



1947

# Francis Thompson and His Relationship to the 1890's

Mary J. Kearney  
*Loyola University Chicago*

---

## Recommended Citation

Kearney, Mary J., "Francis Thompson and His Relationship to the 1890's" (1947). *Master's Theses*. Paper 637.  
[http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc\\_theses/637](http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses/637)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact [ecommons@luc.edu](mailto:ecommons@luc.edu).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).  
Copyright © 1947 Mary J. Kearney

FRANCIS THOMPSON AND HIS RELATIONSHIP TO THE 1890'S

By

Mary J. Kearney

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS  
AT LOYOLA UNIVERSITY  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

June  
1947

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. Introduction.....	1
The heritage of the 1890's--Victorian Liberalism Scientific Naturalism--Intellectual Romanticism Spiritual Inertia--Contrast of the preceding to the influence of The Oxford Movement	
II. Francis Thompson's Relationship to the <u>Fin de Siècle</u> Writers.....	17
Characteristics of the period--The decadence of the times--Its perversity, artificiality, egoism and curiosity--Ernest Dowson, the mor- bid spirit--Oscar Wilde, the individualist-- the Beardsley vision of evil--Thompson's negative revolt--His convictions--The death of the Decadent movement.	
III. Francis Thompson Among the Catholic Literary Revivalists.....	94
His debt to the Meynell family--Thompson, the symbolist in his appreciation of beauty and love--Coventry Patmore's influence--Affinity with Lionel Johnson--Purpose and Destiny	
IV. Francis Thompson: Prophet of an Age.....	124
Political prophecies--Scientific prophecies-- Religious prophecies	
Conclusion.....	136
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	140

## CHAPTER I

### THE HERITAGE OF THE NINETIES

Francis Thompson appeared upon the threshold of the dawning twentieth century with a song which stirred every thinker of the age to proclaim him as a truly great poet. The lengths to which his words drove his critics in their efforts to classify him in the hall of fame of England's greatest is amazing and gratifying. With careful precision he has been distinctly heralded and announced as a religious mystic who has reverted to the thought and style of the seventeenth century mystical writers of the society of Donne, Crashaw, Traherne and Herbert. The evidence of these characteristics is everywhere in his works. However, Francis Thompson was, perhaps to a greater extent than any of his contemporaries, a man of his age, and bore a distinct relation to his period as may be seen from a study of his prose and poetic works.

Calvert Alexander has quoted Edmund G. Gardner, who writing in 1898 of Thompson, said that he

would eventually stand out in the history of modern thought as the epic poet of modern Catholicity, using the term 'epic poet,' not in its more strict sense, but in that in which Shelley employed it in his Defense of Poetry, to distinguish Homer, Dante, and Milton:

a 'poet, the series of whose creations bore a defined and intelligible relation to the knowledge and sentiment and religion of the age in which he lived, and of the ages which followed it, developing itself in correspondence with their development.' <sup>1</sup>

The closing decade of the nineteenth century was the workshop period of his life and no study of these years is complete without serious consideration of the literary contribution of Thompson. As many another of his great predecessors, he seems to have been destined for his age, for he appeared upon the scene fully equipped. His works did not suffer from public neglect, but their appeal won him instantaneous recognition, because they revealed a new writer with a compelling message beneath a splendor and majesty of diction completely foreign to the ignoble mannerisms and attitudes in vogue among many writers at that time.

Whatever the opinions held by his contemporary critics regarding Thompson's relationship to his age may have been, there can be no denial of his own recognition of a definite understanding and interpretation of the era into which he was

---

<sup>1</sup> Calvert Alexander, S. J., The Catholic Literary Revival (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co., 1935), p. 167.

born, upon reading these lines of his.

When an author is unpopular, does not echo the voices of the marketplace, speak the tongue which is loud in the land, think the thoughts which are afloat on the surface of the general mind, skim the scum floating on time's pot -- in one cant-word, does not represent his age; you will be told that he is 'too soon' or 'too late' for his day. In the popular sense of the phrase, every great writer is too late for his age... The very great poet is a prophet because he is too soon for his day rather his day comes after him. None the less it is not true that he gives no utterance to his time. He could not be conscious of the things he speaks, did he not find them about him. He brings up treasure from the deep sea of his time, impenetrable by those who look only on the surface waters of the time to come. The many do not know what is breeding in their time; listening to the cries of the street, they hear not what the time is pondering in its heart. The great poet listens to the quiet, brooding heart of his age and prophesies the things he hears: 'We have nought with this,' say the runners (hurriers); 'he has nought with us: begone from us, or give us the voice of our age.' But the voice of their age is not their own voice. 2

---

2 Quoted from Terence L. Connolly, S. J., Ph.D. Francis Thompson: In His Paths (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co., 1944), p. 61.

Thompson's relationship to the 1890's, his understanding, interpretation and prophecy of the age will be considered throughout this paper.

The closing decade of the nineteenth century was characteristic of the final decade of most preceding centuries in that a series of new attitudes, controversies, beliefs, doubts, and hopes sprung up to take the place of those formerly held, since they had failed to withstand the challenge of political, social, and economic progress which was gradually changing man's material world so completely. To understand in a measure how the final decade of the amazing nineteenth century evolved into the turbulent era it actually was, from a religious and literary point of view especially, it is necessary to take into account the trends which compose the heritage of the age.

This had been an eager century busy with the invention of scientific technique and enthusiastically thinking of the future triumph of science and the regeneration thereby of humanity. Human thought began to recognize the world of man and nature as a vast system of glorious law, whose mathematical discovery and intelligible formulation were to be the glory of the newborn science and its newly acquired logic. Through these were to come the new ages of gold when man was to be intellectually freed, morally happy, and at his ease in a world subdued to his nature. Today that glowing optimism is still far removed from us, as well as all else that characterized

the second half of the Age of Enlightenment. Between that age and our own lies the age of transformation in makeup, of ruthless experiment and revolution, the nineteenth century; which began in war and revolution and closed in a greater war and revolution whose reverberations yet leave the world bewildered. No one today with a knowledge of the disastrous French Revolution would dare to predict what future results it may yet be mother to. The unrest of the 1890's was not original with that age.

...the unrest of today is the child of the unrest of yesterday, with perhaps its parents' traits somewhat exaggerated, and that parent the restless child of restless parent, and so back to the restlessness that bred the French Revolution. 3

There had been other revolutions in the long epochs of history but none so swift and thoroughgoing in scope. It not only involved man's political and social creeds, but it attacked his economic life also, and transformed his habits and associations, and threatened to challenge man's unique reason and moral supremacy. Out of it all arose the complexing problem of adjustment in a new and expanding universe where man

---

3 Philo M. Buck. The World's Great Age (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1936), p. 5.



could live rightly, comfortably and justly in conformity with his deepest desires.

In earlier times changes occurred more slowly so there was the security of time for adjustment. New problems arose, but solution did not have to be devised at the moment because the problem would not change in scope for quite some time. Many various solutions of the swift changing life of the nineteenth century were put into action; one of which was the escape method employed by such men as Wordsworth in

Enough of Science and of Art;  
Close up those barren leaves;  
Come forth, and bring with you a heart  
That watches and receives.

However, it is an inescapable problem, for even the mystic; though he seems to retire from the world, really does no more than to create a new one in his own image.

The nineteenth century has been declaimed piteously because it lacked any outstanding thinker such as former ages witnessed to interpret the trends of the times in an enlightened manner, and to guide to some degree, the thought of the age. "There has been no Shakespeare nor Sophocles, not the splendid trust in human nature of a Sophocles or Shakespeare in the nineteenth century."<sup>4</sup>

---

4 Ibid., p. 9.

However, an optimistic view of the period recognizes a compensation for this loss. There was an earnestness and a wholeheartedness in the search, and a single-eyed pursuit of the main issue that was not to be found duplicated elsewhere. Never before has literature been so obsessed with the importance of its mission. "The nineteenth century writers have nearly one and all felt the vital connection between poetry and literature and life. Not only must literature hold up the mirror to life, but it must, like the scientist offer a formula for what it sees."<sup>5</sup>

The writers of poetry and fiction were for the most part desirous of elucidating the significance of science to human nature in its relation to itself, to society and to nature. This was known as intellectual honesty, a stubborn virtue, and one on which the nineteenth century prided itself. Man's place in relation to nature, to society, and to himself has been a central theme of all literature from time immemorial. In this century it was modified by the new accumulation of science and industry, and their effects on human institutions, and the rapid spread of new restless ideas. The result was that too often in their efforts writers disclosed human nature to us in a garb that was neither complimentary nor pleasant, and many revolted at their sordidness. "The Greeks even in the depth of

---

5 Ibid., p. 10.

tragedy at least preserve for us the ideal of human nature as a thing fundamentally sound and admirable." <sup>6</sup> Science, however, is cold and impersonal and the writer who prided himself on his intellectual honesty saw no difference in the manner in which he should handle human conduct than he would any other assortment of protoplasm. Zola's novels are a sociological treatise on the effects of heredity and environment on indifferent moral character. Towards the close of the century it was evident that man rather than having triumphed with the advance of knowledge over nature for the benefit of humanity, had actually lost himself and forfeited his privilege or uniqueness while making such prodigious advances in his knowledge. Confronted with the abundance of new knowledge opened up before society, the essential thing, human destiny, somehow lost its meaning and was forgotten. Throughout the greater work of the century runs the same strain of thought, the search for human value, which was discarded or levelled to the dignity of matter alone by the so-called "honest intellectuals."

The nineteenth century was really an age that was striving after new values for life, the old settled order, partly feudal with landowning classes in large control, giving way reluctantly and slowly to the new industrial democracy. A new

---

6 Ibid.

conscience was destined to evolve in which there was a greater sympathy for the unfortunate of society, for the ethics of liberalism; and its economics left much to be desired for the welfare of the nation as a whole. The crux of the converging feud was to be that of faith against the overwhelming convictions of doubt. The Victorian Age has been characterized as an age of doubt. Poetry must be utterly sincere, faithfully honest if it is to approach greatness, and because they could not meet these requirements, the poets of the Victorian Age were few and differed radically from their prose contemporaries who viewed their age much more honestly. In Victorian prose there was an open conflict between Faith and Doubt marked by the quality of honesty. This doubt in the nineteenth century in England was the direct result of science with its implications of man's place in nature; the new sciences of biology and sociology, and the narrowing horizon they seemed to be granting to the ideal of moral freedom. " ...the new philosophy of science fell upon the conscience of England about the middle of the century with the same crushing weight that the guilt of slavery carried for America."<sup>7</sup> The appearance of Darwin's Origin of Species was the beginning of a controversy

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 313.

which has continued down to our own day. It was not regarded as a book on biological theory but as a travesty against Holy Scripture and those who adhered to its tenets were not regarded as scientists but as advocates of an un-Christian myth.

Carlyle called it the "monkey damnification of mankind," and was never able to forgive its advocates. Many close literary friends parted company when their opinions upon Darwin's theories failed to co-incide. This particular work indicates how much in accord the prose of the age was with the conflict of current thought between faith and doubt. This conflict was also to be seen in Dickens and Thackeray who were constantly in touch with the perplexities of the age, as was George Elliott, who appears to attempt a solution, but whose works invariably conclude with the hopeless attitude characteristic of those of little faith. Those who turned to science for the solution to the problem of their age, discovered to their dismay that science, exact as it may appear to be, cannot substitute new certainties for the old certainties it displaces. In place of faith in God and immortality it offers cold formulas, hypotheses after ceaseless search and no verification. The law of selection and survival, the formulas of physics and chemistry, and the economic law of supply and demand may enlighten man to his material surroundings, but they fail to supply a motive for moral conduct.

Matthew Arnold represents the advocate of intellectual

romanticism among nineteenth century writers who sought a substitute for the outgrown religious and social creeds of the past. Having been afflicted with doubt as a young man and a conviction that without an abiding and genuine faith, a people perish; he faces the problem of science, and seems to find it in poetry and in the maxim "art for art's sake." He recognizes his age as unpoetic; with divided aim, and its lack of wholesome moral purpose and moral faith. He describes his age in these lines; the symptoms and their cause.

And we  
 Light half-believers of our casual creeds,  
 Who never deeply felt, nor clearly will'd,  
 Whose insight never has borne fruit in deeds,  
 Whose vague resolves ne'er have been fulfill'd,  
 For whom each year we see  
 Breeds new beginnings, disappointments new;  
 Who hesitate and falter life away,  
 And lose tomorrow the ground won to-day.

Everywhere is recognized the loss of the old faith and no substitute that can supply a motive for life. Meanwhile science is at work building a new world which lacks a motive for moral conduct and is quite unfamiliar to the wandering, lost soul. Arnold's gospel of culture, the study of perfection, is an emphasis on the need for a general theory that it does not itself supply, and his appeal for a balance implies confusion. He is credited with defining the enemy of the age and labeled it "philistine."

In 1888, the Confessions of a Young Man, by George

Moore, listed many unpleasant facts about the natural selfishness and callousness of youth. It had first been written in French, and is typical of the foreign influences which were to bring the latent seed to harvest in the final decade of the century. French influences, the naturalism of Zola, the decoration of Flaubert and Baudelaire, the stirrings of individualism, the inevitable protests of the human imagination against the colorless uniform of industrialism, were being manifested everywhere. Conventional patterns previously followed in literature lost their appeal and the new demand was for the reflection of personality in all its ugly truthfulness, accenting the exception against the general. The Victorian convention had become a taboo, which was inevitably to lead to a cult of the unmentionable. The imagination had been surfeited with a decorum that was unnatural and a conventionality that was dull. In the last decade of the century the convention was to be reversed.

