction draw," but

Only our love hath no decay;
This, no tomorrow hath, nor yesterday.

He rejoices too over the fact he and his beloved are more secure than any monarch, for

Who is so safe as wee? Where none can doe
Treason to us, except one of us two.

Are we to say with Johnson that his wit is merely the most heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together? Johnson himself suggests the refutation of his opinion when he admits: "Their attempts were always analytic; they broke every image into fragments."⁵⁶ This is merely to admit the rational basis of their wit. For such breakage demands the recognition of many relationships between things.⁵⁷ When in Donne's verse this recognition tickles our fancy, it is called wit; when it stirs our sensibility, imagination. In either case, it is definitely rational and aesthetically justifiable. According to T. S. Eliot, this wit is nothing but a "tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace," and is ever evident in the evolution of

55 Grierson, Donne's Poetical Works, xxx.

56 Williamson, 31.

57 Ibid.

imitators. Crashaw and Cowley, for example, succeed partially in achieving the same result, but with variations. "Cowley's development has its parallel in Donne's 'Canonization,' while Crashaw's development goes back to Donne's 'Valediction: of Weeping,' which certainly represents Donne's most individual way of thinking."⁶⁰ However much they may resemble their model, yet they can never be mistaken for him. They default in his "passionate, intellectual, and mystical conception of life and love and death."⁶¹ The shell is there when often the kernel is missing; "the fashion of metaphysical wit remains...when the spirit that gave it colour and music is gone."⁶² When wit ceases to be intrinsic to the verse, when it is not "inherent in the fibre of the thought," it ceases to be metaphysical wit.⁶³ Granted that this wit is astringent because "created by a tension between reason and knowledge," still it fails not to be "highly inaminative and profoundly moving in its revelation."⁶⁴ In short, "it must be born in an agitated mind" which is bound tightly to bone, flesh, and nerve. "Only Shakespeare among Elizabethan song-writers and sonneteers can show anything like the depth and range of feeling and psychological perception that we find in Donne."⁶⁵ As instanced in "Lovers' Infiniteness," logic, psychology, music, and emotional cognition can be

60 Ibid., 187.

61 Ibid., 189.

62 Grierson, The Background..., 165, 166.

63 Williamson, 185.

64 Ibid., 186.

65 Ibid., 40.

compassed by a man like Donne in four lines:

If yet I have not all thy love,
 Deare, I shall never have it all,
 I cannot breath one other sigh, to move;
 Nor can intreat one other teare to fall.

How intimate Donne's wit is to the conceit and surprise, how intellectual and somewhat magic, is evident to any serious reader of even a small number of his poems.⁶⁶

The conceit has been mentioned as the customary vehicle of Donne's wit. A consideration of this staple of his verse calls for special attention to the terms: concretization, rhetorical shock, structural value, and "radical image."

First of all, concretization may be practically defined as that method the poet uses to express his inspiration so that it ceases to be esoteric and abstract, but becomes instead an unmistakable reality which all who wish may touch, taste, and see. An ideosyncratic thought is reduced, so to say, into the common denominator of sense perception possessed alike by all men; it is a process of sensualization.

Although beauty essentially is the object of intelligence, it should also by rights come within the domain of the senses.⁶⁷ For although "man can certainly enjoy purely intelligible beauty ...the beautiful which is connatural to man is that which comes to delight the mind through the senses and their intuition."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ibid., 78.

⁶⁷ Maritain, 23, 24.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

This requirement is quite legitimate and most important to poetry, which "always endeavors to arrest you, and to make you continuously see a physical thing, to prevent you gliding through an abstract process,"⁶⁹ in order that by the slower and more difficult path you may re-experience more exactly the curve of the poet's feeling. Not a phenomenon peculiar to poets only, or artists in general, it is, as Newman says, a property of human nature itself "to be more affected by the concrete than by the abstract."⁷⁰

The Metaphysicals capitalized on this disposition of human nature; it was their secret. The commerce between their emotions and intellect and sensuous expression was constant. "For poets in this tradition, love strikes fire in the intellect and philosophy itself becomes the language of adoration."⁷¹ That explains how Donne was not trying to illumine with conceits as with fireworks, but endeavoring to ignite beacons in the minds of others from the blaze in his own. "The astonishing daring of Donne's images is not born of the impulse to decorate, but of the impulse to leap straight to the heart of his matter."⁷²

Donne's followers succeed, some more some less, in imitating his use of the conceit. Andrew Marvell, although a

⁶⁹ T. E. Hulme, quoted by Williamson, 86.

⁷⁰ John Henry Newman, Gram. of Assent, New York, 1870, 35.

⁷¹ Williamson, 137.

⁷² Ibid., 195.

Puritan, reflects enough of "the persuasion of his Latin culture" and "the urgency of his metaphysical sensibility" to escape the fate accorded Milton's less sensuous works, just as Donne had "combined the sensuous strain and urbane wit of the Latin poets with the dialectics of medieval love poetry."⁷³ For Marvell's ratiocinations, colloquial directness, and passionate intensity, as in his "Nymph and the Fawn," the conceit is an able agent.⁷⁴ In the "Vertue," "The Collar," and "Church-monuments" of Lord Herbert of Cherbury we find the conceit used as in Donne, together with Donne's "impassioned geometry, the mixture of philosophy and emotion, and the chain of reasoning."⁷⁵ But there is also noticed a certain cooling and moderation of the sensuous perception peculiar to the master.⁷⁶

Dramatic language is necessary to report human events adequately--and that is the necessity for symbolism, for symbolic form is always dramatic. "When the poet tells us to 'gather rosebuds while ye may,' we may indeed say that he conjures up all 'sweet and pleasant things,' but what he really conjures up is not expressed in these abstract terms."⁷⁷ To deliver his message effectively, the poet first concretizes. He lifts the things of this world out of their practical reality, in order to make them real and active again in language.

⁷³ Ibid., 150.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 151.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 136.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 137.

⁷⁷ W. M. Urban, *Language and Reality*. MacMillan, N. Y., 1939, 465.

This is just another definition of metaphysical poetry, of which Donne's verse is an example, for reality and activity are as much in his lyrics as they were in his life. When come of age, he stepped into a considerable fortune, and "mingled eagerly with the world of London and with the Court."⁷⁸ He took part in the naval warfare under Sir Walter Raleigh, and volunteered for the Island Voyages. Such was the background from which he drew his concrete language.

A curious feature of his sensuous expression is the shock it not infrequently precipitates.⁷⁹ This reaction is due to the sudden flash of truth from an unexpected quarter. Here again his biography parallels the dash of his verse, for audacious hyperboles and intellectual somersaults are but natural accompaniments of his uncommon education; his emotional experience has its counterpart in the artful lunges and spirals of his song. "The contrast of single words, the sudden juxtaposition of ideas, or the compulsion of a neutral term into a powerful metaphorical relation" are responsible for this phenomenon. "Such an example as 'O More Than Moon' is both ingenious and imaginative, a combination that Donne and his followers often achieved with astonishing and beautiful results. It is in such combination that the conceit attains to high poetic value."⁸⁰ Such a way of writing came natural to Donne. He saw in this

⁷⁸ Gosse, The Life and Letters..., 23-52.

⁷⁹ Williamson, 197.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

"lyric expression of personal experience" an effective opponent to the Elizabethan papier-mache.⁸¹

The shock, then, is not a mark of insufficient skill. It is an instance of preferring reality, to the appearance of reality.⁸² It is deliberately caused or knowingly permitted for a desired effect. This desired effect is not to be brutal or fantastic, but to be exact.⁸³ It makes the unknown known by the discovery of resemblances to something familiar.

There are specimens of the grosser as well as the more delicate variety of shock. "The Flea" is an instance of the former,⁸⁴ "The Garden" of the latter.⁸⁵

A scrutiny of the conceit raises a question about its nature. Does it "by thought exclude feeling, or does it through thought embody feeling in some new, individual, and subtle way"?⁸⁶ The latter seems to be the truer conception. For neither Donne nor the majority of the other metaphysical poets separate image from meaning; rather they subordinate one to the other.⁸⁷ This view is contrary to Johnson's. For although "Dr. Johnson's charge that wit was used to show the author's ingenuity and learning is too often true,"⁸⁸ the fault is not to be

81 *Ibid.*, 30.

82 Maritain, 189.

83 *Ibid.*, 192.

84 Pierre Legouis, 75.

85 Grierson, *The Background...*, 142.

86 Williamson, 81, 82.

87 *Ibid.*, 89.

88 *Ibid.*, 27.

restricted to the Metaphysicals alone, but recognized wherever the conceit has appeared. It should be reprimanded "by the general standards of English poetry, not accepted as the defective virtue of the metaphysical school."⁸⁹ With good reason has the conceit been compared to an electric wire. For just as the resistance of the wire increases the heat of the current, so the retarding of comprehension by the conceit effects the exact curve of Donne's idea.⁹⁰

'Sons' of Donne, as intimated, were not always as successful as their father in this use of the conceit, but their achievement is worthy of notice. They sport the same fashion of using esoteric images, and of combining the images with colloquial language.⁹¹ The younger brother of Lord Herbert of Cherbury, George Herbert, for example, transferred to religious poetry Donne's talent in love-lyrics. Herbert's conceits are "ingenious, erudite,...indiscriminate," and unconfined. "He would speak of sacred things in the simplest language and with the aid of the homeliest comparisons."⁹²

In Marvell, too, the metaphysical conceit is valuable structurally and decoratively, so that Williamson speaks of his poetry as porcelain-like.⁹³ This quality "is capable of producing the most extraordinary emotional connections for slight

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 84.

⁹¹ Drew, 189.

⁹² Grierson, *The Background...*, 148, 149.

themes, or the most enamel-like finish for iron thoughts."⁹⁴

Then he contrasts him with Henry Vaughan.

Vaughan is responsible for that engaging image:

I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great Ring of pure and endless light
All calm, as it was bright.

Here is an excellent example of Donne's conceit and lyrical magic.

Thomas Carew is a metaphysical ornament of the court, with as deep thought and scant suggestion of it as Donne himself.⁹⁵ In "Ask Me No More" he uses all of his special talent to the full--"conceits, humorous, naughty, extravagant, fantastic, frigid." As the rest of his kin, he reveals the old in new form. He will "light or stumble upon some thought which reveals a fresh intuition into the heart, or states an old plea with new and prevailing force."⁹⁶

For Richard Crashaw, at once famous and infamous for his metaphors about Mary Magdalene's eyes, the conceit "brings an intellectual element which fetters and locks up fast in a powerful precision the subtle and mystical emotions."⁹⁷ As Herbert represents more of Donne's reason, Crashaw is said to represent more of his ecstasy.⁹⁸ L. C. Martin in a gratifying edition of

⁹³ Williamson, 153, 154.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 158.