The remarkable influence of the Oxford Movement which affected English religion in the middle of the nineteenth century could not have failed to affect English literature. But one stood apart from the other in a way unusual in English history. The Oxford Movement seemed throughout almost its whole course, to stand apart from the literature of the day. "Men went on for a long time thinking and writing in other

fields of learning as if there were no such persons as Newman and Keble and Pusey." <sup>8</sup> After long and persistent efforts the influence of their work was gradually felt outside religious or academic circles. Although the Oxford Movement was not recognized for a long time it was destined to form a most important epoch in literature in contrast to the scientific and liberal trends considered heretofore. "It is impossible to study the Oxford Movement without seeing that it was essentially one with the romantic movement which had re-created the literature of Germany and France." <sup>9</sup>

The Oxford Movement dawned at a time when society was quite thoroughly exposed to the extreme nature of the Romantic excesses and "it was in the nature of a last brave attempt to realize for religion and art some of the early promises of the revival before English society had hardened into Victorianism." <sup>10</sup> It was a revolt of a spiritual nature against the Liberalism which characterized contemporary society and which directed all its efforts toward "whittling down the revealed truths of Christianity until only pure naturalism was left." <sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, (Editors) Cambridge History of English Literature, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1928), Vol. XII, p. 280.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>10</sup> Calvert Alexander, S. J., The Catholic Literary Revival, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 28.



The main objective of the movement was "the return of those truths of the Christian revelation which alone could satisfy the 'spiritual wants' that lay at the bottom of the Romantic disquiet."<sup>12</sup>

Newman sought a divine solution for the state of human affairs as he saw them; by the elevation of human nature to a higher level than the natural. The revival of religion and culture would follow. Here he was in direct contrast to the "honest intellectuals" of the nineteenth century who were promulgating other remedies in the light of science and progress. The Oxford Movement was the "protest in the name of outraged art and despoiled religion, by those who all belonged to the earlier Romantic resurgence, against a strongly entrenched,<sup>13</sup> complacent, and rationalistic Philistinism."

The Movement constituted probably the greatest religious awakening in history and simultaneously its effects upon the trend of contemporary English literature was remarkable. It represents the direct anti-thesis of the cold rationalism and scientific materialism which characterized the so-called liberal progress of the nineteenth century. The incompatibility of these two diverse forces directly influenced the close of the century and the overwhelming confusion paramount in the

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

nineties was the result.

The inner connotations of Newman's philosophy was interpreted in poetry by Patmore, de Vere, and Gerard Hopkins. The system of theology and philosophy left by Newman to the poetic artists who possessed the foresight to cut themselves off from the official Romanticism of the day, provided them with a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which spared them from the mistake of indulging in personal philosophies and allowed them to concentrate their attention upon the problems of the poet.

The direct opposite was the effect of the intellectual disorder of the nineteenth century which "gave the poet no such system, indeed it imposed upon him the necessity of being at once an artist and an original speculative thinker -- an impossible combination. Thus the effort to construct for himself a workable plan out of the odds and ends of the wreckage of philosophical systems not infrequently resulted in grotesque and unsteady structure, the early collapse of which left him a prey to despair and frustration."<sup>14</sup>

The Oxford leaders were much indebted to the philosophy of conservatism, and in this way represent their most acute

---

14 Ibid., p. 34.

differences from the coldly rationalistic thinkers of the day. In his theory Newman was far away from Darwinism, yet he certainly expressed the heart of the science of comparative religion. His lectures on education state that knowledge for its own sake, as enlargement of the mind, is the object of a university education, but such knowledge is impossible apart from a theology. He found reality in the religious facts of the world, as the philosophers of his time found them in the moral fact, and the men of science in the physical.

The movement was primarily religious, but it was not narrow or cloistered and did not reject, but aspired to embody in itself, any form of art and literature, poetry, philosophy, and even science which could be pressed into the service of humanity. 15

---

15 Cambridge History of English Literature. Vol. XII, p. 290.

CHAPTER II  
FRANCIS THOMPSON'S RELATIONSHIP  
TO THE FIN DE SIÈCLE WRITERS

The diversive forces at work throughout the whole of the nineteenth century had their ultimate disastrous effects upon the society of the nineties, which was heir to all that had gone into the making of the century, but its most singular effects were realized in the art of the members of the younger generation who were destined to interpret and reflect the period as poets and artists of no mean talents.

The Eighteen Nineties possessed distinctive and arresting characteristics. It was a period of change. The people realized they were living amid changes and struggles, intellectual, social, and spiritual. "The atmosphere of the Eighteen Nineties was alert with new ideas which sought to find expression in the average national life."<sup>1</sup> There was a vital awakening to a new social consciousness which was for the most part ludicrous and extravagant by nature. It was an age of hope and action. People expected that anything might happen and would be happy so long as something was happening. "It was a time of experiment."<sup>2</sup> There was a complete revolt

---

1 Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties (London: Grant Richards Ltd., 1913), p. 23.

2 Ibid., p. 36.

against all that the Victorian Age had represented and a marked dissatisfaction with age-old conventions. This led to a desire for a new and total freedom. The period of transition, as it was called, saw hundreds of different movements abroad. The imagination was allowed full play and a new zest for living characterized the formerly staid atmosphere of English life in the eighties. People were "convinced that they were passing not only from one social system to another, but from one morality to another, from one culture to another, and from one religion to a dozen or none."<sup>3</sup>

All the new ideas that had been for some time accumulating from the disintegrating action of scientific and philosophic thought were being tried and applied under the guise of one movement or another. In the spiritual, moral, and social strata, age-old conventions were being ignored to allow the artistic trend of the individual to exploit its talents without any particular respect for any particular authority. It was a time when people were endeavoring to solve the riddle of life and to discover in their individualistic way a philosophy by which to live. Dissatisfied with the long ages of convention and action which arose out of precedent, many set about testing life for themselves. "It was the old battle between heterodoxy

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

and orthodoxy, materialist and mystic, Christian and Pagan, but fought from a great variety of positions."<sup>4</sup>

The artists of this younger generation were of two distinctly different schools of thought mirroring the two definite trends afoot in the nineties; one leading into religion and mysticism, the other into decadence and debauchery. It is the members of this latter group who represent the fin de siècle element of the age, while those of the former, represent the culture associated with the renaissance of the period. There are conflicting opinions regarding the value of the efforts expended by these men of the nineties by writers who have telescoped the period for us, but regardless of which direction the sympathies of the critics lie, they are almost all consistent in their recognition of the diversity of the two precise trends of the age. The period was as certainly a period of decadence as it was a period of renaissance.

The artists of the younger generation who followed the trend towards religion and mysticism, center around the most significant religious poet of the nineties, Francis Thompson, and his benefactors and greatest friends, Wilfrid and Alice Meynell. Their society however, is not complete without the added presence of Coventry Patmore, to whom Thompson openly

---

4 Ibid., p. 4.

confesses his great indebtedness. From within this immediate circle of Catholic writers emanated the spirit of the Catholic Literary Revival which distinguished the period as one of renaissance with purpose and results so consistently the direct anti-thesis of the decadent spirit of the times.

The decadent phase of the literary movement of the nineties was that which found expression in the work of those writers associated with the journalism of The Yellow Book and The Savoy: Aubrey Beardsley, Oscar Wilde, and Ernest Dowson. Beardsley has been called "the draughtsman of the period," Oscar Wilde, "its dramatist," and Ernest Dowson, "its characteristic decadent poet." These artists represent the fin de siècle spirit of the times, which we shall view as the movement it actually was.

There are many controversial interpretations of the meaning of decadence in relation to the spirit of that movement in the 1890's by even the best authorities on the subject because each writes from a different point of view. Those critics who lived during the period and were a lively part of the movement, interpret the trend with a nostalgic relish for the past in which they continue to live and recognize, therefore, little or no evil in the movement in which

The staidest of non-Conformist  
circles begot strange, pale youths  
with abundant hair, whose abandoned

thoughts expressed themselves in  
'purple patches of prose,' and  
whose sole aim in life was to live  
'passionately' in a succession of  
'scarlet moments.' 5

Arthur Symons, one of the most thorough critics of the  
nineties has described the literature of the period as follows:

The most representative literature  
of the day is certainly not classic,  
nor has it any relation with that old  
anti-thesis of the Classic, the Roman-  
tic. After a fashion it is no doubt a  
decadence; it has all the qualities  
that we find in the Greek, the Latin  
decadence, an intense self-conscious-  
ness, a restless curiosity in research,  
an over-subtilizing refinement upon  
refinement, a spiritual and moral per-  
versity... a new and beautiful and  
interesting disease. 6

Osbert Burdett has taken a volume to identify the nine-  
ties as "The Beardsley Period" and approaches its decadent theme  
in this manner:

The ugliest century in history  
laid, in the course of its decades,  
a deposit on the human imagination  
from which the poets and artists had  
tried in their several ways to escape.  
Wilde delighted in the contrast of its  
luxury and wretchedness. Beardsley

---

5 Holbrook Jackson. The Eighteen Nineties p. 31.

6 Arthur Symons. Dramatis Personae (Indianapolis:  
Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1923), p. 97.



translated the contrast into masses of black and white, and stripping the inhabitants of their masks, showed that to men without convictions, the passions became identified with sin, and in an age when the degradation of beauty had been pushed to its extreme, he took this degradation for his subject and proved how beautifully degradation itself could be depicted. 7

The Beardsley period had an autumnal atmosphere about it and represented in its literature the dissipation of the Romantic movement. Beardsley fulfilled the demand for a satirist of an age without convictions. The general theme of his subject was concentrated upon the state of the soul, not of innocence, but of experience, weary in the pursuit of a now exhausted conception. The soul of the modern was no longer able to command obedience on behalf of precepts in which it had ceased to believe. The one greatest reality of the age was the growing disillusionment resulting from the insincerity, ugliness and degradation of the period. This type of reality appeared to Beardsley as a vision of evil and he transcribed his vision with a satirical purpose as a decorative artist. His most characteristic style was not actually an original invention of evil in a virtuous age, but the depiction of an underlying

---

7 Osbert Burdett. The Beardsley Period (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925), p. 8.

corruption always present. "The evil that informs the Beardsley drawings was an evil that informed the typical soul of his contemporaries."<sup>8</sup>

Richard Le Gallienne, poet and critic of the period recognized in it "the widespread assertion and demonstration of individualism."<sup>9</sup> He refers in particular to the art of Oscar Wilde.

In him the period might see its own face in a glass. And it is because it did see its own face in him that it first admired, then grew afraid, and then destroyed him. Here, said the moralist, is where your 'modern' ideas will lead you... . 10

The age has also been stamped "The Yellow Nineties." "Like all artistic and literary movements, this one had, in the shape of various periodicals, its manifestoes."<sup>11</sup> The two principal organs of the movement, as mentioned before, were The Yellow Book, edited by the American, Henry Harland, a critic of unusual genius who had become profoundly influenced by the French decadents; and The Savoy, edited by Arthur Symons, which

---

8 Ibid., p. 127.

9 Richard Le Gallienne. The Romantic Nineties (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1925), p. 268.

10 Ibid., p. 269.

11 Bernard Muddiman. Men of the Nineties (London: Henry Danielson, 1920), p. 36.

"stood boldly for the modern note without fear and without any wavering of purpose."<sup>12</sup> It represents the most ambitious and comprehensive achievements of fin de siècle journalism. It was the deliberate intention of the founders of The Yellow Book to do something daring, and the improprieties of the periodical were described by The Times as a "combination of English rowdyism and French lubricity."<sup>13</sup> It would not have made an appearance in any other age but the turbulent nineties, where an unprecedented freedom in all matters had come to be expected and accepted. This periodical contained neither literary nor political news, nor book reviews, but claimed to be devoted to art and letters. However, it actually served the selfish purpose of chronicling in its pages the creative work of individualistic artists and writers who felt no direct responsibility to the sensitivities of the public and offered no apology for the nature of their contributions. Although these often shocked and confused, their authors desired to realize wide appeal and were in earnest to attract an audience through the medium of the bizarre, unwilling though the average reader might be to feign interest in their perverse writings.

---

12 Jackson, op. cit., p. 48.

13 Muddiman, op. cit., p. 39.

The Westminster Gazette asked that a law be passed making the publication illegal. Nothing like The Yellow Book had ever been seen before. "People were puzzled and shocked and delighted, and yellow became the colour of the hour, the symbol of the time-spirit."<sup>14</sup> It represented the bizarre and queer in art and life, with all that was outrageously modern. One of the chief reasons these periodicals flourished was the popularity of Beardsley's delicately-wrought black and white sketches, and also the excellent translations from the French of Verlaine, Voltaire, Zola, the Goncourts and Laclos, made by Ernest Dowson, highly recommended for the commission by Oscar Wilde, who knew his friend's ability to catch the nuances of a French story.

However, the career of each of these periodicals was short-lived, although during a brief existence Muddiman observes, "never did the gospel of the times flourish so exceedingly as in its [The Yellow Book's] pages."<sup>15</sup> With the withdrawal of Beardsley as art editor, its death sentence was written. He had overstepped the outer-most bounds of decency in his drawings and offended high and low society with the

---

14 Jackson, op. cit., p. 46.

15 Muddiman, op. cit., p. 41.

cruelty of purpose reserved exclusively to youth. Leonard Smithers made a unique place for himself as a fin de siècle publisher, and when The Savoy was published by him, "he stood courageously for the ideas and art of the decadence at its darkest hour."<sup>16</sup> With the passing of these periodicals the decadence in England was beginning to become a movement of the past.