⁹⁵ Grierson, The Background..., 141.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 138.

⁹⁷ Williamson, 121.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 112.

Crashaw's poetical works cites "On a Foul Morning..." as a compendium of all of the poet's exceptional talent in handling the conceit. Here he lists the qualities, redolent of Donne: "The peculiar lightness, energy, and limpidity of expression, ... the comparative simplicity of thought, ... imagery ... extravagant ... genuinely sensuous ... pictorial effect."⁹⁹

The trouble in past criticisms of Donne seems to be that he has always been too new for his critics; not until our day has he been judged by minds who first try to be sympathetic before being critical--who recognize that we must judge work on the basis of the purpose in the mind which conceived it. The conceit, for example, has usurped the attention merited by other aspects of the poet's art.¹⁰⁰ Nor has even the conceit been accorded its proper unbiased criticism. Usually it has been reprehended for being merely decorative, over-emphatic, inaccurate, whereas the opposite is really true. It is not in itself bad, but "runs the added dangers that always attend the daring use of language in the effort to force it into meaning."¹⁰¹

The conceit is most valuable and defensible as a structural item. True, the Metaphysicals broke most images into fragments, but not for the sake of iconoclasm; they subtly elaborated a passionately conceived paradox, because they could see the little

⁹⁹ Martin, The Poems...of Richard Crashaw, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1927, lxvii, lxviii.

¹⁰⁰ Pierre Legouis, 12.

¹⁰¹ Williamson, 107.

in the great, and the grand in the insignificant.¹⁰² For Donne "simplicity would be affectation."¹⁰³ So he composed verses in his unaffected manner, using the expanded or condensed conceit as a natural structure. Complexity in art makes for self-consciousness only when the complexity is unnatural.

In Donne, the conceit is not a mere exposition of a comparison or contrast, but rather a logical evolution of thought based on rapid associations.¹⁰⁴ This "telescoping of images and multiplied associations is characteristic of...Shakespeare" too.¹⁰⁵ It makes for vitality of language; that is why great art finds it almost indispensable. If the extended conceit requires extraordinary mental application to appreciate it, that is evidence that its first office is expression and not ornament.¹⁰⁶

The condensed conceit is also of tremendous poetic value. "The Compass" is a classic example of the extended type, whereas the condensed is exemplified in "The Extasie."

Where, like a pillow on a bed,
A pregnant banke swel'd up, to rest
The violets reclining head,
Sat we two, one anothers best.
Our hands were firmly cimented
With a fast balme, which thence did spring,
Our eye-beams twisted, and did thred

102 Cf. Johnson, 49.

103 Grierson, CHEL, 249.

104 T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," Selected Essays, Harcourt, Brace and Co., New York, 1938, 242.

105 Ibid., 243.

106 Williamson, 88, 89.

Our eyes, upon one double string;
 So to entergraft our hands, as yet
 Was all the meanes to make us one,
 And pictures in our eyes to get
 Was all our propagation.

Here the image is the very body of the thought; or, in other words, from analysis Donne recreates surprising synthesis, as if the conceit were "a microscope held over pulsing emotions."¹⁰⁷

His resources were the best possible for proper use of the conceit, for they were exact and various.¹⁰⁸ He consistently reacts with such intensity that whatever sound he utters begins to froth or effervesce, or sing out boldly as on a clear cold night. Not only in his pagan love-lyrics, but also in his religious poetry "there are the same arresting phrases and staccato, medieval, and metaphysical conceits; there is the same packed verse with its bold, irregular fingering and echoing vowel sounds."¹⁰⁹ So much for Donne's and the Metaphysicals' rugged intellectualism!

A second element discovered consistently in the works of the metaphysical poets, and accordingly rated as distinctive and essential, is passionate intensity. To treat this note adequately, certain details must be investigated: the integral sensibility or sincerity of the metaphysical poet (typified in Donne), his colloquial and fresh diction, his music from rougher

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 31, 32.

¹⁰⁸ Crofts, 137.

¹⁰⁹ Grierson, The Background..., 131, 132.

metres, and love-songs.

To begin the discussion of Donne's sincerity, Gosse supplies a leading sentence:

Poems are not written by influence or movements or sources, but come from the living hearts of men. Fortunately, in the case of Donne, one of the most individual of poets, it is possible to some extent to reproduce the circumstances, the inner experiences, from which his intensely personal poetry flowed.¹¹⁰

His poetry is sincere, then, for it is congruent with his intensely emotional life.

Johnson denies all the Metaphysicals this credit.¹¹¹ His opinion, however, does not seem to correspond with that of other scholars. Consider only a few of the judgments of literary men who have given special study to metaphysical poetry. First, Gosse:

We read Donne to little purpose if we do not perceive that he was, above all things, sincere. His writings, like his actions, were faulty, violent, a little morbid even, and abnormal. He was not, and did not attempt to be, an average man. But actions and writings alike, in their strangeness, their aloofness, were unadulterated by a tinge of affectation.¹¹²

This estimate is based on knowledge of the poet's whole life and aesthetic output. Far from forgetting the important fact that Donne at twenty-four was singularly unfettered and autonomous in

¹¹⁰ Grierson, The Background..., 120.

¹¹¹ Johnson, 21.

¹¹² Gosse, The Life and Letters..., 55-84.

matters of family, fortune, and religion, speculation, pleasure, and conscience, Gosse cautions the reader of Donne's Songs and Sonnets and Elegies to "remember...that we have to do with no simple pastoral swain, but with one of the most headstrong and ingenious intellects of the century."¹¹³ From Walton we know he was "by nature highly passionate...a type of the Renaissance young man." With this nature he slowly rose from the evolution of his own vita sexualis with its agonies and errors, to "those spiritual heights in which he so glorified the grace of God."¹¹⁴ His poetry, as a perfect recording disc, registers these crests and troughs of emotional and intellectual experience.

Next, Grierson says of Donne, that

...in virtue of his hot-blooded sincerity of feeling his poetry reveals on a closer study a greater complexity of moods, a wider dramatic range, than the first impression suggests, so much so that one comes at moments to the conviction that his poetry is a more complete mirror than any other one can recall of love as a complex passion in which sense and soul are inextricably blended.¹¹⁵

This comment is nothing if not a confession of the realistic and curiously sincere nature of Donne's verse.

T. S. Eliot points out that, if it is true Milton and Dryden are sometimes artificial because they do not look into their

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Grierson, CHEL, 145.

hearts and write, it is likewise true that Donne "looked into a good deal more than the heart."¹¹⁶ He looked, "into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts." This accounts for what he calls "the massive music of Donne,"¹¹⁷ the "direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling," which by its very nature renders duplicity and superficiality highly improbable because impractical.¹¹⁸ The questionably laudatory adjectives "metaphysical," "witty," "quaint," and "obscure" have no more place when we speak of the Metaphysicals at their best than when we speak of any other serious poet.¹¹⁹

Leishman testifies to the sincerity of Donne when he comments that "the most remarkable quality of the poems...is their realism."¹²⁰ Leavis remarks this too when he says that "with... Donne we end a period when the intellect was immediately at the tips of the senses," for in Donne "sensation became word and word sensation."¹²¹

Williamson seems preoccupied with the damage Johnson's misleading criticism has done the Metaphysicals on this point, and is at pains to repair it as far as possible. He insists that

116 Eliot, 250.

117 Ibid.

118 Williamson, 23.

119 Ibid.

120 Leishman, The Metaphysical Poets, 22.

121 Leavis, New Bearings..., 80.

"the metaphysical poets...certainly produced vigorous and novel blossoms with vital roots in sincerity."¹²² Their intellectual intensity itself receives its drive from nothing if not their unified sensibility. Their puns, even in divine verse suggest how completely the poet was present in every thought and feeling. Accordingly Donne might have said of himself what he declared of Elizabeth Drury, that his body thought. For him, thoughts were not thoughts unless proved upon his pulse. This natural way of thinking recalls the somewhat similar trait in Keats, who, in his preference for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts, confessed that axioms in philosophy did not become axioms until they were proved upon our pulses. How can anyone say Donne is insincere when his whole psychological method of "fidelity to emotion as he finds it," and his "recognition of the complexity of feeling and its rapid alterations and antithesis" is the burden of his verse?¹²³ Critics who fail to hear the ring of sincerity in expressions of such integrated sensibility are surely victims of confusion.¹²⁴

We have already examined into the "thought" of Donne, but the relation of his "thought" to his "feeling" merits further study; granted his "intellectual texture," what of his "sudden splendours and his pervading glow"?¹²⁵ Why is Donne at once

122 Williamson, 236.

123 Ibid., 34, 35.

124 Ibid., 242.

125 Ibid., 193.

"weightier, more complex, more suggestive of subtle and profound reaches of feeling"?126

Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think, but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.127

So could Donne's sensibility assimilate and synthesize any kind of experience. This is the answer to our question. "We are always conscious of the leap and throb of 'the naked thinking heart' which he presses beneath his trembling fingers."128

"Only this sensuous and emotional apprehension of thought can account for the extraordinary mingling of what Donne learned from books with what he learned from life."129 When he set to work, then, to put on paper what he thought and felt, his verbal equivalents were as bizarre as his experience.

Ordinarily we think that knowledge in poetry has been consciously vitalized by the poet; but with Donne knowledge must have come living into his mind....A mingling so spontaneous and natural that he finds all he knows blended with his love and religion,

126 Grierson, The Background..., 143.

127 Eliot, 247.

128 Gosse, The Life and Letters..., II, 290.

129Williamson, 48.

and all he has lived part and parcel of what he knows. Handling ideas must have been almost a physical experience to Donne, like caressing a shoulder or drinking wine.¹³⁰

His theme in any given poem is no other than his own mood, whether as lover, friend, or feeble mortal; and his verse is simply the recording of his analysed reaction, this interior response of his soul to vigorous stimuli.¹³¹ Stocked with "a complex imaginative temperament, a swift and subtle intellect, a mind stored with the minutiae of medieval theology, science and jurisprudence," he said what he pleased, what he felt; and his poetry, as a result, has both sincerity and strength.¹³²

Because he was a realist in the good sense, Donne was metaphysical. For whereas some poets are said to have held a mirror up to nature, "Donne shivered the glass, and preserved a reflection from every several fragment."¹³³ Not from Tytirus or lyrical fauns, but from traffic, "from the humdrum professional employments of his own age, from chemistry, medicine, law, mechanics, astrology, religious ritual"¹³⁴ he drew his pictures of the human soul. In this procedure he was new, because he was entirely realistic. From such a convenient supply-house he drew his images without rationing or stint. He exercised the right to make use of any material which seems to the poet

¹³⁰Ibid.