Most of the influences which went into the making of the decadence in England were indirect and foreign. Each of the three decadents; Beardsley, Wilde, and Dowson came under the direct influence of the French decadents and share the same peculiar allegiance to things French. At the same time they were almost oblivious to the English currents of their own day probably because these were scientific or social, or coldly intellectual, and as such found no sympathy in the keenness of their sensitiveness. The age in which they lived has been described as an age of nerves. This implied a keener sensitiveness to certain feelings pulsating in the art of this movement. The English decadents however, were not truly representative of England as a nation, but only of cosmopolitan London.

During the early formative years of the lives of those men who were to make the 1890's a distinct literary age in

---

16 Jackson, op. cit., p. 46.

itself, the literary activities upon the continent, and in Paris in particular, were being recognized by most Englishmen as forewarnings of great import in shaping the trend of modern thought. Paris came to be regarded as the metropolis of art and letters. It represented the city of movements and experiments, of gaiety and an uninhibited freedom which appealed instinctively to the artistic temperament of the younger writer. The circumstances of the times were continually driving the new authors in search of new subjects and new treatments to the region that had been the least explored and which, because of the mystery it possessed, seemed to allure. Thus the new school of writers in cosmopolitan London looked primarily to Baudelaire for a new range of themes. "He and his followers were dandies of the spirit; but acute consciousness of sin bade them resist not evil, in contradistinction to the older mystics who became dandies of the spirit because they resisted evil."<sup>17</sup> He was as curious in his manipulation of language as in his choice of subject, and this double curiosity appealed to English writers who had grown weary of a too explicit and prosaic style. Most of the mentionable subjects of the day had become either too familiar or dreary. The search for the unmentionable became the imaginative impulse of

---

17 Jackson, op. cit., p. 110.

the day. A sanction, however, was found for this search in the rise of the scientific spirit and the accompanying appetite for facts. The growth of many newspapers was attributable to their busy display of the grosser scandals of the day, and the activities of the police court and the divorce court became the staple reading diet of the masses. To utilize this mass interest in the romantic and to redeem it to more artistic purposes, the new school of writers seeking a new artistic theory went to the French for inspiration, for it was they who had produced the naturalistic novel.

Emile Zola held a special attraction for these writers for he plunged with a remarkable bravery into his immediate surroundings and produced the romance of modern life with such a comprehensive insight into the vast spectacle of complexities which make up human existence that he made the truths which seemed ugly and hostile to the imagination, exhilarating and exciting. He began the system of search which was to become characteristic of the modern trend in literature. He preyed into concealed corners, dragged the souls of his own generation into the light, and attempted to reveal through the activities of the group as well as the individual, the phenomena of the new psychology. The influence of Zola upon English letters is recognized first in Swinburne's Poems and Ballads, the precursor of much that was to be typical of the Beardsley period.

Swinburne's poems exhibited a protest against the current critical prejudice that pleasure could be taken only in the representation of subjects that were pleasant in themselves. This was the attitude to be demonstrated later by the decadents of the nineties, who believed that any subject which could be poetically treated, was thereby poetical.

Another characteristic of the decadent writers of London was the careful concern for language as language, concern for the set and balance of words, and a certain feminine primness and preciseness heretofore not deliberately sought. This effort to express everything to the last extremity was partially derived from the French decadent movement also.

Theophile Gautier, exponent of "l'art pour l'art" described the decadent style as

...ingenious, complex, learned, full of shades, of meaning and investigation, always extending the boundaries of language, borrowing from all the technical vocabularies, taking colours from all palettes, notes from all keyboards, forcing literary expression of that which is most ineffable, and in form the vaguest and most fleeting outlines; listening that it may translate them, to the subtle confidence of the neuropath, to the avowals of ageing and depraved passion, and to the singular hallucinations of fixity of idea verging to madness. 18



The influence of Verlaine and the symbolist poets of Paris in this circle was profound. It was the liberty and lack of restraint of the French literature which captivated the minds of Dowson, Wilde, and Beardsley. French art and literature were never stationary but always developing. In 1890, Paul Fort, eighteen years old, like Beardsley, founded the Theatre d'Art in Paris. This French art at high pressure had such an immediate stimulating effect on English art that the corresponding eccentricities which developed in English art and literature equally as readily, were destined to be short-lived.

There were other foreign influences apart from that of the French decadent school which were eagerly absorbed by the English writers of the nineties. They became familiar with the philosophies of many European writers through the publication of their translated works. These included Tolstoy, Ibsen, Nietzsche, D'Annunzio, and Turgenev.

The first and foremost foreign ethical influence of the period was Henrik Ibsen who criticized conventional morals through his dramas. He was the spirit behind the movement "to shock." His dramas expressed a newly awakened social consciousness which demanded a change in the affairs of state, wider margins of personal freedom and better opportunities of life and comfort for all. He drew attention to the difficulties of the present-day marriage customs, and suggested the attitude of the

moral revolt. "Ibsen was the social stimulus to revolt."<sup>19</sup>

The intellectuals reading his plays soon learned to accept his idea of a self-centered personality. Ibsen had declared to a friend that "the great thing is not to allow oneself to be frightened by the venerableness of an institution."<sup>20</sup> "In the third quarter of the nineteenth century many false prophets went out into the world. The approaching death not only of the Catholic Church, but of Christianity was by many learned men confidently asserted."<sup>21</sup> Ibsen was not the least of these in his hollow predictions. "The state has its roots in Time: it will have to culminate in Time. Greater things than it will fall; all religion will fall."<sup>22</sup> The decadent of the nineties accepted this philosophy with relish, being perfectly in tune for a negative sort of calamity which would wipe out the particular form of soul-sickness from which he saw no escape.

These various foreign influences, and the great changes which came too quickly, combined to give the period its fin de siècle temper, which we shall view at work in the literary endeavors of the men of the nineties.

---

19 Ibid., p. 133.

20 Ibid.

21 Shuster, George N. The World's Great Catholic Literature (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1943), p. ix (Preface).

22 Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties p. 133.

The fin de siècle temper of the period was characterized by attitudes and feelings peculiar to the decadents in general, but to Dowson, Beardsley, and Wilde, in particular, as three of the most representative artists of their day. The movement which they represented, similar to most movements in art, was one of young men, each animated by the same protesting mood.

Probably the most distinguishing characteristic of the Beardsley group from their very earliest literary efforts was their personal dissatisfaction with themselves. This was the fatal spirit which was eventually to lead them through various mazes of false hopes and theories to utter destruction. After having willingly exposed their youthful and impressionistic minds to the fatalistic philosophies of the French decadents, and of Nietzsche and Ibsen; they discovered themselves stripped of whatever Victorian ideals and convictions they had not already lost at Oxford. The philosophies of pessimism and aestheticism which they had absorbed at Oxford and their too eager reception of the revolutionizing scientific threats of men of Darwin's company, had completely conquered their spirits and made them fatal victims of a frustration which they never succeeded in satisfactorily defeating.

This frustration was the source of the open revolt of all of them against the age in which they lived. With no well-laid plans for individual professions, and with no innate

desires to attain the conventional objectives of success for which other young men were striving, they were afflicted with an incurable thirst for the sense of escape from familiar and repressive surroundings. For the most part they found nature and humanity, in the mass, abhorrent. Their scope of vision was limited and faulty. Their conceptions of life, its purpose and destiny, were chiefly subjective rather than objective.

The desire to escape from reality and the world indicates the over-whelming sense of disappointment they experienced, and if they recognized a Supreme Power and believed in Him, their attitude was that of the individualist, the attitude of the egoist, "Where does 'He' fit into my plans?" rather than "Where do 'I' fit into His plans?" The decadent was the weak man blinded and overwhelmed with a sense of his own individualism who retaliated savagely upon an obscure, indefinable, imagined foe whom he could not master.

This marked personal dissatisfaction with themselves was at the root of the sense of disillusion which characterized the decadent group. In the face of it they recognized with a whimsical satire the precarious position they occupied in the society of their day and took a pagan delight in being favorites for no better reasons than that they were boldly different in a dandified or a cynical fashion. This note of disillusion was not original with this decade but had been

observed earlier in the century and was expressed in varying degrees and for various reasons by Byron, Keats, and Shelley, and grew with the century until it became explicit in the fin de siècle writers. It is easy to understand the disillusion which overtook the decadents when we consider that they were for the most part genuinely sincere in their intentions and purposes. This sincerity was one of the greatest virtues of the decadents. They were products of an age suffering from spiritual inertia and scientific confusion, and they shared with each other a similar loss of faith in what there remained of the supernatural in official Protestantism. This "made them the fittest sort of subjects to be victimized by all the negative attitudes -- cynicism, revolt, despair, nihilism..."<sup>23</sup>

The familiar and repressive surroundings which encouraged an incurable thirst for escape from ennui and disillusion drove the new Romantic in search of inspiration to the "artificial" rather than to the natural. This interest in the artificial was most obviously true of Oscar Wilde who had remarked "The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible--what the second duty is no one has as yet discovered."<sup>24</sup>

The elements of perversion, artificiality, curiosity,

---

23 Calvert Alexander, The Catholic Literary Revival p.221.

24 Quoted from Calvert Alexander, p. 96.

despair, and morbidity which gave to the 1890's a character all its own, were to find precise expression in the works of the three decadents, Dowson, Beardsley, and Wilde. The manner in which Francis Thompson, their contemporary faced the challenge of the fin de siècle spirit and thereby distinguished himself as a genuine son of the nineteenth century, and especially of the 1890's, will constitute the main theme of this chapter.

Thompson bore a definite affinity to the decadents of the period and has been described as having displayed certain decadent characteristics in common with Dowson, Beardsley, and Wilde. These similarities are not many nor very important, however. As literary artists, Thompson and his contemporaries were, as a group, distinguished by a scholarly respect for English and intense desire to write well. Each recognized in himself a positive relationship to the age in which he lived. Thompson envisioned himself, and rightly so, as a prophet of the age: "It is left to the poet to prophesy... ." <sup>25</sup>

Oscar Wilde has expressed the method of the contemporary decadent in his consideration of his personal relationship to his age: "I was so typical a child of my age that in my perversity, and for perversity's sake, I turned the good things

---

25 Everard Meynell. The Life of Francis Thompson (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1913), p. 151.

of my life to evil, and the evil things of my life to good."

To envision with greater clarity the affinity which existed between Francis Thompson and his decadent contemporaries, and the differences which ensued in their individual responses to the voice of the age, it is necessary to consider the background and preparation which accompanied each into their respective literary careers.

Francis Thompson and Ernest Dowson lived very similar lives from a physical point of view. The days of their youth and the final days of their lives were marked by incidents remarkably similar in nature.

Ernest Dowson was born at Lea in Kent, in England, in 1867 when Francis Thompson was just nine years old. Although a healthy child at birth he was by no means a robust child and never became a boy among boys. His youth was almost entirely devoid of optimism and lightheartedness, and as a result, before he left his teens he manifested a direct inclination toward pessimism. His family life was marked by an atmosphere of insecurity and despair, the cause or serious nature of which it is quite likely Dowson was unaware. Both parents were temperamentally unstable and each possessed an inherited predisposition to consumption. Because the cold dampness of London was so harmful to the frail health of his parents, they

were forced to take frequent winter trips to the sunny climate of southern France. It must have been apparent to Dowson as a boy that his parents could not legitimately afford these trips to the Continent, and undoubtedly as he grew older he recognized the exact reasons for the sojourns. In spite of the sorry conditions under which the trips were executed, Dowson soon learned to adapt himself to his new surroundings and became deeply receptive to the new series of impressions which were to mark his outlook upon life in later years.

Early in his teen he became quite fluent in the French tongue; and as his ability to express himself in the language developed, his mind developed a great impressionability to the French point of view. He cultivated an attitude toward life and literature which was peculiarly French; and without consciously realizing it, conducted himself at home in England with a natural French air devoid of affectation in an age when other young Londoners were trying so desperately to develop such a Continental aspect. His sincere and lasting preference for things French and the influence of his tutors led him to a familiarity with French literature which was extraordinarily wide for one born of English parents. His boyhood reading was in direct contrast to that of Thompson's. Throughout his adolescence he hardly touched Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth. However, he more than a casual familiarity with Dumas, Balzac, and Hugo. Later on when



Dumas no longer appealed to him, he had become much interested in Gautier and Musset, and had read considerably in Flaubert, Daudet, and the Goncourt brothers. His favorite in his late teens was Baudelaire, whose Fleurs du Mal held him under a prolonged spell.

At times when his parents took up brief residence in Italy, Dowson picked up a considerable Italian vocabulary. While his family was staying at Senta he was provided for a short while with a tutor, who was an Italian priest, and through him Dowson became acquainted with the Roman poets, Catullus and Propertius. His father encouraged and assisted him in his study of Latin literature for he believed, as did others of his generation that a solid foundation in Latin was not only a mark of culture but fundamental to intellectual development and attainment. It is difficult to determine to what extent his reading of the ancient poets shaped Dowson's inclination to write verse, but in his later work there are themes which he took directly from his reading of Vergil, Catullus, Propertius, and Horace. It has been suggested that the Horatian phrase Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae from the first Ode of the Fourth Book was the sole genesis for his famous Cynara poem. It is generally believed that Dowson enjoyed the Roman poets during an impressionable period in his development, and in their works he found much to admire and imitate until it became his own; but he was far from being the

result of their exclusive influence and was actually much less of a Latinist than his classmates at Queen's believed him. His reading in French and Latin authors did little to stimulate curiosity in other fields. He showed no interest in the sort of information which was part of every English schoolboy's common knowledge. His ignorance of the common facts of history, geography and natural science was conspicuous. His ingenuous notions concerning the great men of the past often gave his acquaintances considerable amusement. The fact that his great-uncle, Alfred Dommet, had been Prime Minister of New Zealand did nothing to stimulate Ernest's interest in government or in England's far-flung possessions. His father's business at the Dock, where ships passed flying the flags of a score of nations, did not tempt him to inform himself about foreign lands.