¹³¹Grierson, The Background..., 132, 133.

¹³²Grierson, CHEL, IV, 244-249.

¹³³Gosse, The Life and Letters..., 340.

¹³⁴Ibid.

significant. He quickened the movement of verse by injecting into song direct and individual contacts with life. Each poem was the "harmonious echo of that intimate wedding of passion and argument which is the essential quality of the metaphysical lyric."¹³⁵ The man's life and his work are the same reality under two different appearances. He may have covered in his poetry untraversed stretches in the human soul, but always realistically and from personally acquired knowledge.

Another indication of Donne's sincerity is his colloquial and fresh diction. His "blend of the colloquial and the bizarre shows that he writes as one who will say what he has to say without regard to conventions of poetic diction or smooth verse."¹³⁶ He could be gross and he could be delicate. Those who admired his style enough to imitate it, learned to a void mellifluousness as deception; poverty of thought was no excuse for conventional sweetness. What Coventry Patmore says of poets in general¹³⁷ may be particularly applied to Donne, that we like to read a man who we know has something to say, no matter how much he stumbles in the saying.

Precisely because Donne insisted on expressing himself exactly and sincerely he has often been rated obscure. Here, as in Browning, obscurity is not intentional but incidental.

135 Grierson, CHEL, IV, 244-249.

136 Grierson, The Background..., 128.

137 Coventry Patmore, "Poetical Integrity," Principle in Art, Bell and Sons, London, 1912, 48, 49.

He is not elliptical, but only complex in sentence structure. Difficulty with Donne is justified only by careless reading.¹³⁸ For "when forked flashes of fancy strike, they stun us with the very energy of their motion," provided we have paid serious attention to his lines. Moreover, "as their light spreads out we see broad sweeps of thought which a moment before were buried in darkness."¹³⁹ Such a characteristic has much more to recommend it than the glazed fancies of the Elizabethans.

The homespun diction we find often in Donne is contrary to the more elegant tastes of his predecessors. No one has pointed out more truly than Carew, Donne's scorn of outworn ornament. Donne stopped borrowing.

Donne's diction is not always brusquely direct, but is sometimes magnificent. This quality is what excited Coleridge to exclaim, "I should never find fault with metaphysical poems if they were all like this [The Extasie] or but half as excellent."¹⁴⁰ No wonder Grierson states that "if purity and naturalness of style is a grace, they [the Metaphysicals] deserved well of the English language."¹⁴¹

Another manifestation of Donne's sincerity, and one which seems partially effected by his insistence on colloquial and

138 Drew, 82-84.

139 Williamson, 51, 52.

140 Pierre Legouis, 67.

141 Grierson, The Background..., 137.

fresh diction, is his music from rugged metres.

In poetry such as Spenser's, more sensuous than passionate, the musical flow, the melody and harmony of line and stanza, is dominant, and the meaning is adjusted to it at the not infrequent cost of diffuseness....In Shakespeare's tragedies the thought and feeling tend to break through the prescribed pattern till blank verse becomes almost rhythmical prose, the rapid overflow of the lines admitting hardly the semblance of pause. This is the kind of effect Donne is always aiming...bending and cracking the metrical pattern to the rhetoric of direct and vehement utterance....To those who have ears that care to hear, the effect is not finally inharmonious....For Donne... is striving to find a rhythm that will express the passionate fullness of his mind, the fluxes and refluxes of his moods.¹⁴²

Other authorities too have the same comment to make.

Pierre Legouis says that instead of deserving hanging for not keeping accent, Donne merits praise for reverting to a "freedom that English poetry had lost for less than twenty years."¹⁴³

Emile Legouis is of the same opinion, commending Donne's "lapses to the expressive spoken tongue, in defiance of the convention of poetic rhythm."¹⁴⁴ Williamson consistently approves Donne's "haunting tune,"¹⁴⁵ "the extravagance and rough accents," and the passion which burned away the dross.¹⁴⁶

In a word, Donne is a profound study in the discipline of the poetic mind, in the tension required to force language into vital

¹⁴² Ibid., 126, 127.

¹⁴³ Pierre Legouis, 12.

¹⁴⁴ Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian, A History of English Literature, MacMillan, New York, 1930, 347.

¹⁴⁵ Williamson, 196.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 195.

meaning; where Coleridge failed...Donne succeeded, though at the expense of some harmony.¹⁴⁷

"The conventional line vexed his ear with its insipidity."¹⁴⁸

His followers are recognizable from this trait, although their music is seldom as rugged as his. Crashaw's poetry, for example, is "composed in irregular rhythms which do not progress but rise and fall like a sparkling fountain."¹⁴⁹ They are not as metallic as Donne's; for they meet no opposition. In them it is not the case of "an aria struggling to be free." In Donne there is always struggle, always constraint. Donne's music, in short, is bound by his sincerity.

A final consideration of the subject of Donne's passionate intensity is his aptitude for love-songs, and his influence on subsequent love-poetry. Without any hesitation Grierson hails him as "the greatest poet of love as a real, untransmuted, overwhelming experience."¹⁵⁰ For in the matter of psychological knowledge of love, "only Donne...went beyond the point where Shakespeare left off."¹⁵¹

It was Donne alone who created an entirely new kind of love-poetry, and who, discarding all the old conventions, dared--to borrow Hazlitt's famous words about Montaigne--to say as an author what he felt as a man.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷Ibid., 246.

¹⁴⁸ Gosse, The Life and Letters..., II, 334.

¹⁴⁹ Grierson, The Background..., 154.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 123.

¹⁵¹ Williamson, 240.

¹⁵² Leishman, 21.

This particular gift, nursed by introspection and self-analysis, seems to have biographical foundation. His bittersweet marriage was a runaway with a girl not yet of age. When her father discovered his loss, Donne was thrown into prison. "Even this, his deepest love, had proved 'a flattering mischief'...the love whose intense feeling was communicated to the most memorable of his love songs."¹⁵³

He packs a more powerful punch in his later religious sonnets and songs than he did in his secular pieces, so that the influence of his religious poetry on subsequent devotional verse is weightier than that of his profane works on subsequent love-lyrics.¹⁵⁴ "The Canonization," "The Funerall," and "The Relique" are acknowledged on all sides to be tremendous powers in the development of devotional poetry.

The third and final major distinguishing note abstracted from the verse of Donne and the so-called metaphysicals is the preponderance of mysticism. A discussion of this characteristic requires a careful statement of the essential relation between poetry and mysticism, a distinction between mysticism properly-so-called and transcendentalism, and an enumeration of the elements of Donne's transcendentalism: unworldliness, alienation from God, and preoccupation with death.

¹⁵³ Williamson, 8, 9.

¹⁵⁴ Grierson, The Background..., 130.

The foundation of the relation between mysticism and poetry is what Newman has called "realization."¹⁵⁵ For both mysticism and poetry penetrate to ultimates, though by different means and causes. Poetry, whether it go by the name of "inspiration," "enthusiasm," "secret influence of heaven," or "Dieu entre nous," has no meaning unless a quasi-mystical character be attached to it.¹⁵⁶ For "the deciding factor," explains George Shuster, is not whether poetry teach a lesson, "but whether it is beautiful with an inkling of everlasting life."¹⁵⁷

In this light, how do the Metaphysicals appear? Does their poetry verify the principle? If it does not, what "was Donne doing 'at the round earth's imagin'd corners'? or Vaughan when he 'saw Eternity the other night'? or Marvell when he heard 'Time's winged chariot hurrying near'?"¹⁵⁸

Donne was worldly yet unworldly, and extremely human in reacting to pangs of alienation from God and to the shudder of death; it is as if he walked about in injured ecstasy.¹⁵⁹ The more developed his culture became, the more ethereal became the form which enraptured him. As compared with

Spenser's romanticism...which chooses from the outer world the fitting and the pleasing
...Donne's is the romanticism of insight,

155 Henri Bremond, Priere et Poesie, transl. by Algar Thorold, Burns Oates and Washbourne, London, 1927, 94.

156 Ibid., 83.

157 George N. Shuster, The Catholic Church and Current Literature, MacMillan, New York, 1930, 55.

158 Williamson, 237, 238.

159 Bremond, 152.

which, looking inward, describes the subtle relations of things and transfigures them with a sudden and unexpected flood of light.¹⁶⁰

Consider, for example, his "The Second Anniversary," where one of the most full-blooded of English poets is least earthly. Or read his "Anatomy of the World," which is the "most marvelous poetical exposition of a certain kind of devotional thought yet given."¹⁶¹ Surely Donne has, if not romantic glamour, at least a peculiar magic common to few. It is a biographical fact that he went, "in response to an imperious instinct, where his peculiarly southern and Catholic intellect found the food that it required."¹⁶² Whatever may be the cause of this attractive intuitive power of his, only later masters of verse and kindred spirits, such as Crashaw and Thompson, seem to have detected it enough to imitate it. Conflict between sensuality and mysticism is not new, but this conflict joined to religious persuasions is what sets Donne apart from the commonplace.¹⁶³ This touch of the true realities is responsible for his passionate joy, amazement, and shudder.

Principally because of his sincere interest in this supreme Being, the thought of death fascinated Donne. "Of all English poets John Donne was probably the most profoundly haunted by

¹⁶⁰ Schelling, xix, xx.

¹⁶¹ Chambers, xxiii.

¹⁶² Gosse, Life and Letters..., II, 177.

¹⁶³ Williamson, 50.

the thought of death,"¹⁶⁴--a fact which accounts for what Saintsbury calls "the dusky air" in many of his works.⁴ Such a prominence of death in his thought is not surprising when we acknowledge the mystical character permeating the whole man.