There were pronounced gaps in Dowson's education, one of which can be recognized as a distinct injustice to him as he grew older and fell more and more into the despair of pessimism. That was the absence of any religious training whatever in his youth. He confessed at one time to Plarr, his biographer, that his boyhood was pagan. His parents nominally were of the Church of England, but in the Dowson home there were no devotional rites enacted and no insistence on any formal mode of worship. In fact, there was no moral code in the home but a vague sort of application of the Golden Rule. It is conceivable that had his family professed some particular

creed Dowson's boyhood would have been better ordered and his character would have been strengthened. But his parents seemed to lack a necessary strength of will and were not bent on a conventional rearing for their son, which would include the academic training and discipline from which Dowson's temperament would surely have benefited greatly. Ill health and financial insecurity began to warp their outlook on life and by the time Ernest was ready to attend school his parents were primarily concerned about their own health and dwindling income.

There is little reason to suspect that there was any over-abundance of security and peace in the atmosphere surrounding the unstable and consistently ill and financially harried parents of Dowson. The biographer of Dowson learned from the poet many things concerning his religious attitude, which was a complex and confused state of mind, from his very earliest years. "Natural religion," he states, "was a phase, which at no time of my life have I ever undergone or understood." Again he wrote, "all these fluctuations and agonies of a hypersensitive, morbid childhood with Hebraic traditions are to me incomprehensible."<sup>27</sup> However, this freedom from formal dogma or natural religion did not appear to allow him any

---

<sup>27</sup> Mark Longaker. Ernest Dowson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944), p. 16.

degree of carefree happiness. On the contrary, through the lack of it he also missed the discipline and the instinctive feeling of security which are part of an intelligently moderated religious training. As a result of the irregular training of his youth he grew up without any consuming ambition to reach any of the goals conventionally set by English boys of his class. His plans for a profession and a future were vague.

Another noticeable gap in Dowson's education centers around his lack of interest in, and appreciation for, the things of nature. The days of his youth during which he travelled with his parents were not centered around large cities, but preferably in small Italian and French towns and country places. Yet, even in those days he showed no inclination to roam about the fields and woods. When he uses the names of flowers in his poems they have come to his work directly from a book or an encyclopedia, rather than from his personal experiences with them in a garden. "Dowson's lilies, asphodels, and violets have none of the dew of the garden on them; they are only a part of a remote background. He likes the word 'violet' but it is for the sound of the word rather than for the fragrance and beauty of the flower. The roses which he 'flung riotously with the throng' were only symbols to him, not flowers whose velvety petals moved him to joy."<sup>28</sup>

---

28 Ibid., p. 15.

He frequently amused his Oxford comrades on their walks through the country by the bookish names he inaccurately applied to common trees, flowers, and birds.

Following his pagan childhood of shifting scenes and life-long impressions, Dowson's display of talent in literature and poetry decided his father to send him to Oxford where he would receive the advantages of university training and the type of discipline he so sorely needed. It was not the desire for particular professional training which interested Dowson in Oxford, but a curiosity in what other young men of similar interests were doing there.

The circumstances of life and the influences which shaped the destiny of Francis Thompson in the days of his youth are interesting in contrast and similarity to Dowson's.

The atmosphere which surrounded the childhood of Francis Thompson was of a far more stable, secure, and religious nature than that experienced by Ernest Dowson. "Thompson's spiritual heritage was derived from a mother disowned by her family when she became a Catholic, and a convert father no less fervent who spent his life as a physician in a community in which his family was ostracized because of their faith."<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Terence Connolly, S. J., Francis Thompson: In His Paths (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co., 1944), p. 163.

The obstacles which his mother had to overcome before she found complete peace in the practice of her Catholic faith were to be duplicated in her son's sorrowful life-time until he found complete peace and security awaiting him in the Catholic sanctuary of the Meynell home.

As a child Francis was never robust and never became a boy amongst boys; and from his personal recollections of his childhood days one is easily convinced that they were not happy days entirely, but rather a melancholy period of his life during which he learned early to discipline his tongue and to reserve expression for his pen alone. He remembered with unusual lucidity many occasions in his childhood when despair and fear were often his sole companions, as the time he accidentally became separated from his mother and realized with terror that he was lost. In a notebook he has written: "Yes, childhood is tragic to me. And then critics complain that I do not write 'simply' about it. O fools! as if there was anything more complex; held closer to the heart of mystery, than its contemplation."<sup>30</sup> That was his childhood. But what it means "to be a child" was beautifully expressed by Thompson when he wrote: "It is to have a spirit yet streaming from the

---

30 Meynell, Life p. 4.

waters of baptism; it is to believe in love, to believe in loveliness, to believe in belief... ." <sup>31</sup> His greatest happiness in his childhood was found in the company of his mother, his sisters, his toys and his books.

At the age of seven he was reading poetry, and "overwhelmed by feelings of which he knew not the meaning, had found his way to the heart of Shakespeare and Coleridge." <sup>32</sup> Of his early reading he writes: "I read certain poetry-- Shakespeare, Scott, the two chief poems of Coleridge, the ballads of Macaulay--mainly for its dramatic or narrative power." <sup>33</sup> Blake and Aeschylus were constant companions of his in his early twenties. From these authors he gathered about him the company of thoughts which were to be his intimates until the end.

At a very early age he displayed a vigorous interest in the affairs of the nation and this interest never waned but grew as he matured until he reached that pinnacle of sheer wisdom from which he was able to interpret and prophesy from the things he saw and heard. "As a youth during the Russo-Turkish war he built a city of chairs with a plank for a draw-bridge; 'Plevna,' his father said, would be found written in

---

31 Francis Thompson, Works, Vol. III "Shelley," p. 7.

32 Meynell, op. cit., p. 4.

33 Ibid., p. 5.

his heart for the interest he had in the siege. If Plevna was written there, then so was Ladysmith. He had no plank draw-bridge during the Boer war, but he was none the less excited on that account."<sup>34</sup>

Thompson resembles Dowson in his youthful attitude toward nature in that he "would make any layman appear a botanist with easy questions about the commonplaces of the hedges, and a flowered dinner-table in London always kept him wondering, fork in air, as to kinds and names."<sup>35</sup> He could not distinguish one tree from another and was ignorant of the names of the commonest field flowers. Yet one of his favorite recreations was a tramp through the country and during his Ushaw days such tramps were very frequent. It must have been on these walks that he imbibed the remarkable knowledge of the things of nature of which his later poetry abounds; for his poetic associations with plants and flowers are free from the bookish, artificial, symbolic air which characterizes Dowson's reference to them. While a seminary student his two chief recreations were a country walk or a visit to Chapel. Being disorderly in matters of time and appearance, he found in the ritual of the Church an order and discipline which his mind and soul stood

---

34 Ibid., p. 7.

35 Ibid., p. 23.



very much in need of, and gradually, although he never did succeed in overcoming the irregularity and lack of punctuality which would have made him a success in his seminary days, he did demand a degree of orderliness and discipline from nature. His biographer has remarked: "Nature he ignored till she spoke the language of religion."<sup>36</sup>

Contrary to the nature of Dowson's parents, Thompson's possessed an admirable strength of will which motivated their plans for Francis's future life. In the autumn of 1870, Thompson, a boy of eleven entered Ushaw seminary as a junior to begin his seven long years of preparation for the priesthood. Here he spent the most impressionable years of his life and distinguished himself in the field of literature.

However, an unsuccessful attempt to overcome an incurable indolence, combined with a life-long physical weakness and an incredible impracticableness, made it inevitable that his destiny should not lie in the priesthood; and his superiors were forced to advise him to discontinue his efforts toward that goal. This was not the first disappointment suffered in Thompson's young life; but it was the greatest, most heart-breaking sorrow life had to deal him; and to observe the trend of his life from that point on, it is obvious that it was

---

36 Ibid., p. 26.

a disappointment from which Thompson never fully recovered.

Always an obedient son, and eager to please his father who had likewise suffered at this great failure of his, Francis agreed to take up the study of medicine although his heart was not in it. After six years endeavor during which he again distinguished himself in the field of literature, he suffered the inevitable second failure. Considering that his heart was never in the pursuit of the medical profession, this failure was not the cause of as much sorrow to him as his failure to merit the priesthood. But it did disastrously strengthen and magnify his "consciousness of failure," a state of mind which followed him to his early grave.

The impatience and misunderstanding which grew out of these failures between Thompson and his father resulted in his leaving home in 1885, for London, destitute and broken in health and spirit. He carried with him, however, a remarkable background. He had spent his entire life-time in an exclusively Catholic environment and under exclusively Catholic influences at home and at school, all of which had helped to shape his thoughts and ideals. His Catholic faith, his seminary training with its consequent knowledge of the liturgy and Holy Scripture, his medical studies which gave him a broad scientific outlook and his personal experiences were to prove invaluable to him as a poet, and account for his expert handling of so many diverse subjects and his constant foresight so

sadly lacking in the literary endeavors of most of his contemporaries.

From this point on, Thompson's life and Dowson's follow a quite similar physical pattern. After two years at Oxford, Dowson returned home without a degree and scarcely equipped to be self-supporting. His home-coming did little to gladden the heart of his father, who had long recognized the instability of his son's nature. Dowson knew he possessed definite literary talents and desired to make literature his profession; but a modest loyalty to his family prevailed upon him to assist his sick father with his work at the Dock, where he was unable to evince even the most minute curiosity. Only at night when the ships moving up the channel at high water to present memorable scenes to his mind did he find any satisfaction in his work. Although his work at the Dock rarely called for momentous decisions, he much preferred to avoid the responsibility of supervising even the most trifling details. The intolerable ennui which oppressed him after the novelty of his work had worn off was due to this dread of responsibility. Consequent dissatisfaction with his circumstances and the surrounding environment's lack of inspiration drove him to abandon the pretense and escape to London's West End where he renewed Oxford friendships and drifted into a Bohemian sort of existence which was the characteristic routine of the fin de siècle artist.

Dowson's friends recognized in him even at the early age

of twenty-two a definite inclination toward pessimism. He began to display a marked decadent note in his occasional expressions to his close friends. His scattered and fragmentary observations concerning the inner significance of life, during the years immediately following his departure from Oxford, reveal an almost total lack of Christian hope. Plarr, his biographer, recalls one of his earliest utterances, which is an echo of the despair so characteristic of the age and which was to find expression in much of Dowson's poetry: "The conclusion of the whole matter--a striving and a striving and an end in nothing."<sup>37</sup> A contemporary of Dowson's penning his impression of the young boy wrote:

The final impression... that one gets from him and his verse is in substance this: behind the veil of personality if you could succeed in raising it--such seems to be his analysis of human purpose--you would find--nothing... . The mystery of our days and deeds according to the pessimistic outlook, may be likened to a series of cunningly devised, but empty audience chambers; or if you prefer a different notion, a secret drawer one discovers by merest chance and forcing it open finds a billet-doux, a faded ribbon, ashes of roses--  
Rien! 38

---

37 Longaker, Ernest Dowson p. 57.

38 Ibid., p. 58.

To Dowson, the contemplation of heaven and the fear of hell were horrible contemplations. "I object most strongly to a personal immortality. Immortality! Wretched ideal. Infinite ennui--I die at the thought."<sup>39</sup> It is not difficult to comprehend such a philosophy in one whose childhood was pagan and whose entire life was completely devoid of religion.

When Dowson left Oxford and went down to London his philosophy was tinged with pessimism and marked by its lack of hope. His health was obviously poor, but he exhibited an unmistakable zest for life with little or no remorse over his previous failure as a student and at his initial efforts to aid his father in his business at the Dock. His background in French literature and philosophy, an irregular education, and a pagan childhood in an age so sorely lacking convictions, contributed to his gradual development into one of the most representative decadents of the period.

He was not long in London before he became identified as a new member of the Rhymer's Club, where "young poets, then very young, recited their own verses to one another with a desperate and ineffectual attempt to get into key with the Latin Quarter."<sup>40</sup> "To one who had for long cherished the notion

---

39 Ibid.

40 Arthur Symons, Introduction to The Poems and Prose of Ernest Dowson (New York: Boni & Liveright Co., 1919), p. 3.

of a brother-hood of artists such as the groups which flourished in the Latin Quarter of Paris, the formation of the club of poets held out a marked appeal."<sup>41</sup> Dowson's membership in this club, which some critics have identified with the decadence, brought him into close contact with Oscar Wilde who was to exert an unhealthy influence upon him; and Lionel Johnson, to whom Dowson went in search of encouragement when he was the victim of total despair and disillusion. He had early discovered Johnson to be a man who "saw men's minds and souls rather than their ill-kept, suffering bodies."<sup>42</sup>

Dowson's sojourn to the Bohemian West End of London during his most productive years, which were few, was marked by a ruthless quest for the sensational. He became careless of his appearance and always looked like a foreigner entirely ill at ease and out of place in London. He frequented strange, squalid haunts and drank hashish in his insane desire to escape from the ennui of life. Indolence and fear played an important part in Dowson's inability to cope with the great things of life. He was unhappy but knew not the reason why. Dividing his time between London and Paris, his characteristic zest for riotous living distinguished him and took no small toll of his already

---

41 Longaker, op. cit., p. 87.

42 Ibid., p. 232 .

delicate health which was threatened by consumption. He affected a "curious love of the sordid, so common an affectation of the modern decadent, and with him so genuine it grew upon him, and dragged him into more and more sorry corners of a life that was never exactly 'gay' to him."<sup>43</sup> With a body too weak for ordinary existence he desired all the enchantments of the senses. He possessed a keen sensibility, and suffered tragic emotions; but because he had no outlook and no escape of the intellect, his only escape was to plunge into the crowd and fancy that he lost sight of himself. He appeared to vaunt from one vain illusion to another vain illusion never finding life to correspond with his idle dreams. In succumbing to circumstances he brought the destructive forces of life tumbling down upon his head, and plunged from there into the deep waters of oblivion.

His Bohemian existence as a disciple to realism in poetry was filled with much suffering and despair. A man with lesser ideals in similar circumstances would have suffered far less. But Dowson had **ideals**, and he recognized early in life his inability to realize his ideals. One of these was the consummation of an ideal love. Another was the genuine desire for

---

43 Ibid., p. 8.

a guiding purpose in his erratic life toward the culmination of a worthwhile destiny. "With a soul too shy to tell its own secret, he desired the boundless confidence of love."<sup>44</sup>

The pathetic story of his unrequited love for the very young daughter of a French restaurant proprietor in Soho reveals the source of much of the despair he gives voice to in his poetry. The girl, who was to become the passion of his life, was little more than a child when he first saw her. Her freshness and innocence immediately attracted him and she seemed to have a way of bringing to the surface the very best that was in him. He never referred to her beauty, and she was a comely child; but her unspoiled, unaffected grace and sincerity stirred his soul as no one had ever succeeded in doing before. With the passage of time his sentimental attachment took on all the emotional intensity of a great passion, to the amazement of his friends and relatives, who feared disastrous results inasmuch as the object of his devotion was still a mere child and his past association with women was of a none too admirable character. But "his love of Adelaide Foltinowicz was only the natural result of his devotion to the beauty of innocence."<sup>45</sup>

---

44 Ibid., p. 8.

45 Ibid., p. 75.



However, Adelaide's parents did little to foster the poet's attachment for their daughter and did not seem to even recognize how genuine and sincere his intentions actually were. When, after two years of constant admiration and devotion towards his ideal, she married a waiter in her father's restaurant, Dowson's cup of sorrow overflowed. His ideal, as always, stood beyond his reach.

He turned to the Catholic Church at a time of his life when his spiritual economy was completely disorganized. His earlier utterances on religion had since lost any significance for him and he had reached a stage where he was not only willing but anxious to believe in the existence of an alleviative force.

Without relinquishing his notion that the ugliness of the world could be partially escaped and corrected by a worship of beauty, he evolved the belief that the Church could offer him and mankind partial sanctification if not complete redemption. It could inculcate an innocence of heart and mind which in itself was beautiful and would mitigate the bitterness of the recognition of the preponderance of ill. 46

Dowson never achieved the rank of a Catholic poet in the sense that Francis Thompson did because of his inconsistency in everything. But surely he anticipated upon his reception

into the Church a partial sanctification and a fruitful enriching of his life. This was his ideal. But again it was an illusion beyond his powers to accomplish. How greatly these two disappointments in his young life strengthened his "consciousness of failure" and drove him further into the depths of despair, we may only conjecture from the poems he has left. As with Thompson, he went to an early grave with the conviction of failure weighing upon his heart. His rescue from the streets of London by Robert Sherard was too late, and he succumbed at the early age of thirty-three to the ravages of consumption; destitute, friendless, and without the comfort of the last rites of the Church.

Francis Thompson's outcast days in London had a similar nightmare atmosphere about them. He went down to London destitute and broken in health and tried to earn his living at odd jobs until finally he became a common tramp earning a few pence during the day by calling cabs and spent his nights in wretched lodging-houses. His greatest affliction during this time was his addiction to laudanum with which he had been treated during a previous illness. His use of the drug was not due to a ruthless quest for the sensational, but actually was a dire necessity to stave off the ravages of tuberculosis.

"Opium, the saving of my life; is one of his rare allusions

to it."<sup>47</sup> But it dealt as severely with him as hashish had with Dowson.

It put him in such constant strife with his own conscience that he had ever to hide himself from himself and for concealment he fled to that which made him ashamed, until it was as if the fig-leaf were of necessity plucked from the Tree of Evil. It killed in him the capacity for acknowledging those duties to his family and friends, which, had his heart not been in shackles, he would have owned with no ordinary ardour. 48

He was weak physically, suffering from the same malady which afflicted Dowson, but his moral spirit never wavered under the burden of ill health. His body suffered from under-nourishment in order that his sporadically earned money could purchase for his tortured nerves the soothing nirvana which was to be found in narcotics.

Thompson discovered London at the same time as did Dowson, Beardsley and Wilde. The night life of the huge city opened up before him in all its vividness and boisterous magic. He was surrounded by fleshly vices of all sorts but was never corrupted by them. He did not, as did Dowson, seek an escape from the disillusion which confronted him after his

---

47 Meynell, Life p. 41.

48 Ibid., p. 40.

two outstanding failures, in the riotous living the West End afforded the seeker after sensations. But he suffered keenly from the vision alone of the sordid side of life in the dirty and crowded districts of the city where Dowson sought love and inspiration. Thompson knew at first hand all that went into the making of the decadence of the nineties.

It is necessary however, to make a distinction between the manner of his familiarity with evil and that of Wilde or Dowson or Verlaine. They knew sin by sinning; he by a method no less experimental and productive of compunction but without the same moral guilt. He tramped the crooked streets of London as did Dante the descending spirals of Hell, knowing all sins and participating in them by the consciousness that in himself was the seed of all these fleurs du mal. It was this undoubtedly that enabled him later to rise to the higher terraces of the spiritual life while those who knew sin in another way remained below with only the heavy sense of guilt. 49

Despair, the knowledge of sin, repentance, all the solitary griefs, agonized hopes and ashen flowers he knew on the one hand, and on the other the exultant surge of resurrection, not partial, not momentary, as was the case with so many, but a

triumphant entering into the full spirit of Catholicism out of which arose his best poetry. 50

Both Thompson and Dowson suffered from the soul-sickness which permeated the age in which they lived and each has produced a literary masterpiece depicting an avenue of escape for the soul in a desperate struggle to evade the responsibility for the state of suffering in which it finds itself. Dowson's famous poem "Cynara" is his personal identity with the nineteenth century and portrays the despair he gives himself up to in the realization that there is no escape from the voice of the immortal soul. Burdett says it is a poem of ennui and of reaction, "of the inconstant flesh at issue with the constant soul."<sup>51</sup>

I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind,  
 Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng,  
 Dancing to put thy pale, lost lilies out of mind;  
 But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,  
     Yea, all the time, because the dance was long;  
 I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

I cried for madder music and for stronger wine,  
 But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,  
 Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! and the night is thine;  
 And I am desolate and sick of an old passion,  
     Yea, hungry for the lips of my desire;  
 I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

---

50 Ibid., p. 150.

51 Burdett, The Beardsley Period p. 158.

The moral and physical weakness which Dowson depicts here is representative not only of himself but of the sins and failings of the entire society of humanity of the nineteenth century, and particularly of the 1890's. It is a complete confession of unfaithfulness to every ideal, or deals, symbolized in the "lost lilies." It closes on a destitute note of despair, without even a glimmer of the Christian hope we find in Thompson's masterpiece, "The Hound of Heaven," which has identified him with the nineteenth century. This is a poem of reaction also, but it is a complete reaction and symbolic of the spiritual unrest of the whole century. Despair is depicted in the desolation of man in his futile efforts to seek peace in flight from the over-powering love of his Creator.

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
 I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
 I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
 Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears  
 I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

The substitution of human compassion for Divine comfort was the method of the soul in the throes of despair fearing retreat into the arms of God would close the door to earthly joys and associations.

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.)

The soul then seeks peace in the consolation afforded through the contemplation of the beauties of nature.

Against the red throb of its sunset-heart  
I laid my own to beat,  
And share commingling heat;  
But not by that, by that, was eased my human smart.  
In vain my tears were wet on Heaven's grey cheek,  
For ah! we know not what each other says,  
These things and I; in sound I speak-  
Their sound is but their stir, they speak by  
silences.

And to his despair he discovers that

Nature, poor stepdame, cannot slake my drouth;

But the reaction is complete. We are not deserted in the depths of despair as in "Cynara," but the solution to the mystery of life's sufferings, hopes and desires is culminated in the victory of God's love.

Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,  
Save Me, save only Me?  
All which I took from thee I did but take,  
Not for thy harms,  
But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms,  
All which thy child's mistake  
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:  
Rise, clasp My hand, and come!  
Halts by me that footfall:  
Is my gloom, after all,  
Shades of His hand, outstretched caressingly?  
'Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,

I am He Whom thou seekest!  
 Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me.'

The decadents' writings were mostly an explicit confession of despair as can be ascertained by the most casual ramblings through the poems of Dowson, the arch-exponent of the Decadence. Fashioned from his imbibing of the philosophy of Verlaine are his thoughts in "After Paul Verlaine:"

Tears fall within mine heart,  
 As rain upon the town:  
 Whence does this languor start,  
 Possessing all mine heart?

Nay! the more desolate,  
 Because, I know not why,  
 (Neither for love nor hate)  
 Mine heart is desolate.

Again in "Seraphita" is echoed the remark Dowson made to Plarr, his biographer, "the conclusion of the whole matter-- a striving and a striving and an end in nothing."

But when the storm is highest, and the thunders blare,  
 And sea and sky are river, O moon of all my night!  
 Stoop down but once in pity of my great despair,  
 And let thine hand, though over late to help, alight  
 But once upon my pale eyes and my drowning hair  
 Before the great waves conquer in the last vain flight.

And in "A Last Word" he not only accepts the fin de siècle pessimism, but entertains it and uses it to paint a picture of the age.



Let us go hence: the night is now at hand;  
 The day is overworn, the birds all flown;  
 And we have reaped the crops the gods have sown;  
 Despair and death; deep darkness o'er the land,  
 Broods like an owl; we cannot understand  
 Laughter or tears, for we have only known  
 Surpassing vanity: vain things alone  
 Have driven our perverse and aimless band.

Thompson recognized the pessimism and despair and the fin de siècle inertia of which so many writers of his younger generation were stagnant victims, and we know from knowledge of his nightmare days in the heartless London streets, that he suffered tremendously from lack of hope, and from dissatisfaction with himself. But his experience did not halt his song and drive him to the fatal succumbing to circumstances that seemed to Dowson the only avenue of escape. His experience pitched his song in a minor key only, and because he felt "the futility of all writings save such as were explicitly a confession of faith"<sup>52</sup> we have in that description his answer to the challenge of the decade with all its perversity, despair, and ennui.

His rare gift of insight, sorely lacking in the reflections of the decadents is exemplified most clearly in his attitude toward nature, compared to Dowson's. In prose he expressed the depth and the strength and the reason thereof

---

52 Meynell, Life p. 202.

Nature's hold upon his soul.

Absolute Nature lives not in our life, nor yet is lifeless, but lives in the life of God: and in so far and so far merely, as man himself lives in that life, does he come into sympathy with Nature, and Nature with him. She is God's daughter, who stretches her hand only to her Father's friends. 53

Thompson reiterates in poetry the sentiment expressed above; the necessity of the spirit of Christ for the right interpretation of nature, in these lines from "Of Nature: Laud and Plaint."

Stand at the door and knock;  
 For it unlocked  
 Shall all locked things unlock,  
 And win but here, thou shalt to all things win,  
 And thou no more be mocked.  
 For know, this Lady Nature thou hast left,  
 Of whom thou fear'st thee reft,  
 This Lady is God's daughter, and she lends  
 Her hand but to His friends,  
 But to her Father's friends the hand which  
                   thou wouldst win;  
 Then enter in,  
 And here is that which shall for all make mends.

Thompson's dedication to nature is entirely different from the Nature worship identified with the Romantic school of

---

53 Thompson, "Nature's Immortality," Works, Vol. III, p. 82.

poetry also. His is a mature view in contrast with the childishness often to be found in Wordsworth, and the lack of insight to be found in his decadent contemporaries who neither worshipped nature nor loved her, but denounced her. One of the first steps in the development of Dowson's philosophy of Bohemianism was based on his belief that "Nature and humanity are, in the mass, abhorrent."<sup>54</sup>

In a poem entitled "To Nature," found in a manuscript book of his, Dowson indicated that he had reached through his reading or experience the belief that Nature was an abhorrent harpy, who was a false mother to her children. In terms more positive than were usual for him, he denounced Nature, and vowed that no song of his should ever celebrate the shameful triumphs of her laws. He was completely aware of all of Nature's treachery and vileness; and he would never again be betrayed into believing her beauty other than a mask behind which lurked a malign force. The spirited vindictiveness of the sonnet would suggest that he was indulging in no mere literary exercise in penning its lines, and that his source of inspiration was far more concrete than his reading in the pessimistic philosophers; but there seems to be no substantial

---

54 Longaker, Ernest Dowson p. 39.

reason for his unnatural attack on Nature.