Donne's macabre preoccupation, however, in no way detracts from his primary occupation with love--profane before the reception of 'Holy Orders,' divine afterwards. Donne is on record for saying that love "though it be directed upon the minde, doth inhere in the body, and find piety entertainment there."¹⁶⁵ The dash in "The Ecstasy" is the same dash apparent in "Holy Sonnets."¹⁶⁶ In his costly numbers earned from personal experience, he contributed to poetry so ample a capital of mystical expression of love that

...no country or century has produced a more personal and varied devout poetry, rooted in the basal religious experience of a consciousness of alienation from God and the longing for reconciliation but complicated by ecclesiastical and individual varieties of temperament and interpretation, than the country and century of...John Donne.¹⁶⁷

164 Ibid., 3.

165 Ibid., 15.

166 Ibid., 16.

167 Grieron, The Background..., 156.

CHAPTER III

THOMPSON'S RUGGED MIND

The genius and verse of Francis Thompson manifest the same features already pointed out as characteristic of the metaphysical poets in general, and of John Donne in particular. It is a curious fact that although these two poets strongly resemble each other, they have never been given credit for this likeness with anything more than a passing remark. To cull the diminutive acknowledgments of this striking relationship between Thompson and Donne is the first step necessary to advance recognition of modern metaphysical poetry. Our line-up will follow the same pattern as the foregoing analysis of Donne.

As Donne, so Thompson had an exceptionally bright intellect. If mind ever was kingdom to man, Francis Thompson's mind a kingdom was to him.¹ His theological and medical studies, united to the literary browsing of his boyhood years and his later rambles in London, provided better than could anything else the stone and leaded glass with which he erected his literary cathedrals. His own intellectual background met exactly the demands he himself is known to have made of poetry. For in Thompson's opinion, poetry "had to be the poetry of revelation...with a strong intellectual or intuitive element, otherwise it could hardly restore the Divine idea of things."² To this end also

¹ Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties, Mitchell Kennerley, New York, 1914, 201-214.

² Norman Weyand, Francis Thompson: His Theory of Poetry, Dissertation, St. Louis, 1934, 140.

the poetry must be freighted with imagery, else the intellectual truth or 'revelation' of the poet was lost. Precisely because of his candid, childlike clarity of sight and sage reflection he has been called a "nursling of genius."³ "He is all compact of thought."⁴ Averred of Donne, it is true of Thompson also: "his peculiar greatness...is in the double potency of intellectual and emotional energy."⁵ Megroz has seen this exceptional activity implied in Thompson's "mystical structure," and his "appropriation or anticipation of scientific discoveries."⁶ Another scholar induces the same conclusion from Thompson's conceits, which are, "with few exceptions, the subtleties of one who has a clear vision, an unrivalled wealth of words; who effectively sings what he clearly understands."⁷

The complexity of content in Thompson's work is, as in Donne's, almost encyclopedic. To his gleanings from others he brought such substantial accretion from personal resources and experience that "the waves of perception crowd one after another to the mind's shore, and they set up a spiritual music more and more eloquent of Donne."⁸ To cite from only one of his poems, the familiar "Hound of Heaven:"

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- 3 George O'Neill, "Crashaw Shelley and Thompson," The Irish Ecclesiastical Record, IV (July-Dec., 1914), 6.
 4 Geoffrey Bliss, "Francis Thompson and Richard Crashaw," The Month, CXI (Jan., 1908), 5.
 5 R. L. Megroz, Francis Thompson, Faber & Gwyer, London, 1927, 52
 6 Ibid.
 7 Thomas Whelan, "The Hound of Heaven," IER, XV (Jan.-June, 1920), 368.
 8 Megroz, 159.

Come then, ye other children, Nature's--share
 With me' (said I) 'your delicate fellowship;
 Let me greet you lip to lip,
 Let me twine with you caresses,
 Wantoning
 With our Lady-Mother's vagrant tresses,
 Banqueting
 With her in her wind-walled palace,
 Underneath her azured dais,
 Quaffing, as your taintless way is,
 From a chalice
 Lucent-weeping out of the dayspring.' (61-72)

With a rush of insight into the strange ways of Providence, he
 addresses his infinite Maker:

Ah! must Thou char the wood ere Thou
 canst limm with it?
 My freshness spent its wavering shower
 I' the dust;
 And now my heart is as a broken fount,
 Wherein tear-drippings stagnate, spilt
 down ever
 From the dank thoughts that shiver
 Upon the sighful branches of my mind.
 Such is; what is to be?
 The pulp so bitter, how shall taste the
 rind?
 I dimly guess what Time in mists confounds;
 Yet ever and anon a trumpet sounds
 From the hid battlements of Eternity;
 Those shaken mists a space unsettle, then
 Round the half-glimpsed turrets slowly
 wash again. (135-147)

In final resignation the poet echoed the strains of that mutual
 friend of both himself and Donne, St. Augustine:

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 fliest
 Me!
 Strange, piteous, futiel thing!
 Wherefore should any set thee love apart?' (155-162)

These excerpts chosen at random immediately indicate with how many allusions and entities Thompson's single lines are concerned; the associations suggested by each word are legion; they are as many as they are precipitant.

Like Donne, too, Thompson conserved the best of the old, and readily transformed it into thrilling new things. For Greek and Oriental beauties, he often substituted a superior Apollo and Venus from Theology. To the color and pathos of Virgil, he attuned "Sister Songs," and "Corymbus for Autumn." Consider his reference to Venus in the first part of "Sister Songs." How like Virgil in color, and Donne in multiple metaphor is this passage!

I know in the lane, by the hedgerow track,
 The long, broad grasses underneath
 Are warted with rain like a toad's knobbed
 back;

But here May weareth a rainless wreath.
 In the new-sucked milk of the sun's bosom
 Is dabbled the mouth of the daisy-blossom;
 The smouldering rosebud chars through
 its sheath;

The lily stirs her snowy limbs,
 Ere she swims
 Naked up through her clover green,
 Like the wave-born Lady of Love Hellene;
 And the scattered snowdrop exquisite
 Twinkles and gleams,
 As if the showers of the sunny beams
 Were splashed from the earth in drops of
 light. (9-23)

So always light and fresh are his touches on the ancient classical myths and lore. Another instance is found a few lines lower in the same poem:

Next, I saw (wonder-whist!)

How from the atmosphere a mist,
 So it seemed, slow uprist;
 And, looking from those elfin swarms,
 I was 'ware
 How the air

Was all populous with forms
 Of the Hours, floating down,
 Like Nereids through a watery town.
 Some with languors of waved arms,
 Fluctuous oared their flexile way;
 Some were borne half resupine
 On the aerial hyline,
 Their fluid limbs and rare array
 Flickering on the wind, as quivers
 Trailing weed in running rivers. (120-134)

In four lines an old allusion is enhanced with unexpected application:

 Thy soul's fair shape
 In my unfading mantle's green I drape,
 And thy white mind shall rest by my devising
 A gideon-fleece amid life's dusty
 drouth. (349-352)

This is the manner in which Thompson, with the same habit as Donne, uses the old in a new way; some novelty is added to time-worn names without losing any of their ancient charm in the transformation.

Like Donne dissatisfied with shackling poetry to mere physiological sources of emotion, Thompson freed it and crowned it with intellectual candor and precision. He insists he can explain any of his thoughts, if asked to, in prose shorn of all vibrating imagery and expressive music. He scorned "gush" as mightily as did Donne. Whatever he permitted himself to say in meter was well thought-out and steel-framed by his intellect, although resplendent with engaging passionate intensity calculated to satisfy the eye, ear, tongue, hand, and heart of his

reader. Patmore even goes so far as to castigate his friend for being too "masculine." The older poet gives the younger credit for his "profound thought...and nimble-witted discernment of those analogies which are the 'roots' of the poet's language."⁹

Shuster appraises Thompson as having neither too much thought nor too much music, but a substantial mixture of both. This simplicity was due to an assimilation and synthesis of profound science, natural and divine--his Franciscan love of nature united with the gigantic residue of his theological studies. For Thompson, love of God was as much philosophy as it was theology--and this "because of his wide-eyed outlook upon life."¹⁰ His perennial wonderment, moreover, concerned itself with vital fact, not fiction. Not only did he keep his grip on scientific reality, and penetrate to its very core, but, like Donne, he transcended it.¹¹ In the "Orient Ode," for example, fervid as it is with adoration, there are hints of the electronic theory of matter and the relativity theory of time and space.¹²

On this point of synthesizing orthodox science with poetic talent the poet himself has a comment. In a footnote to his

9 Katherine Bregy, "The Poetry of Francis Thompson," Catholic World, LXXXI (Aug., 1905), 613.

10 Ibid., 610.

11 Megroz, 195-197.

12 Ibid., 197.

phrase, "Night's scientific idolatry," he shows how meticulous he can be in this regard:

For once I have used a symbol which--unlike true symbolism--will not turn every way. The parallel is incomplete, for the moon is dead--'the corpse in Night's highway' as Mr. Patmore says. Otherwise the parallel is accurate, your science may grasp at it. Yet even science has lately discovered (what poets never needed 'scientists' to tell them) that the moon does not simply reflect the sun's rays, but absorbs and emits them again. This is distinctly promising. When science has drawn the corollary that they must needs be charged with the moon's own emanations, she will be on the way towards knowing a little¹³ of the heavens as the poets know them.

This is no childish warbler meriting only patronizing smiles.

On the contrary, "Thompson's purely intellectual activity would have compared well with that of many men of scientific reputation."¹⁴

Granted that Thompson was unusually well-informed, and showed an unusual understanding of scientific activities "which would not have discredited the volatile mind of Goethe," he did not see much use in sheer fact-cataloguing, and was like his metaphysical precursor, Donne, in his endeavour to enlist all suitable knowledge for the service of poetry.¹⁵ Although interested in the development of natural science, he spared no scorn for pseudo-science which entertained idle hopes of undermining

¹³ Ibid., 64, 65.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 189.

features of his genius.²¹ Because of them he could realize in creatures their Creator, and transmit his vision no otherwise than by intense and passionate imagery. Consequently he is the modern replica of John Donne, famed for the magical sweep and restraint of his integrated sensibility.

The concretization common to these two poets deserves more detail. As Donne, so Thompson--to use Thompson's own phrase describing Shelley--shows that strange "power to condense the most hydrogenic abstraction."²² Once his sensuous and metaphysically subtle imagination was appealed to, it would pour itself out regardless of intellectual control--a habit preeminently characteristic of Donne also. Symbols were almost literally meat and drink for the starved poet, and for this reason he enjoyed so much Patmore's talk and poetry--their interpretation of symbols.²³ Thanks to Thompson's creative imagination, his verse "moves on a full, occasionally overflowing, stream of intuitive knowledge...and beats the loftiest air with pinions only then unfaltering."²⁴ Such is the testimony of witnesses who see with their own eyes Thompson's "gift of making spiritual splendours start into form and burn before our eyes in many-coloured flames."²⁵

21 Weyand, 147.

22 Francis Thompson, Shelley, Charles Scribner's and Sons, New York, n. d., 53.

23 Megroz, 92, 93.

24 Ibid., 102.

25 O'Neill, 22.

Like Donne, Thompson strikes professionally and true with keen-edged imagination. Because of this similarity, the question arises over just how much Donne and others influenced Thompson's verse. Shelley, Crashaw, Donne, and Shakespeare are listed by Megroz as the only substantial influences Thompson is in some way or other indebted to.²⁶ Even here the term "influence" had best be taken as meaning "congenial discoveries of a poet's genius." What Crashaw and Donne pointed to, Thompson accomplished. He took advantage of their labors, and actually succeeded in expressing "the immaterial and the material in terms of each other."²⁷ The first stanza of "Dream Tryst" is representative of many another passage of the "Ethereal poignancy" of his poetry:

The breaths of kissing night and day
 Were mingled in the eastern Heaven:
 Throbbing with unheard melody
 Shook Lyra all its star-chord seven:
 When dusk shrunk cold, and light
 trod shy,
 And dawn's gray eyes were
 troubled gray;
 And souls went palely up
 the sky,
 And mine to Lucide.

Though "Dream Tryst" is said to resemble Shelley and Poe in this first stanza, Coleridge and Shelley in the second stanza, and Blake and Poe in the third stanza, "the strong current of the idea unifies them into Thompsonian poetry."²⁸ There was no

26 Megroz, 59.

27 Pullen, 43.

28 Megroz, 55, 57.

literary association so bristling he could not assimilate it, then give it forth again substantially his own.

Thompson has been called "Crashaw born greater."²⁹ For the latter never joined homely image to divine feeling more masterfully than Thompson in his "Sister Songs," which are said to "contain the finest metaphysical poetry of nature ever written in English until Thompson himself produced still finer."³⁰ These few lines are evidence:

Now therefore, thou who bring'st the year
 to birth,
 Who guid'st the bare and dabbled feet
 of May;
 Sweet stem to that rose Christ, who from
 the earth
 Suck'st our poor prayers, conveying them
 to Him;
 Be aidant, tender Lady, to my lay! (37-40)

There, like the phantasms of a poet pale,
 The exquisite marvels sail:
 Clarified silver; greens and azures frail
 As if the colours signed themselves away,
 And blent in supersubtile interplay
 As if they swooned into each other's
 arms;
 Repured vermilion,
 Like ear-tips 'gainst the sun;
 And beings that, under night's swart pinion,
 Make every wave upon the harbour-bars
 A beaten yolk of stars. (II, 35-45)

 The earth and all its planetary
 kin,
 Starry buds tangled in the whirling hair
 That flames round the Pheobean wassailer,
 Speed no more ignorant, more predestined
 flight,
 Than I, her viewless tresses netted in.
 (II, 109-113)

²⁹ James O'Rourke, "The Christology of F. T.," IER, XXXV (Jan.-June, 1930), 185.

³⁰ Megroz, 219.

Both Crashaw and Thompson have the fluid diction, the unearthly exaltation of soul, and the legitimate presentation of the conceit.³¹ A choice image common to both poets is that of eyes. In Crashaw, as we know, weeping eyes appear to be an obsession; with him it is either tears running or wounds bleeding.³² In Thompson, eyes are more often represented as caves or windows through which he enters or perceives an eternal wonderland. In "The Making of Viola," he has the Father of Heaven saying:

Scoop, young Jesus, for her eyes,
Wood-browned pools of Paradise--
Young Jesus, for the eyes,
For the eyes of Viola. (13-16)

Cast a star therein to drown,
Like a torch in cavern brown,
Sink a burning star to drown
Whelmed in eyes of Viola. (18-21)

In "Sister Songs" he addresses his Lady:

Purities gleam white like statues
In the fair lakes of thine eyes,
And I watch the sparkles that use
There to rise,
Knowing these
Are bubbles from the calyces
Of the lovely thoughts that breathe
Paving, like water-flowers, thy spirit's
floor beneath. (274-281)

In "Love in Dian's Lap," eyes attract him again:

The water-wraith that cries
From those eternal sorrows of thy pictured
eyes
Entwines and draws me down their soundless
intricacies. (52-54)

In both Crashaw and Thompson there is the arduous abandonment,

31 Martin, lxix, lxx.

32 Megroz, 116, 117.

the thought thrilling into feeling and the feeling into rapture, which have been found to be characteristic of Donne.³³ The later Crashaw's poems are, the more are they like Donne's and Thompson's in complexity and more rapid succession of images.³⁴

Thompson's high praise of Shelley's poetical talent should by rights be turned full force on the eulogist himself. As Megroz notes in one bursting paragraph,

...who can fail to see in the luminous symbolism of Shelley's sun, light, fire, rivers and caves, mountains, and fountains, wells and perfumes, the garden and its visionary Lady, Birth and Death and Change and Eternity, recondite hints which reappear in Thompson's heights and depths, Orient and Occident, the two Marys, creation and the cross, the Bridegroom and the Bride, the Tabernacle of the Sun, and Monstrance of the poet's adoration? Certainly Thompson must have known that pulse of the inner heartbeats in rhythmic antiphonies between 'Prometheus Unbound,' 'The Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,' 'The Witch of Atlas,' 'The Triumph of Life,' the 'Hymn of Apollo,' 'Alastor,' the 'Ode to the West Wind,' 'Epipsychidion' and his own orchestral harmonies in the 'Sister Songs,' 'The Hound of Heaven,' 'The Anthem of Earth,' 'Corymbus for Autumn,' 'Ode to the Setting Sun,' and 'Orient Ode,' and 'The Mistress of Vision.' Does not the mere enumeration of such poems seem to bring into splendid conjunction two marvelous galaxies in the same universe?³⁵

There are differences, of course, between the two, but their similarities seem more noteworthy. One was at best a pagan,

33 Brother Bernardin, "Richard Crashaw: A Catholic Poet," IER, XXXIV (July-Dec., 1929), 170.

34 Martin, xci, xcii.

35 Megroz, 136, 137.

the other a tertiary of St. Francis. But in the manner of verbally expressing beauty there is no sizable difference.

Thompson's liturgical imagery is especially voluptuous and representative, as if all the riches of his imagination were consecrated to God. But he is by no means a personified hymnal; if anything, he is apocalyptic. Whatever he looks upon, he beholds with sacramental eyes, whether it be an eternal mystery or a waterfall.³⁶

The same element of rhetorical shock found in Donne's work is evident in Thompson's also, although less frequently. Such poetical audacity should not surprise us when found in one "who goes to eating-houses not only for his meals, but for his images."³⁷ For Thompson, the shock of "The Hound of Heaven" and "Charing Cross" was neither shocking nor bold, but merely the sincere "spontaneous outpouring of poetic passion."³⁸ If he is daring, he is felicitously so! "No pair of entities are so widely disparate but he can weld them together in a verse. 'Who girt dissolved lightnings in the grape?' he asks of the sun."³⁹ Small and immense things become identified after contacting his integrated sensibility. No matter how shocking or ridiculous or childish his analogies may seem to strangers, they are nevertheless always true. To the dead Cardinal of West-

36 O'Neill, 23.

37 Meynell, 207.

38 Weyand, 155.

39 Bliss, 6.

he address^b addresses himself with customary directness:

I will^{ll} will not perturbate
 Thy Pa^d Paradisal state
 With praise
 Of thy dead days....

There^{re}efore my spirit clings
 Heav^{er}en's porter by the wings....

But I, I, ex-Paradised,
 The sh^{ou}l^der of your Christ
 Find high
 To lean thereby....

Life is a coquetry
 Of death death, which wearies me,
 Too sure
 Of the amour....

Beneath my appointed sod;
 The gra^{ve} is in my blood;
 I shake
 To winds that take
 Its gra^{ss}es by the top....

Tell! ^{ll}ll!
 Lest m^y feet walk hell.⁴⁰

time, howe^{ver} however, does he suffer his energetic imagination
 to be chaotic and destroy the unity of his inspiration.

Thompson's ^{po}et's metaphors are telescoped just as Donne's, and
 led out fu^rther and further only to make the total im-
 pression more ravishing. As for Donne, so for Thompson, the
 images are valuable structural units as well. So much

at

...passages have to be wrenched out of their
 context for quoting because they grow out
 of previous images and subside into succeed-
 ing images. This flexuous symmetry and com-
 plicated continuity of images and perceptions

the Dead Head Cardinal of Westminster."

supplies the concealed frame-work of the "Sister songs," which constitute, with no external rise and fall, beginning and fulfilment of design, the almost perfect whole of a single poem. The sections and the sections of sections bud and bloom and seed in the seasonal rhythm of the one garden.⁴¹

Sometimes he slowly unfolds a simile, but more often the Chinese box method is necessary to convey his speeding thought. This characteristic unfolding is what makes the critical reader compare Thompson's conceits with Donne's. A single idea is couched melodiously and subtly in apparently never-ending metaphor rich with cross-references. The opening lines of "A Corymbus for Autumn" are representative of a score of other examples:

Hearken my chant, 'tis
As a Bacchante's,
A grape-spurt, a wine-splash, a tossed
tress, flown vaunt 'tis!
Suffer my singing,
Gipsy of seasons, ere thou go winging;
Ere Winter throws
His slaking snows
In thy feasting-flagon's impurpurate glows!
The sopped sun--toper as ever drank hard--
Stares foolish, hazed,
Rubicund, dazed,
Totty with thine October tankard.
Tanned maiden! With cheeks like apples
russet,
And breast a brown agaric faint-flushing
at tip,
And a mouth too red for the moon to buss it
But her cheek unweave its vestalship;
Thy mists enclipe
Her steel-clear circuit illuminous,
Until it crust
Rubiginous
With the glorious gules of a glowing rust.