It was with a characteristic humility, faith and hope that Thompson looked to Nature for just what she was--a creature of God. The Romanticist looked to her for a guide, a consolation, a hope, a refuge, a religion, and many like Wordsworth stopped there and were claimed by the philosophy of Pantheism. Thompson, in his admiration for nature, which he loved with a love very deep in its ardor, shows himself most truly a nineteenth century man. It was his Catholicism in its most mystic phases which served as a sanctuary to him and saved him from the fallacy of Pantheism. "At every turn he is the devoted, intentest, faithfulest interpreter of the material world. All his sources were found in nature."<sup>55</sup>

London, the capital city inspired such a song as this in the decadent, Richard Le Gallienne:

London, London, our delight  
Great flower that opens but at night,  
Great city of the midnight sun,  
Whose day begins when day is done.

Lamp after lamp against the sky  
Opens a sudden beaming eye,  
Leaping a light on either hand,  
The iron lilies of the Strand.

---

<sup>55</sup> Thomas E. Trese, S. J., Francis Thompson, A Metaphysical Poet (Chicago, Loyola University, 1944), p. 75.

However, the sights of the capital city touched springs in the soul of Thompson for which expression he had no song, but a prose lament which reveals how greater was his insight, his concern, his understanding, and his sorrow over the spectacle which London presented to his prophetic eyes.

I look upon my left hand, and I see another region--is it not rather another universe? A region whose hedgerows have set to brick, whose soil is chilled to stone; where flowers are sold and women, where the men wither and the stars; whose streets to me on the most glittering day are black. For I unveil their secret meanings. I read their human hieroglyphs. I diagnose from a hundred occult signs the disease which perturbs their populous pulses. Misery cries out to me from the kerb-stone, despair passes me by in the ways; I discern limbs laden with fetters impalpable; I hear the shaking of invisible lashes, I see men dabbled with their own oozing life. 56

The attitude of the decadent group toward Nature confines them to the age in which they lived exclusively and closes the door to immortality upon them. "In short, it was the characteristic of the decadence not to sing the bloom of Nature,

but the bloom of cosmetics, and likewise, town was adored for its artificial rather than its natural characteristics."<sup>57</sup>

When Thompson resorts to the minor key with a heavy note, he has good reason to do so. His plaintive chant is inspired by what he hears and sees and society refuses to hear and see. His attitude is one of recognition of the ills and the distress of the times with the desire to relieve the soul of society through uplifting men's minds and directing them toward that destiny which Providence had ordained for them. Thompson neither rejected his age nor desired a revolution. We might say that one of the greatest differences between Thompson and his contemporaries was in this attitude. He recognized the responsibility of the poet to the world in which he found himself, and they rejected that responsibility in various ways--from simple escape to the attempt to replace the rejected world by a new one.

Thompson could not close his eyes to the sin-laden picture of London before him. It was the realization of the moral disease which was emitted from those black streets and which was far more lamentable than the smoke of London, that made for him his outcast days there a horrible nightmare. "During those years he learnt what sin was, what the sons of Adam were in

---

57 Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties p. 106.

themselves. Later he was to learn what God was, thus encompassing the two poles of the spiritual life."<sup>58</sup>

Contrast his reaction to the sins of his age and the reaction of Oscar Wilde, who used sin and perversity as a part of his ordinary literary material.

What is termed sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate and grow old, or become colorless. By its curiosity sin increases the experiences of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism it saves us from monotony of type. In its rejection of the current notions about morality, it is one with the higher ethics. And as for Virtues! M. Renan, tells us Nature cares little about chastity, and it may be to the shame of the Magdalen, and not to their own purity, that the Lucretias of the modern life owe their freedom from stain. 59

If Wilde failed to write another line he earned through the above a lasting claim to fame as one of the greatest degenerated perverts of all time. He was the arch-exponent of the individualism which was the keynote of the esthetic movement vindicating the decadents pursuit of the art for art's sake theory. He is classed with Dowson and Beardsley in the

---

58 Calvert Alexander, S. J., The Catholic Literary Revival p. 156.

59 Oscar Wilde, Intentions, Essay on "The Critic as Artist," (New York: Boni and Liveright), p. 176.

decadent group, but differs greatly from either in many ways. The depravity which invaded Dowson's life never manifested itself as such in his writings. However, Wilde's writings are as depraved as his life. Beardsley's sketches represent depravity, but with a satirical attitude which antagonized Wilde greatly in instances where the artist was called upon to portray legitimately the evil of Wilde's own work in all its hideous proportions.

Perhaps of all the decadent writers of his period, none was as well qualified as Oscar Wilde to leave literature of genuine merit to posterity. That he was a man of genius there is no doubt. His literary ability seems to have been inherited from his mother who played an important role in the Celtic Revival. His education was quite complete and throughout his student days he distinguished himself in literature. At Trinity, at seventeen, he won a Gold Medal for his prize-essay on the Greek Comic Poets. He became well acquainted with the English poets, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Swinburne and Tennyson. His knowledge of, and familiarity with, the Bible is evidenced from his early student days also. Later on he unfortunately came under the influence of the French. From Gautier he may have received the fundamental conception of art as a whole, wholly separate from that of actual existence, art for art's sake only. He confessed that Baudelaire's Fleurs du Mal fascinated him and wrote: "If I spend my future



life reading Baudelaire in a cafe I shall be leading a more natural life than if I take to hedger's work or plant cacao in mud-swamps."<sup>60</sup> He shares with Dowson a pronounced gap in his education; the absence of any specific religious training whatever in his youth.

After leaving Oxford he went down to London in the role of a professor of Aesthetics and art critic. When the treasures of his mentality did not win immediate acclaim, he focused the public gaze upon the eccentricities of his personality. He saw years of neglect at the hands of the public if he did not force himself, by sensational methods, upon its attention. He began to realize a delightful distinction in merely being different from others with a conscientious effort. The publicity with which he had himself hailed as a new and great writer through his own brother's publication was far from honest, but served his own selfish ends nobly. With some assurance of a public aware of him as a modern writer, he settled down in imitation of Balzac to produce what he anticipated would be literary masterpieces.

During the years 1892 to 1895 he attained to remarkable

---

<sup>60</sup> Ernest Bendz, The Influence of Pater and Matthew on Oscar Wilde (London: H. Grenel & Co., 1914), p. 18.

success as a playwright and the rewards of literature flowed without cessation into his pockets. Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband, and The Importance of Being Earnest were phenomenal successes. At this time three of Wilde's plays could have been witnessed on a single night in London. As a playwright with a new and highly seasoned wit he attracted unusual attention. He was far from satisfied with such moderate success, however, and soon began to take himself very seriously in his role as critic and artist. Recognizing himself as a licensed individual he refused to conform to any laws, and consequently his art refused to conform also. He wanted to be a dramatist, a critic and a poet, and claimed the privileges of these artists but refused to shoulder the responsibilities which they entail. He began to use the aesthetic theory as an excuse for his decline into degeneracy as a writer and debauchery as a man. He shared with Dowson an abhorrence of humanity as a whole, in keeping with the aesthetic philosophy in which literature was wholly separate from life, art wholly separate from religion. This separation produced a chaos of personal ideas that resulted in extreme individualism. Traditional standards were tossed aside either because they were worthless, misunderstood, or because the moderns had not the wisdom or courage to apply to them the complex problems of contemporaneous life. Wilde represented the moderns who had no allegiance with the past and lacked

insight into the future. They lived in the present exclusively, seeking to evolve from their inner psychic selves new modes and new manners as guides to a new literature and life. Francis Thompson recognized that literature bears a close relation to life. Wilde denied it. This was the primary difference in their theories of art.

"In his life as an artist, it was his sincerity to be insincere."<sup>61</sup> Here he differs from Dowson. He considered the public a boorish monster. "If Wilde could be said to have any morals, it was a faith in the artistic validity of poetic justice. If he could be said to have a sense of right, it was a sense of the right of the artist to live his own untrammelled life."<sup>62</sup> "It was his primal distinction as artist to be consumed with a passionate love of art. It was his primal deficiency as artist to have no genuine sympathy with humanity."<sup>63</sup>

It is generally believed that Wilde had a predisposition to vice through inheritance. This, plus the effect of intoxicants and the indulgence in ultra-stimulative food and drink while being lionized in London contributed to his ultimate downfall and ruin. Much of his verse is a faithful

---

61 Archibald Henderson, Interpreters of Life (New York: Mitchell Kennerling, 1910), p. 46.

62 Ibid., p. 47.

63 Ibid., p. 103.

reflex of his personality and feeling, with its morbid and sensuous daydreams, its vain regrets, and unhealthy obsession with the wanton and macabre. With masterful artistry he produced "Salome" which is actually an excursion into the macabre, with Wilde succeeding in fascinating through the bizarre and the horrible. "In it one discerns the revolting decadence of an age when vice was no prejudice and sensuality no shame."<sup>64</sup>

"Salome" focuses attention upon abnormal and lascivious states of feeling, indicative not only of Wilde's degeneration, but the degeneration of an age.

The romantic elements in Wilde are based on an extreme individualism and a desire for a rich, full, and too sensual experience as a background for aesthetic appreciation. This leads to perversity of action and of paradox in thought. A disgust with reality sharpened his relish for an escape into art. The extreme restlessness of his life is accompanied by a corresponding restless attitude in the literary arts. He tried them all, but just as he could never escape from himself in the art of living, so he never achieved a perfect balance in his criticism. He was too self-centered an egoist ever to come into any real or vital relation with life. Although he imaged life with clearness, grace and distinction, he never saw life steadily,

---

64 Ibid., p. 75.

nor ever saw it whole. To him perversity was a passion. His knowledge was the knowledge of evil, not of good. "The crux of mania was blindness to the truth that the man who is the lackey of his passion can never be the master of his fate." <sup>65</sup> Wilde abused his talent, distorted it, and made it serve false gods, the greatest of these envisioned in his own personality.

In analyzing the method of the aesthetics, Daiches concludes that it was not "art for art's sake" that they wanted at all, but

art for the sake of individual emotion, an emotion deriving not from events occurring in the outside world, but from their own contemplation of objects chosen in advance for their ability to arouse the desired state of feeling. This was accomplished in writing through Wilde, and in art through Beardsley, the draughtsman of the period, who introduced into art the desolation of experience, the ennui of sin. 66

Just as the genius, wit, and moral depravity of Wilde cannot be denied, neither can the artistic genius and the fascination of Beardsley by evil be ignored in a just consideration

---

65 Ibid., p. 44.

66 David Daiches, Poetry and the Modern World (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), p. 14.

of the character of the 1890's. His sudden and immediate rise to fame at the age of twenty-two is testimony of the rare talent with which he produced his neat black and white sketches to a widespread and enthusiastic public. Beardsley's attitude toward life was developed and shaped by various influences, which for the most part were far from healthy. With only two months of actual art training in technique, it must be admitted that he was self-taught and just as Thompson found all his sources in Nature, Beardsley found his in literature. "The only real and lasting influence in the art of Aubrey Beardsley was literature"<sup>67</sup> He confessed to having been influenced by the writers of the eighteenth century. While only a child he read indiscriminately in Elizabethan drama, the French classics, modern French novels, and Latin. In addition, "he was well versed in the literature of the decadence, and was fond of adventuring in strange and forbidden bookish realms of any and every age."<sup>68</sup>

"As with all the works of the decadence, Aubry Beardsley's represented a consistent search after new and more satisfying experiences: the soul-ship seeking harbourage."<sup>69</sup>

---

67 Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties p. 101.

68 Ibid.,

69 Ibid., p. 102.

Similar to Wilde, he loved the abnormal and the perverse and had a natural desire to shock. His illustrations to the Lysis-trata were the most masterly of his career and yet cannot be outdone in indecency. "He was essentially a decorator; but with the perversity of one phase of his generation he made decoration a thing in itself."<sup>70</sup> Longaker has observed "it would be difficult to exaggerate the distress--yes, distress, that Beardsley's work in The Yellow Book caused in the hearts of the old-fashioned and conventional."<sup>71</sup>

Just how seriously Beardsley should be considered as a satirist of an age without convictions is difficult to ascertain. The subject of his satire was not corruption in any one of its many forms, "but the state of soul to which an age without convictions is reduced."<sup>72</sup> He seemed to possess a humorous attitude towards life inconsistent with so many of the decadents and just how close this humor was to downright satire, is difficult to discern. If he recognized himself as a satirist and fully intended that his drawings in The Yellow Book should shock its readers, his purpose was to reveal to them the greatest sin of their day, which was not their willingness to

---

70 Ibid., p.103.

71 Longaker, Ernest Dowson p. 118.

72 Burdett, The Beardsley Period p. 117.

admit and deplore the depraved condition of the soul of society as a whole, but their own consistent blindness in recognizing the actual corruption which brought about such depravity. Through his black and white sketches Beardsley succeeded in representing the evil of the times with such shocking realism that the force of their shock was equalled only by the awful truth to be recognized in the mirroring of the lack of virtues and honesty which he took from the life about him. He was far more of a realist than his contemporaries, Dowson and Wilde, and though he threw himself with reckless abandon into the life about him and seemed to enjoy every hour of his work and association with the other decadents of the period, it is generally believed that he possessed an insight keenly lacking in either Dowson or Wilde, and thus his interpretation of the decadence abroad indicates real depth of intelligence. He used his artistic talent to depict the decay of the times and did so incorporating in his work that illusion of restlessness, cynicism, morbidity and depravity which he took indirectly from the literature of the times, but directly from his own society.