41 Megroz, 66.

In this spiral fashion his theme goes on and on, turning, bending, with feelers, leaves, tendrils, and fruit, almost like the very vine he started out describing, each new thought rooted in the previous one. A more familiar poem of his, "The Hound of Heaven," is rich for the same reason:

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.)
 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.
 Across the margent of the world I fled,
 And troubled the gold gateways of the
 stars,
 Smiting for shelter on their clang'd
 bars;
 Fretted to dulcet jars
 And silvern chatter the pale ports o'
 the moon. (16-29)

Every addition made to his theme-idea seems to grow out of the thought which went before. "To a Poet Breaking Silence" insists on one idea without causing tedium:

Ah! Let the sweet birds of the Lord
 With earth's waters make accord;
 Teach how the crucifix may be
 Carven from the laurel-tree,
 Fruit of the Hesperides
 Burnish take on Eden-trees,
 The Muses' sacred grove be wet
 With the red dew of Olivet,
 And Sappho lay her burning brows
 In white Cecilia's lap of snows! (19-28)

Notice there how he says the same thing every two lines, with extraordinary variety of figure. Lines from his "Ode to the Setting Sun" illustrate his practice of unfolding a metaphor

and showing gradually its several parts:

If with exultant tread
 Thou foot the Eastern sea,
 Or like a golden bee
 Sting the West to angry red,
 Thou doest 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 veil 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.
 (210-224)

This intricacy of structure in Thompson is responsible, as in the verse of Donne, for the tag "obscure" sometimes seen. It was the greeting given the first edition of his New Poems.. Now, obscurity may be traced to diverse causes: it may be due to "the very nature of the ineffable theme, as in the Divina Commedia," or from "compression of thought...as sometimes in the later plays of Shakespeare," or from "an excessively intense imagination...as in Shelley's 'Prometheus Unbound'," or from "super-subtle intellect...as in the poems of Donne." In the verse of Thompson all these causes seem to play together.

The obscurity in Thompson's poetry is not the result of lack of clear thinking. It rather results from the nature of his ideas and conceptions and the diction with which he clothed these. There is hardly a single poem of Thompson which when analysed --and the diction if necessary even translated--does not show a clear train of thought. Thompson takes Dante as an example of a clear-thinking poet; yet Dante to the

uninitiate is obscure and even devoid of meaning.⁴²

The explanation of Thompson's apparent obscurity is quite reasonable and aesthetically orthodox, considering that "in the work of a poet whose chief theme, and constant preoccupation, is the marvel of God's ways with men, we cannot be surprised if all that he says does not lie open to the light of common day."⁴³ The obvious solution to this initial handicap for the reader of Thompson's poems is an acquaintance, as far as can be, with the background of the poet's mind. It is worth the trouble, for Thompson unquestionably leads his play-fellow out "along that way of eminence (via eminentiae) in which, according to the Thomist doctrine of analogy, the human mind sees the unseen things divine."⁴⁴

42 Weyand, 235.

43 Bliss, 6.

44 Thomas J. Gerrard, "Francis Thompson, Poet," The Catholic World, LXXXVI (Feb., 1908), 619.

THOMPSON'S PASSIONATE INTENSITY

As the passionate intensity of Donne was marked by its sincerity, so too is the passionate intensity of Thompson. "He sang," remarks a friend of his, "because he could not help singing--and he craved no monetary reward."¹ He was no etching nor pastel, but a real poet, flesh and blood, who sometimes shocked those who knew him best. Instead of being found reflecting in tranquillity on some embryonic ode or sonnet, he was more often discovered "taking porridge and beer for supper."² An eye-witness gives us a picture of him wearing

...a frowsy inverness cape; and the said cape was thrust half a side to accommodate a fish-basket, slung by leathern straps, over his shoulders. This basket always puzzled the public: for it gave Thompson the appearance of an infatuated angler, who had mistaken the thronged city thoroughfare for a trout stream. Francis used this strange receptacle, however, for the books which he used to review; or even for a meat-pie, bought at one of the cheap restaurants.³

He was not handsome, admits the same friend, but there were in his eyes what looked very much like falling stars, and there was a tremor in his lips that betrayed how much "he loved to talk--anywhere, anyhow, anywhen."⁴

1 M. Stuart-Young, "My Friend, Francis Thompson," TCW, CXXV (Aug. 1927), 652.

2 Paul J. Ketrick, "Francis Thompson: Poet of Two Worlds," TCW, CXLVII (July, 1938), 422.

3 Stuart-Young, 650.

4 Ibid.

This "tremulous quiver of his lips...from the intensity of his thoughts" marks his poetry also, and is a feature fit to dwell upon. For, as in the case of Donne, his verse was but the natural offspring of his integrated sensibility, so that "the seemingly riotous flow of his imagery is but the counterpart of glorious spontaneity,"⁵ and intense life. No matter that his manner may seem affected to some of his critics, to those who know him more truly, his is "an overcharged spirit that overflows before its waters can be caught in orderly cisterns."⁶ Rarely has a man been more sensitive to the beautiful, and at the same time possessed the faculty for sharing his experience with the world at large. In this, his "so sweet and beautiful a sense of life,"⁷ and in his style, he is far removed from the self-conscious Alexander Pope.⁸ Even Blunt, who does not spare many good words for Thompson, confesses that the poet "seems good-hearted and quite unpretending...simple and straightforward."⁹ Despite all this, and the ringing earnestness of purpose in his verses, "his work was bought almost as one buys a pound of bacon."¹⁰

The poverty of his life is more than a little responsible for the wealth of his song. In place of a magnificent patron,

⁵ Cuthbert, "Francis Thompson," TCW, LXXXVI (Jan., 1908) 488.

⁶ Margaret Munsterberg, "Francis Thompson, A Poet's Poet," TCW, CIX (Sept., 1919), 756.

⁷ Jackson, 201-214.

⁸ E. G. Gardner, "The Poetry of Mr. Francis Thompson," The Month, XCI (Feb., 1898), 131-141.

⁹ Megroz, 177, 178.

¹⁰ Stuart-Young, 652.

the great city offered dregs; instead of dreamed-of down and silver-plate, fruit-peels and a door-stoop. If poetry¹¹ begins with a lump in the throat, as some say, then these bitter years were preparing a prodigy, for the whole tenor of his verses is "a conflict between his ascetic faith and a hunger for human kindness."¹¹ The biography of his later years, however, is the story of a male Cinderella, tubercular, over-dosed with laudanum, then transformed within an atmosphere of beauty in all its forms.

In his verses also is this paradox of joy out of pain. There too are the paradoxes of death and life, of asceticism and splendor. For he was elementally human, even in his expression, and "neither an idiot who blundered accidentally upon a glorious idea, nor a religious fanatic who happened to write verse."¹² His response to beauty was extraordinarily whole-hearted--above normal. For this reason, his works at once are splendid and connote infinite simplicity. A book of his poems is dainty and at the same time profound. "On one page is a fragment "To a Snow-Flake," of incredible delicacy; on another, an ode that thunders into sublimity."¹³ At every turn, he is the devoted, intentest, faithfullest interpreter of the material world. All his copy awaited him in nature.¹⁴ Because of this fidelity to nature, there is in his verses the whirlwind and the tower of ivory latent in every man, the "passionless passion and wild

¹¹ Megroz, 145.

¹² Ketrick, 423.

¹³ Bregy, "The Poetry of Francis Thompson," 609.

tranquillity" which he predicates of divine Love itself.

By reason of this candid revelation of his soul, he is not what is called a popular poet. His sensibility is too integrated and refined oftentimes to find an echo in the soul of the average man. "In more than one passage he has imprisoned emotions still palpitating with life, and found words for those flashes of consciousness which almost to our own souls remain inarticulate."¹⁵ Fortunately for Art, he is "quite heedless of the wide appeal," and "too much in earnest to keep his audience at all in mind."¹⁶ He was content to be the tattered minstrel, the singer or dreamer of dreams; his only concern was that his dream be not false to his adorable ideal.¹⁷ Like Donne he could be dissatisfied with himself, but his dissatisfaction did not halt his song--it merely pitched it in a minor key. No wonder that all his uttered emotions throb deathlessly! The tranquil turmoil and dreadful peace which runs beneath his verse like an underground torrent is an indication of his Donne-like, or metaphysical, temperament.

Two facets of his soul which are reflected in his poetry most strongly are his romanticism and religion. For "he was absolutely sure of his creed, and his heart sang in joy his thanksgiving of this surety."¹⁸ As in Donne's, the two strands

14 Meynell, 207.

15 Bregy, "The Poetry of Francis Thompson," 613, 614.

16 Ibid.

17 Cuthbert, 486.

18 Barry, 30.

were in his soul too. As a result, "no better combination of the religious and romantic could possibly be imagined"¹⁹ than the combination evident in the poetry of Thompson and Donne. Thompson has been called "a more metaphysical Wordsworth,"²⁰ and Thompson's work has been linked to the Romanticists' best poetry, but Thompson is nevertheless always distinct from Romanticism merely as a movement; for his was a humanly essential romanticism, such as Donne's. He sang a creed which was nonsense to the Victorians.²¹ Even in the sphere of child-poetry Wordsworth and Blake compare only remotely with Thompson, for the latter is more direct, more intimate, and betrays himself with graver sincerity.