David Daiches in his treatise on poetry and the modern world has declared that the poets of the nineties "are neither homogeneous nor easy to understand." It is not exactly clear just what they represent. "The fag end of the Tennysonian tradition, or the Swinburnian revolt stuttering towards its



final extinction, or the rejection of contemporary life as any sort of basis for art."<sup>73</sup> The general theory put into practice by those poets and artists of the decadent school who were influenced both by the Pre-Raphaelites and by the French "art for art's sake" doctrine dictated that personal sensation is the origin and the aim of poetry.

... to seek for any other kind of value is to implicate the poet in a world which has no genuine interest in art however defined, a world which it is therefore the poet's duty to despise and, on occasion, to shock. 74

Nearly all of these poets did possess positive values actually, but values of a hazy and ill-defined nature. Coupled with the aesthetic theories which they succumbed to through their association with the works of the French decadents and their own personal lack of convictions, such general values lost whatever import they may have carried in their early youth and gradually came to be denied entirely. Their denial of these values was their method in declaring their distrust of certain contemporary attitudes which had no validity for them.

---

73 Daiches, Poetry and the Modern World p. 10.

74 Ibid.

These poets thus rejected the contemporary world without any clear understanding of why they rejected it, and without any clearly conceived substitute to offer. The positive values underlying Victorian life were beginning to crumble. The place of the poet in society was ill-defined. The only thing, in their opinions, which remained stable was the poet's own emotions and sensations. On these the poet took his stand seeking after some traditional belief which would give some pattern to the exploitation of his emotions and sensations, a license to unlimited freedom for his sensibilities. Oscar Wilde played the part of the licensed clown. Dowson and Beardsley were concerned with winning greater freedom for sensibility than the conventional poetic tradition then allowed. They "turned their work into gestures of rejection of their age."<sup>75</sup>

They were seeking to retreat from a world they despised to a realm where they would be safe from the impingement of that world and its market-place values. They wanted to be able to express their own sensations and emotions with confidence and security. They played up the self-expression aspect of poetry. They had no great message to give. They simply

---

75 Ibid., p. 14.

wanted to sit in a corner and express themselves, and if that shocked the public, so much the better. 76

And in the same city

...whilst every thinker and dreamer of the fin de siècle decade was seeking a fuller life through art, or experience, or sensation, or reform, or revolt, Francis Thompson was finding it in the negation of all these. 77

He represented the revolt against the world. Although he recognized in the spirit of the times, the search for reality, the disillusion, the crumbling of Victorian ideals, the spiritual inertia and scientific confusion, he did not defy the social and moral revolution they precipitated, finding himself, as he did, in the very middle of it. Rather he denied it, and by placing his condition beneath contempt, he conquered.

While so many of his contemporaries were impelled by unknown forces to follow life to the very frontier of experience Thompson was carrying on the staid traditions of English poetry, having since birth possessed an ideal basis for both literature and life in his own traditional Catholic faith. He

---

76 Ibid., p. 15.

77 Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties p. 172.

was untouched by the exotic influences of the Latin Quarter in Paris and other foreign elements. He had found his chief sources of inspiration in the healthiest of all literature, the Classics, the best in English letters, and the Bible, which he accepted as the word of God and which he did not distort as did Wilde to serve his own ends with an interpretation fundamentally dramatic in its abnormality.

His positive and secure convictions have their foundation in his spiritual perception which served to protect him throughout all the tragedies of his life against the sentimental and gloomy obsessions to which the decadents succumbed. It must be remembered that Thompson was a Catholic first and a poet secondly. All of his work was directed toward pleasing God. The place of literature in his life was only second to the place of his religion. He had regard for neither fame nor fortune, although he did believe with the artist's proud humility that his verse would live. Contrary to the decadents, and fortunately for Art, he was "quite heedless of the wide appeal and too much in earnest to keep his audience at all in mind."<sup>78</sup> Very often this is the source of difficulty in understanding him, for he was earnestly concerned with difficult problems. His contemporaries on the other hand, recognized their

---

<sup>78</sup> Katherine Bregy, "Poetry of Francis Thompson," The Catholic World, August, 1905, p. 613.

limitations and in producing poetry and prose of a highly subjective nature they avoided the deeper and graver things of life because they could not cope with the sublime; neither as men nor as artists. Dowson wrote: "The small things of life are odious to me, and the habit of them enslaves me; the great things of life are eternally attractive to me, but indolence and fear put them by."<sup>79</sup>

Thompson was unique among the poets of his generation in that he was master of the sublime. He "moves in the loftier altitudes with an ease which is in itself really impressive and absolute, the mark of royal inheritance."<sup>80</sup> He possessed the ability and the vision necessary to write inspiringly of the experience of mankind through the private experience of Thompson himself. It requires genuine poetic talent and artistry to speak as frankly of oneself as Thompson has done. This gift of his identifies him with the immortals and forever separates him from the decadent school of the nineties whose exponents could speak of their loves, desires, hopes, regrets, failures, disillusionings, and of common tangible things, but failed hopelessly when the question of spiritual things, of the

---

79 Longaker, Ernest Dowson p. 271.

80 John Freeman, The Moderns (London: Robert Scott, Roxburghe House, 1916), p. 301.

soul's life and love demanded interpenetration. Thompson stands apart from most modern poets as "an asserter of the faith, joint-inheritor of the spiritual world, revealer of the un-<sup>81</sup>seen," almost alone among so many imaginative writers who venture into that unknown spiritual sea only to sail about in comfortable darkness, avoiding that guidance which will demand unity, order, or purpose to their existence.

Perhaps the greatest difference which existed between Thompson and the decadents and the difference which enabled him to rise to the ranks of the immortals was his possession of Christian hope. Beardsley, Dowson and Wilde were born in due time for the nineties. The times and the circumstances were ripe for them. It has been said that Wilde lived for the mood. He never had any hope of finding anything absolute. He was born far too late in the century for that. Beardsley was born into an age of easy publicity and was peculiarly of his period. It was almost inevitable that he should have arrived with The Yellow Book. He was local in point and his work was archaic even before he died. He never became universal. These decadents were prisoners of the nineties. They died with the age, both as men and as artists. Their work carried no message, no prophecy and was devoid of faith or hope in the future or lessons

---

81 Ibid., p. 316.

from the past. Their only passing interest is their characteristic mark of decadence which in their art and literature so closely paralleled their lives.

Perhaps no one understood the decadents as well as Thompson did. In a review of The Poems of Ernest Dowson, one of the most important of his critical writings, Thompson gives us not only an estimate of Dowson as a poet, but actually a general criticism of the whole Decadence as a literary movement. He calls Dowson a frail, minor poet.

He has more affinity with the Quartier Latin than with Grub Street, with Verlaine than with Kears or Savage.

The French influence was an evil thing in his career; though, be it said that with him, at least, it was no affectation, but the natural result of an early foreign up-bringing. Partly through native trend and affinities, partly (one fears) through the influence of a morbid Parisian tradition, or an impressionable and imitative nature, he transplanted to the brutal atmosphere of the East End the worst follies associated with the literary cafes of Montmartre; from the haschisch of Baudelaire to the alcoholism of Verlaine. So he prematurely broke to pieces a fragile body and a more fragile genius.

... So many modern poets have professed a Parisian morbidity at second hand that the thing is suspect. But here it was the too sincere outcome of a life influenced by what to him was a compatriot atmosphere. Derivative he was in

his morbidity, but as a Parisian poet might be. Nevertheless this derivativeness condemns him, as it would a French writer to the minor ranks. The major poet moulds more than he moulded by his environment. It may be doubted whether the most accomplished morbidity can survive the supreme test of time. In the long run sanity endures: the finest art goes under if it be perverse and perverted art, though for a while it may create a life under the ribs of death.

Yet, with this great doubt, Ernest Dowson's work makes a present and delicate appeal to a generation itself sick of many ills. Sensitiveness, indeed, is the precise word one would choose to indicate its leading quality. It is altogether poetry of feeling, one might well-nigh say of a single feeling, or cast of feeling. Regret--the pathos of lost virtue, lost or at least ineffectual love, lost opportunities, lost virginalness in an aesthetic no less than an ethical sense--informs these lyrics in monotone.

An ineffectual regret, with not even a desire to regain what is lost, or a hope to attain effectual love.

It is the poetry of disillusion. Read in bulk, the constant wail of regret and unsatisfied satiety becomes weak and weariful. But in single lyrics, when he touches his best, it has a frail and mournful charm.

His best, Mr. Symons thinks, is the poem with the refrain, "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara, in my fashion." Remembered love makes hollow present infidelities--that is



the theme of it. Unwholesome, wistfully cynical, like the bulk of these lyrics, it is perfect in workmanship and a dainty symmetry contrasting with its sincere bitterness of regret.

... a poet of the bitten apple, without the core of fire which made Rosetti, for instance, far more than a lesser poet. And then, too, unlike Rosetti, he has no brain, but just pure feminine sensibility. 82

The failure to realize any stabilizing satisfaction in the unlicensed expression of perversion, morbidity, despair, and satire in art and literature brought the exponents of the decadence to the realization that "the great choice between the world and something which is not the visible world, but out of which the visible world has been made, does not lie in the mere contrast of the subtler and grosser senses."<sup>83</sup> After rejecting their age and all that it represented and after seeking a hopeless escape into the delusion of the decadence, they were gradually led, one by one, through repentance, their greatest virtue, into the Catholic Church.

Ernest Dowson, confessing to his friend, Frank Harris, following his conversion, that he had become a Catholic "as

---

82 Quoted from Terence L. Connolly, S. J., (Editor) An Account of Books and Manuscripts of Francis Thompson, (Massachusetts, Boston College), pp. 14-15.

83 Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties p. 15.

every artist. must" had finally reached that point in the development of his literary theory where he no longer could sustain that false doctrine "art for art's," and only in the reunion of art and religion did he produce his finest work. Although Dowson possessed neither the strength or will nor discipline of a well-ordered life to enable him to become a consistent worshipper in the Catholic faith, his final poems, "Extreme Unction," "The Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration," and "The Carthusians," convince us that he found in his religion a source of inspiration, hope, and peace which the combined sources and influences of his past life completely failed to supply him. In "Extreme Unction" he expresses a faith and a hope which are a long way from the pessimism of one who had written "the conclusion of the whole matter--a striving and a striving and an end in nothing."

Vials of mercy! Sacring oils!  
 I know not where nor when I come,  
 Nor through what wanderings and toils,  
 To crave of you Viaticum.

Yet, when the walls of flesh grow weak,  
 In such an hour, it well may be,  
 Through mist and darkness, light will break,  
 And each anointed sense will see.

It is impossible to reject the sincerity of one who could pen those lines. In "The Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration," Dowson reveals that he did not leave this life before discovering the source of genuine peace.

And there they rest; they have serene insight  
 Of the illuminating dawn to be:  
 Mary's sweet star dispels for them the night,  
 The proper darkness of humanity.

Calm, sad, secure; with faces worn and mild:  
 Surely their choice of vigil is the best?  
 Yea! for our roses fade, the world is wild,  
 But there, beside the altar, there, is rest.

"Sensitive to all forms of beauty, and impressionable to the influence of the spiritual quiet which comes to those who kneel before the high altar, Dowson was equipped by nature and experience to recognize in the Catholic Church an unmistakable power."<sup>84</sup>

Before Aubrey Beardsley's eyes were closed in death he had passed from the artist of the "vision of evil" to the artist with a "vision of life." The downfall of Oscar Wilde marked the turning point in Beardsley's life, for with it, he too suffered reproof by dismissal from the staff of The Yellow Book. However, this stinging disappointment served greater ends than he probably envisioned at the time. "It gave him an opportunity to think pertinent thoughts about himself, to turn inward the intellectual energy he had been pouring out upon a multitude of exterior things. He began to find himself, to

---

84 Longaker, Ernest Dowson p. 67.

sketch the real Aubrey Beardsley."<sup>85</sup> Through the influence of his friend, Canon John Gray, Beardsley's progress along the road traversed by the decadents was brought to a halt and he died in the Catholic Church. "In the introduction to The Last Letters of Aubrey Beardsley, Father Gray says:

Aubrey Beardsley might, had he lived, have risen, whether through his art or otherwise, spiritually to a height from which he could command the horizon he was created to scan. As it was, the long anguish, the increasing bodily helplessness, the extreme necessity in which someone else raises one's hand, turns one's head, showed the slowly dying man things he had not seen before. He came face to face with the old riddle of life and death; the accustomed supports and resources of his being were removed; his soul, thus denuded, discovered needs unstable desires had hitherto obscured; he submitted, like Watteau, his master, to the Catholic Church. 86

Beardsley referred to his conversion as the most important step in his life. He reveals how thoroughly the decadence had run its course as the century itself was drawing to a close

---

85 Galvert Alexander, S. J., The Catholic Literary Revival p. 104.

86 Quoted from Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties p. 94.

in the finality of the following note to his publisher, Mr. Smithers.

Jesus is our Lord and Judge!  
Dear Frined, I implore you to destroy  
all copies of Lysistrata and bad  
drawings. Show this to Pollett  
and conjure him to do the same.  
By all that is holy--all obscene  
drawings.

Aubrey Beardsley  
In my last agony. 87

His genuine sincerity in his submission to the guidance of the Catholic faith in his last days is paramount in his letters to Father Gray, particularly in the following written approximately one month before his death.