On the score of religion, too, superlatives are not without foundation. For, as is said of Crashaw, "to come suddenly upon a writer with whom the things of faith are an adequate motive for poetry which is fiery, joyous, buoyant--that is a glad surprise not speedily forgotten."²² In short, he presents an example of what Emile Baumann has called an "integral literature," where faith governs their every interpretation of life.²³ So true is this of Thompson, that "he came...to feel the futility of all writings save such as were explicitly a confession of faith."²⁴ His verses have the atmosphere of a cathedral, on

19 Kehoe, 119.

20 Megroz, 193.

21 Barry, 29.

22 Bliss, 2.

23 Shuster, The Church and Current Literature, 36, 37.

24 Meynell, 202.

the front of which all life is represented, and where "the same master-mason who carved the heads of seraphs and the modest forms of saints ventured also to chisel out the figures of racers and hunters, of sinners and fantastic monsters."²⁵ His inspiration is equally from Grace as from Grandeur, from Simplicity as from Multiplicity.²⁶

He cannot, in a word, gaze upon sin without some of the sorrow which once made so infinitely pathetic the wounded face of Christ. But that he should turn his eyes from the world's sores and see nothing in the universe but middle-class primness--in order to avoid shocking some imaginary school-girl--is an assumption too ridiculous to merit attention.²⁷

What, then, is the value of Thompson's passionate diction? Is it true, that "he makes us feel his warm, eager personality in every line"?²⁸ This "aureate language" is redolent of Donne; his "searchingly philosophical" and "richly imaginative" language, his "tenderness impassioned," and his "pathos intense"²⁹ are not a little familiar, and can be attributed directly to his following of the Metaphysicals.³⁰ As Donne's terminology was partially a reaction to the Elizabethan super-softness, so Thompson's is a reaction to the "refined" diction of the late nineteenth century.³¹ Most of the exceptional words are needed

25 Shuster, The Catholic Church..., 43, 44.

26 Megroz, 213, 214.

27 Shuster, The Catholic Church..., 32, 33.

28 E. M. Roy, "Francis Thompson," TCW, CXXV (Feb., 1927), 371-74

29 Bregy, The Poets' Chantry, 145.

30 George Saintsbury, "Lesser Poets," CHEL, XIII, 243.

31 Megroz, 60, 61.

"to create definite imagery for filmy translucencies of thought,"³² not arbitrary innovations. A scrutiny of His "certain marvelous verbal jugglery"³³ ends in admiration of Thompson's tremendous gift of insight and assimilation. Megroz lists but a few samples of the poet's powerful phrases: "immense profound," "imperishing essences," "vistaed hopes," "viols' lissom bowings," "fluctuous oared their flexile way," "gracile curls of light," "beamy-textured."³⁴ These phrases point directly to Shelley, Crashaw, and Donne, who like himself were at pains to shake off the spiritual inertia of the century preceding theirs.

His insistence on the accurate representation of his integrated sensibility had repercussions, of course, in the music of his verse. The strong sense of rhythm in this "greatly gifted singer who died before he was fifty,"³⁵ and whose "lightest sentence can dance with fantastic melody,"³⁶ allows him to follow the nuances of his inspiration without aesthetic danger. He is like Donne in this free play. "The Anthem of Earth" is noted especially as "the greatest rhapsody in English poetry," and reverberant of "the organ thunders of music," "the tenebral splendours of image," and "the grim dark thought of the seventeenth-century poet."³⁷ These qualities we can see exemplified in a few lines:

32 Ibid.

33 Bregy, The Poets' Chantry, 145.

34 Megroz, 62, 63.

35 Stuart-Young, 650.

36 Ibid., 651.

37 Megroz, 151.

The fiery pomps, brave exhalations,
 And all the glistering shows o' the seeming
 world,
 Which the sight aches at, we unwinking see
 Through the smoked glass of Death; Death,
 wherewith's fined
 The muddy wine of life; that earth doth
 purge
 Of her plethora of man; Death, that doth
 flush
 The cumbered gutters of humanity;
 Nothing, of nothing king, with front un-
 crowned,
 Whose hand holds crownets; playmate swart
 o' the strong;
 Tenebrous moon that flux and reflucence draws
 Of the high-tided man; skull-housed asp
 That stings the heel of kings; true Fount
 of Youth,
 Where he that dips is deathless; being's
 drone-pipe;
 Whose nostril turns to blight the shrivelled
 stars,
 And thicks the lusty breathing of the sun;
 Pontifical Death, that doth the crevasse
 bridge
 To the steep and trifid God; one mortal
 birth
 That broker is of immortality. (333-350)

As melodious as Swinburne and Shelley, but never monotonous,
 surpassing even Tennyson's musical language and variety,
 Thompson's words "come trippingly because his lips bleed."³⁸
 That is to say, there is music--haunting music--in his verse,
 because his verse is so faithful a replica of the movements of
 his heart.

It is in Donne also that Thompson has his prototype of
 freshness of vision and candor of expression.³⁹ He seems to see

³⁸ Hugh Allen, "A Poet of the Return to God," TCW, CVII, 289-304.
³⁹ Maritain, 179.

the wholeness of things with startling comprehensiveness.⁴⁰ What is more, he has the power of conveying his experience to others. He seems to react to his pristine vision of reality in much the same way as another man reacts to a work of art. As the beholder of Raphael's "Immaculate Conception" is transported momentarily from the gallery in which he stands, and even maybe from the whole world, so the poet seems to be carried away by his vision, never to return--unless he bring a keepsake back. He does not cease to be a man, but becomes more than man. His cares disappear, he seems to himself segregated from the world, and devoted solely with all the strength of his manhood to his prospective creation. "This is true of every art," says Maritain, "the ennui of living and willing ceases on the threshold of every studio or workshop."⁴¹ The agony of ordinary life is overlooked in the glory and agony of what may be called his super-life. Now, in Thompson this glory and agony was most intense, for it involved the most passionate of passions. Love was his motivation and inspiration.⁴² In contrast to Pope and the other neo-Classicists, Thompson never failed to "sing from the heart."⁴³ A cursory glance at the lines of "The Mistress of Vision" reveals this:

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

⁴⁰ Shuster The Catholic..., 51, 52.

⁴¹ Maritain, 7.

⁴² Weyand.

⁴³ Ibid.

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.

What Maritain says of the fate awaiting the man of speculative mind is true of Thompson also: he could maintain himself "only at the expense of his security and comfort."⁴⁴ With the other heroes and saints he must pay for his pride "in poverty and loneliness."⁴⁵ The explanation of this state of affairs is not far to seek. The poet continues to inhabit the world, and shares in the faults and follies of mankind; but his life here is merely an accidental feature of a more substantial current. It seems that he is forever glimpsing life here only to turn from it; with the man next to him he peers into the puddle, but he is searching for the star which may be mirrored there. Not for nothing had Thompson at the age of seven steeped himself in Shakespeare and other poets. Their likeness can be seen in the features of their works as in the faces of blood-relations. Unconscious of his art, he guarded as his soul the deep humility which shaded all he knew with the repose of peace and love--essential to aesthetic simplicity of purpose. This curb is what protected him from license and pride--the pitfalls endangering all good workmanship. His passion is true passion, but chaste; and in this respect he is more like God than man. Accordingly, the poet meets the fate God met when He came down to our globe.

44 Maritain, 38.

45 Ibid.

CHAPTER V

THOMPSON'S 'MYSTICISM'

The third element common to metaphysical poetry as exemplified by the works of Donne, and found likewise in Thompson's verses, is the 'mystical' quality. Like his literary forebear¹ he theoretically and practically could see "only one possible ending to all modes of poetry, that 'multitudinous-single-thing'." Shuster means the same thing by his term "metaphysical bravery," when he declares that since Browning, only the pages of Thompson give evidence of this 'mystical' quality.²

Real beauty has always been given credit for being more than skin deep. This aphorism is true in more ways than may at first appear; it is as true of life and of poetry as of anything else. Shakespeare knew it when he affirmed a lustrous providence beneath the rough-hewn, diurnal swirl. Augustine saw it beneath all loveliness, the fullness of Christian living. He made the same vision possible for all deeply Christian souls, a vision common to the mystic and the artist. It is concretized in the liturgy, which, attests Shuster, can become as appealing as Chesterton's detective stories, because it has kept the flavor of mystery. In the liturgy there is always some tremendous deathless beauty underneath, of which the surface and transient beauty is but an indication and a promise. True beau-

¹ Meynell, 214.

² Shuster, The Catholic..., 39-52.

ty (which is always Christian, at least implicitly) never is posed, for it can exist only as an effusion of the love in the soul which conceived it.³ The work, then, will be beautiful in proportion as that love is alive.

Notice of the necessity of this aesthetic 'mysticism,' or transcendentalism, is taken by all who seriously concern themselves with works of art. They all admit the need for something to spring alive from within the artist and stretch out far beyond the sights and smells and sounds of our universe. In this connection, Alice Meynell calls the poet a priest without parish or spire.⁴ Megroz says the poet touches that central point of human experience where child and man join hands.⁵ It is the poet, says another critic, who makes us feel the whence, the why, and the whither.⁶ It is the poet who sings at once the soul's individuality and God's exclusive proprietorship of it. What do these words mean if not aesthetic 'mysticism'--the vision of transcendental knowledge in sensory experience?

Transcendentalism is not the same, then, as nonsense; but rather the sister of mystery.⁷ Nor is it blind optimism, although it knows the secret of the triumph of love over death. This is certainly evident in the poetry of Thompson, as much as, if not actually more than, in the poetry of Donne.

3 Maritain, 70.

4 Alice Meynell, "Some Memories of Francis Thompson," The Dublin Review, CXLII (Jan., 1908), 212.

5 Megroz, 215.

6 Allen, 289.

Thompson chose ordinary themes in many cases, yet his treatment of them was always different. He was never satisfied with poetic platitudes or even with good poetic representation of nature and life; he must probe down into the ultimate meaning of things, 'life's ocean floor,' and link them up with the Supernatural.⁸

In both Donne and Thompson, the very vision of reality is the signal for song. Thompson's readiness to sing was due in part to the orderliness of his beliefs. His religion

...was never confusion; his mysteries blurred none of the common issues; they were packed as carefully as another man's title deeds; they were, he would have claimed, tied with red tape, cut from the cloth of the College of Cardinals.⁹

But he did not set himself the alien task of transforming ethics; he tried to help man to discern reality, to savour spirituality, to protect them from cowardice, to point out in his mystical pageant of beauty the divine in the human.¹⁰ For his achievement he merits to be called "one of the greatest mystical poets of English, and therefore of European literature,"¹¹ so that even athiests admit his lips were "touched with the Divine Fire."¹² Wilfrid Blunt's impression that Thompson had the face of a Spanish sixteenth-century Saint rested, it would seem, on more than solely physical foundation.

7 Maritain, 110.

8 Weyand, 117.

9 Meynell, 200.

10 Maritain, 109.

11 Megroz, viii.

12 Stuart-Young, 651.

The objection may be raised that this scrutiny of the 'mystical' element in the poetry of Thompson generalizes to qualities in him as a man and as a poet, without marking clearly the division between biography and poetry. The attempted identity is intentional, for the reason that whatever we know of Thompson as a man is curiously duplicated in his song. This is true even of his 'mystical' tendencies. If a student intending to write the poet's biography had only the poetry as source for his story, the resulting vital account of Thompson would be found to be very true to life--so knitted are the poetry and its qualities with the man and his life. When we say, then, for instance, that he was no sectarian, we mean that both in his life and his poetry this is true; neither as a man living in the London slums, nor as a singer of paradisal songs did he reject certain provinces of truth. We take for granted that the point of Thompson's sincerity already touched on, showing that his music is but the reverberation of his soul, permits the interchange of his biography and poetry here as if they were almost a single source of evidence.

In a very happy analogy Thompson has been compared to the little child with the matches in Andersen's fairy-tale. He would strike one match after another while bare-foot and shivering, because he saw in the flickers radiant dreams which made him forget hunger and cold.¹³ Otherworldliness may very likely

¹³ Munsterberg, 754.

explain the motive power of his verse. In life this quality certainly characterized him. One writer says, "the trance-like expression, that commonly made him seem a fool in a sensible society, was the sign that marked him for the visionary that he was."¹⁴ He was lost in wonder at the spectacle of a "life closer to him than the pulse of his heart,"¹⁵ so he could not be distracted by any other. Curiously enough, in bondage he found freedom, in pain purification, and in renunciation of all that this world grips like a vice, fulfillment of his heart's desire.¹⁶

As a youth already living more in his world of vision than in the one which reads his works, he was often charged with indolence. This seemingly too passive attitude was really only dissatisfaction with mediocrity. This state is not surprising for one who could write, "Saintship is the touch of God. To most...God is a belief. To the saints He is an embrace. They have felt the wind of His locks, His heart has beaten against their side." Always in his heart he was occupied with "echoes of celestial music."¹⁷ He was incorrigibly out-of-step with the "practical business of living," with the world "wherein books are printed--or misprinted; where bills are paid--or not paid; where many commonplace virtues tell more effectively than seraphic raptures."¹⁸

¹⁴ Kehoe, 121.

¹⁵ Megroz, 169.

¹⁶ Bliss, 11.

¹⁷ O'Brien, 603.

All this comment can be verified in his "Mistress of Vision." Here he definitely retraces his steps back into Paradise, to linger there for a moment, then returns with a treasure of memory. The first stanza of the poem casts the same spell Donne attempted in the opening of his divine lyrics; I quote Thompson's "Mistress of Vision:"

...Secret was the garden;
 Set i' the pathless awe
 Where no star its breath can draw.
 Life, that is its warden,
 Sits behind the fosse of death. Mine eyes
 saw not, and I saw....

There was never moon,
 Save the white sufficing woman:
 Light most heavenly-human--
 Like the unseen form of sound,
 Sensed invisibly in tune,--
 With a sun-derived stole
 Did inaureole
 All her lovely body round;
 Lovelily her lucid body with that light
 was interstrewn....

Was that last part from Donne or from the "Mistress of Vision"?

Thompson's insight has its repercussions in his attitude toward Nature, just as all his arguments "go from heaven downwards."¹⁹ Only a Donne or a Crashaw, or some other penetrating metaphysical poet could play double for his mind in this difficult piece of action. No pantheist or pagan can outdo him in concretizing the purely spiritual which is his inspiration. As Meynell points out, "transfiguration is for Thompson the most familiar of mysteries."²⁰ And another: "No earthly creature can

18 O'Neill, 8, 9.

19 Meynell, 203.

20 Ibid.

hold his attention long, before he translates it into some heavenly symbol or sees the spirit shining through the glass of mortal form."²¹ And another: "Every being...speaks to him the same apocalyptic language; is sacrament and symbol of the ultimate truths of faith."²² The Word made flesh, "without Whom nothing was made that was made," is the friend to Whom he dedicates all his writing.

This dedication is something entirely different from the Nature-worship identified with the Romantic school of poetry. They looked to Nature for a guide, a consolation, a hope, a refuge, a religion. He looked to Nature for just what she was-- a creature of God. For him the thorns and briars were as truly Nature as the rose and the silken mild-weed. In this universality he was like St. Francis of Assisi

...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 glamour of moonrise the operations of a conscious, unseen Power that is craving audience.²³

For both the one Francis and the other, song and sanctity are only rationally distinct.

Connected with his sense of otherworldliness is his poignant consciousness of a certain alienation from God. Even his childhood had been haunted by loneliness, so the dark days of

²¹ Munsterberg, 756.

²² Bliss, 11.

²³ Allen, 292.

drugs and exposure in his later years were no strange environment. Both Donne and he are fundamentally "mystical vagabonds." Their wanderlust is diagnosed in his "Hound of Heaven:"

I knew all the swift importings
 On the wilful face of skies;
 I knew how the clouds arise
 Spumed of the wild sea-snortings;
 All that's born or dies
 Rose and drooped with; made them
 shapers
 Of mine own moods, or wailful or divine;
 With them joyed and was bereaven.
 I was heavy with the even,
 When she lit her glimmering tapers
 Round the day's dead sanctities.
 I laughed in the morning's eyes.
 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.....
 Lo! naught contents thee, who content'st
 not Me!
 ...Thou dravest love from thee, who
 dravest Me!

This torrential poem is divinely sad. He is terribly honest with himself and with men in general. The sores, the hunger, the irony familiar to man are not cloaked over. He merely hums to music of a different age the words composed by St. Augustine: Withersoever the soul of man turns itself, unless to Thee, it cleaves unto sorrow; yea, even though it cleave to the fairest things. Similarly Donne's self-indignation and penitance, and Thompson's feeling of pursuit, are redolent of St. Augustine. The poem is surrender of soul put to music--the surrender of a

soul to the deathless and incomparable blandishments of God.

Another characteristic of Thompson's 'mysticism,' and one which is also peculiar to Donne, is his preoccupation with death. His "Anthem of Earth" is an outstanding example of his reaction to the maccabre beauty. Consider these lines (how like Donne's!)

We are sad
 With more than our sires' heaviness, and with
 More than their weakness weak; we shall not be
 Mighty with all their mightiness, now shall we
 Rejoice with all their joy. Ay, Mother!

Mother!

What is this Man, thy darling kissed and
 cuffed,
 Thou lustingly engender'st,
 To sweat, and make his brag, and rot,
 Crowned with all honour and all shamefulness?
 From nightly towers
 He dogs the secret footsteps of the heavens,
 Sifts in his hands the stars, weighs them
 as gold-dust,
 And yet is he successive into nothing
 But patrimony of a little mold,
 And entail of four planks. (96-110)

But what had been for Donne a cause primarily of fear, the later metaphysical poet, Thompson, views as a triumphal arch. Read the closing lines of "To My Godchild:"

And when, immortal mortal, droops your head,
 And you, the child of deathless song, are
 dead;
 Then, as you search with unaccustomed glance
 The ranks of Paradise for my countenance,
 Turn not your tread along the Uranian sod
 Among the bearded counsellors of God;
 For if in Eden as on earth are we,
 I sure shall keep a younger company:
 Pass where beneath their ranged gonfalons
 The starry cohorts shake their shielded suns,
 The dreadful mass of their enridged spears;
 Pass where majestic the eternal peers,

The stately choice of the great Saintdom,
meet--

A silvern segregation, globed complete
In sandalled shadow of the Triune feet;
Pass by where wait, young poet-wayfarer,
Your cousined clusters, emulous to share
With you the roseal lightnings burning
'mid their hair;

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

(48-67)

Precisely this mystical element of his poetry indicates more than anything else his essential connection with the divine lyrics written in the metaphysical tradition. As T. S. Eliot notes, the devotional verse of Herbert, Vaughan, and Crashaw is echoed long afterwards by Francis Thompson.²⁴ Agnes de la Gorce says, too, that critics are "agreed in noting in his work the influence of the seventeenth-century mystics, and particularly that of his co-religionist, Richard Crashaw."²⁵ But, she immediately points out, granted that he assimilated the style of these men, "he surpassed his model...his originality remained intact."²⁶ Patmore, inasmuch as his was a spirit kindred to Thompson's, encouraged the younger poet with his similar ideas. Through him Thompson came to know St. Bernard intimately. It seems that both were fortunately aware of the truth enunciated by Maritain, that "one moment of which man is the master, in the most secret place of the heart, binds and looses eternity."²⁷

24 T. S. Eliot, 242.

25 Agnes de la Gorce, Francis Thompson, Burns Oates and Washbourne, London, 1933, 33.

26 Ibid.

27 Weynell, 115.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In the light of more recent research, Thompson's verse is definitely in the line of the Donne tradition, or, to use the familiar but less accurate term, it is metaphysical poetry.

His work is marked by a quality to which he has affixed the exact and definitive phrase 'ardorous abandonment.' It is the quality he found in Crashaw. But he is remarkable for combining this with an intellectual energy worthy of Donne, and a magic very nearly worthy of Coleridge.¹

Serving as background for his creations are "the rich strain of religious poetry and all that body of seventeenth-century work which was a reaction against the Elizabethan renaissance and a cultivation of new fields of spiritual adventure."² This is not strange when we learn how enthusiastic he was over Crashaw, an undisputed metaphysical poet, and his affinities with Vaughan, Herbert, and Donne who like himself were Catholic in their religious bias. His interest in the metaphysicals had evidently begun with his study of Donne and Cowley, but before long his admired Coleridge introduced him to Crashaw. From England under the Stuarts, wealthy with poets capable of being now courtier, now warrior, now ascetical penitent, now man of science, now mystic still blushing from former sensual indulgence, now hermit singing:

¹ Ibid., 75.

² Ibid.

I saw eternity the other night
Like a great ring of pure and endless light.

--From this England came dominant inspirations and archetypes of style. Thompson conceived such men to be kindred spirits, and differed from them only in his

...deeper affirmations...more childlike candor, [and] a clearer vision that was more affectionate and more naively realistic of the humble circumstances which accompanied the mystery of the cradle and the Cross.³

He imitated their mode of expression, even some of their faults, but at the same time remained original. Imperfections and influences were not overlooked in the instant acclamation given his productions by some of the finest critics. Poems, Sister Songs, and New Poems provoked criticism as well as astonished recognition of an original genius. Although "full of provocation to conservative critics, they were not less charged with evidence of original genius to any reader with aesthetic sensibility."⁴ Chesterton casts his vote in favor of Thompson with the telling paradox that the shortest definition of the Victorian Age is that Thompson stood outside it. To which statement Meynell adds that Chesterton "might have gone on, with a little access of wilfulness, to say that the seventeenth-century was best described by saying that in it was Francis Thompson."⁵ This is to say in a few words what many

3 De la Gorce, 29.

4 Megroz, 50.

5 Meynell, 165.

repeated and enhanced by the substantial beauty of Thompson; Donne's fascination by death is duplicated in Thompson; and both reach out to God in divine songs. These identities and many other overlappings and congruencies lead to but one conclusion: Francis Thompson's poetry is metaphysical.

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