The Blessed Sacrament was brought to me here this morning. It was a moment of profound joy, of gratitude, of emotion. I gave myself up entirely, utterly, to feelings of happiness, and even the knowledge of my unworthiness only seemed to add fuel to the flame that warmed and illuminated my heart... Through all eternity I shall be unspeakably grateful to you for your brotherly concern for my spiritual welfare... This afternoon I felt a little sat at the thought of my compulsory exile

---

87 Quoted from Calvert Alexander, S. J., op. cit., p. 100.

from Church just now; and the divine privilege of praying before the Blessed Sacrament is not permitted me. You can guess how I long to assist at Mass... . 88

Of Beardsley, as well as of Dowson, who was among the mourners at the Church when the requiem mass was held for the repose of the soul of Beardsley, can be applied Father Alexander's following estimation:

He stands for that double aspect of the yellow decade--decadence and renaissance; decadence in his mad attempt to live up to all the brave new theories so plentiful during this time of the old order's collapse, and renaissance, in the poignant sense of frustration that followed repentance, and the vision of a new artistic life in the Catholic Church which would never be realized. 89

Of Oscar Wilde's conversion far less optimism as to his genuine sincerity can be evinced from records of his last days. His imprisonment was a blessing in disguise, just as Beardsley's dismissal from the staff of The Yellow Book had been. In De Profundis he displays a genuine effort to be

---

88 Ibid., p. 104.

89 Ibid., p. 100.

sincere in representing himself in all his faults and failings and his willingness to accept the full responsibility for his predicament, but in spite of his efforts one gleans a stubborn clinging to his characteristic egoism. He is actually not ashamed of the crime which imprisoned him, but he is dreadfully ashamed that Oscar Wilde should be a common prisoner of a common gaol. However, the records reveal that he sought the advice of a priest on the day he was released from prison. During the two years which elapsed from his release until his death, there is no evidence that he abandoned his decadent trends as did Dowson and Beardsley, in preparation for the inevitable end. In one version of the story of his last days it has been written: "When Wilde was dying, he called for champagne and said that he was dying beyond his means."<sup>90</sup> However, according to the Franciscan friar who attended Wilde, he died after receiving the last sacraments of the Church, a Catholic and a penitent.

Our only interest in the works and lives of Ernest Dowson, Aubrey Beardsley and Oscar Wilde stems from the knowledge that "the road called decadence also led to Rome."<sup>91</sup> Because they were in this respect related to Francis Thompson in the

---

90 Chard Powers Smith, Annals of the Poets (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 285.

91 Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties p. 66.

evolution of the Catholic Literary Revival they cannot be overlooked. "In England the artists who represented the renaissance of the Nineties were either Catholics like Francis Thompson and Henry Harland or prospective converts to Rome, like Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, Lionel Johnson and Ernest Dowson. If Catholicism did not claim them some other form of mysticism did... . The one who persistently hardened himself against the mystical influences of his period, John Davidson, committed suicide."<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.



CHAPTER III  
FRANCIS THOMPSON AMONG THE CATHOLIC  
LITERARY REVIVALISTS

The significant importance attached to the personality of Francis Thompson lies in his appearance in the decade of the 1890's, which has been characterized by the prevalence of two distinct trends of thought; one leading into mysticism and religion, the other into decadence and debauchery. As we have observed through the careers of the arch-exponents of the decadence, that trend spent itself in debauchery only to close by humble submission to the authority it had almost despaired of finding. With this bowing out of a movement to another more absorbing and powerful one, we are brought up to date with the progress of the age to the Catholic Literary Revival and Francis Thompson, for they are synonymous. Father Calvert Alexander wrote: "If Alice Meynell is the central figure of the Catholic Revival in this middle phase, Francis Thompson is its greatest figure. He belongs to the 1890's."<sup>1</sup>

Thompson was an integral part of that renaissance which was the direct anti-thesis of the decadence, and stood for "art

---

<sup>1</sup> Calvert Alexander, S. J., The Catholic Literary Revival p. 150.

for life's sake" rather than "art for art's sake" and actually in behalf of "art for God's sake" as far as Thompson was concerned. He understood the decadents better than they understood themselves, and turned down their invitation to membership in The Rhymers' Club because he was so thoroughly at home in the Catholic atmosphere of Alice Meynell's Palace Court drawing-room, a cenacle where the Catholic Literary Revival first took on the form of a movement.

Alice Meynell was, in all respects, capable of directing the development of such a movement as this, having become accomplished early in life as a poetess, an essayist, and a conversationalist. Intellectually interested in the culture of the ancient world as she was, yet she displayed vigorous admiration in the new political and artistic ideas of the age in which changes came so rapidly. Her friendship was highly valued by many renowned figures of the passing era and was as eagerly sought by the younger artists of the period.

To her as to a center came the surviving representatives of the first generation such as Aubrey de Vere and Coventry Patmore; to her also came the artists of the new generation, such as Francis Thompson and Lionel Johnson; the Celtic Revival had its representative there in Katharine Tynan, a lifelong friend of Mrs. Meynell's; from America came the poetess, Agnes Tobin. The decadent motif was there too, in the occasional presence of Aubrey Beardsley and Oscar Wilde,

although Mrs. Meynell was never herself connected with the Decadent movement; in fact, she consistently refused the importunities of Henry Harland that she write for The Yellow Book. Yet she worked privately and with considerable success to cure souls which the "maladie du siècle" had blighted. 2

In striking contrast is the picture of Alice Meynell's cenacle gathering of sincere young writers and older sympathetic litterateurs, among whom there existed a fuller consciousness of Christ's presence in the world, and those meetings of the Rhymers' Club in an upper room of the Cheshire Cheese where "long clay pipes lay in slim heaps on the wooden tables, between tankards of ale; and young poets, then very young, recited their own verses to one another with a desperate and ineffectual attempt to get into key with the Latin Quarter."<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Meynell brought together all the existing forces of the Catholic Revival as a group and impressed upon its members the solidarity and community of purpose which was theirs through their common faith. However, this circle of hers was also a double one.

---

2 Calvert Alexander, S. J., The Catholic Literary Revival p. 115.

3 Arthur Symons, The Prose and Poems of Ernest Dowson (Preface, p. 3).

There was the outer ring composed of the acquaintances and visitors, representing tendencies she never wholly sympathized with, but which nevertheless were a part of the contemporary scene. It was her wish that those who belonged to the smaller and more intimate group--those, namely, who were working for the return to English literature of the essential Catholic spirit--should not suffer from the narrowing effect of isolation. 'Let us be of the center,' she used to say, 'not of the province.' In her vision, the Catholic tradition stood not apart, but in the center of things, in intimate contact with the glories of the European past and the really valuable tendencies in the present, engaged in the work of carrying forward the main stream of English letters. 4

"For the best expression of the Catholic humanism impressed by Alice Meynell upon her associates and upon the Revival for all times, we must turn to the lines written by Francis Thompson of her, in "To a Poet Breaking Silence."<sup>5</sup>

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,

---

4 Father Alexander, op. cit., p. 116.

5 Ibid., p. 117.

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!

Thompson's personal contribution to English letters cannot be considered without almost constant reference to the influence of the various members of the remarkable Meynell family. Apart from the refuge, shelter and physical sustenance which was afforded Thompson in the harmonious sanctuary of the Meynell home, this family inspired within him much of the great poetry to which he has given expression. To Thompson, Alice Meynell "seemed to typify the Church, Mater Artium; she was the Beatrice of some of his best lyrics, and in her children, too, he found another prolific source of inspiration."<sup>6</sup>

It was also through the medium of the columns of Wilfrid Meynell's Catholic periodicals, Merry England and the Weekly Register that Thompson's message was conveyed in prose and poetry to the minds and hearts of a very receptive reading public, and through this outlet he attracted many notable adherents among both Catholics and non-Catholics. The immediate acclaim with which his work was heralded in this peculiar decade attests perhaps as nothing else can, to his timeliness. Everard Meynell

---

6 Ibid., p. 127.

believed and wrote: "Perhaps Patmore's article on Poems in the Fortnightly Review, July, 1894, stands as the most important page in the history of the new poet's reception."<sup>7</sup> Here Patmore predicts an early and general recognition.

Unlike most poets of his quality, who have usually had to wait a quarter of a century or more for adequate recognition, this poet is pretty sure of a wide and immediate acknowledgement... . Mr. Thompson's poetry is "spiritual" almost to a fault... . Since, however, Mr. Thompson's spirituality is a real ardour of life, and not the mere negation of life, which passes, with most people, for spirituality, it seems somewhat ungracious to complain of its predominance. It is the greatest and noblest of defects, and shines rather as an eminent virtue in a time when most other Igdrasils are hiding their heads in hell and affronting heaven with their indecorous roots. 8

Arnold Bennett, writing in the Woman, July, 1895, was equally prophetic of Thompson's destiny as an immortal.

I declare that for three days after this book appeared I read nothing else. My belief is that Francis Thompson has a richer natural genius, a finer equipment, than any poet save Shakespeare. Show me the divinest glories of Shelley and Keats, even of Tennyson, who wrote the "Lotus Eaters" and the songs in "The

---

7 Meynell, Life p. 106.

8 Quoted from Meynell, Life p. 108.

Princess," and I think I can match them all out of this one book... . I fear that in thus extolling Francis Thompson's work, I am grossly outraging the canons of criticism. For the man is alive, he gets up of a morning like common mortals, not im- probably he eats bacon for break- fast; and every critic with an atom of discretion knows that a poet must not be called great until he is either dead or very old. Well, please yourself what you think. But in time to come, don't say I didn't tell you. 9

Alice Meynell and Francis Thompson shared an identical attitude toward the doctrine of the Church on the Mystical Body of Christ which "was beginning to be stressed and understood as it had not been for centuries"<sup>10</sup> and through their advanced understanding of this spiritual relationship of Christ with men through the sacraments of Holy Mother Church, these two poets celebrate the dawning of a new age and characterize the period as truly that of a renaissance rather than a decadence. In "The Unknown God," Alice Meynell expresses her recognition of Christ in the life of a fellow communicant.

---

9 Quoted from Ibid., p. 109.  
10 Ibid., p. 124.

I do confess Thee here,  
 Alive within this life; I know Thee near  
 Within this brother's solitary day.

Christ in his unknown heart,  
 His intellect unknown--this love, this art,  
 This battle and this peace, this destiny  
 That I shall never know, look upon me!

Christ in his numbered breath,  
 Christ in his beating heart and in his death,  
 Christ in his mystery! From that secret place  
 And from that separate dwelling, give me grace.

Thompson, the symbolist, flashes upon his reader the soul of that which can be apprehended only by the soul. His desire to convey the sense of things unseen and the deeper meaning of the evident tempt him to greater imagery than "The Unknown God" exhibits, but his contemplation of the Holy Eucharist uniting the whole world of humanity to God and to one another, is consistently the same in his lines from "The Kingdom of God."

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

\* \* \*

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

But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)  
 Cry;--and upon thy so sore loss  
 Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder  
 Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.



Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,  
 Cry;--clinging Heaven by the hems:  
 And lo, Christ walking on the water  
 Not of Gennesareth, but Thames!

The inner vision of the mystic revealed Christ, not apart in an invisible world, but "Lo here! lo there!--ah me, lo everywhere."

To Thompson, poetry was an affair of ritual or images. In the imagination he recognized the sense which discerns deeply rooted similarities and thus is the origin of his symbolism "which may be traced back to the heart of the truths and mysteries to which it supplies the outward shows."<sup>11</sup>

Imagination is the spring; Symbolism is here the manifestation of Imagination, is the identity-bearer, partaking of the very essence of the Divinity. The symbols of Divinity are Divine; flesh is the Word made flesh; the Eucharist is the true Presence; and Christ is Himself the Way to Christ. Thompson's poetry and theology abode by the Image; it was no necessity of their nature to penetrate beyond the barriers of expression and revelation. The go-betweens of others were his essentials. Holding so grave an estimate of the functions of the imagination, he found in poetry the

---

<sup>11</sup> Meynell, Life p. 161.

highest human scope and motive. 12

Thompson's equal is not to be found among his contemporaries for ability to deal with the sublime, through the faculty of the intellect and the imagination to produce poetry of inspiration and revelation. He recognized his gift and devoted his poetic talent to the immediate service of God and man. He visualized in poetry a very special function to restore the Divine idea of things and with this destiny in view regarded his vocation as a poet as a serious responsibility and feared to fall short in the final account of his stewardship. He felt the futility of all writings "save such as were explicitly a confession of faith, and also of faithfulness to the institutional side of religion--the Church and the organized means of grace."<sup>13</sup> Everard Meynell envisions Thompson in his true role of poet-priest.

The poet is a priest who has no menial and earthly service. He has no parish to reconcile with paradise, no spire that must reach heaven from suburban foundations. The priest puts his very hand to the task of uniting the rational and communal factors of religion with the mystical. The altar-rail is the sudden

---

12 Ibid.,

13 Ibid., p. 150.

and meagre boundary line between two worlds; he holds in his hand a Birmingham monstrance, and the monstrance holds the Host. He has no time to shake the dust of the street from his shoes before he treads the sanctuary. His symbolism is put to the wear and tear of daily use. As a middleman in the commerce of souls, as the servant of the rational sides of the Church, tried by the forlorn circumstances of never-ceasing work, he may find himself shut out from the more purely mystical regions of his communion... . It is left to the poet to prophesy or spy upon the increase of Wisdom and the multiplication of the Word. He, too, in so far as he writes, is circumscribed by the uses of the world. The priest's ministry in infinitudes is bounded by his parish; the poet's by his language. And if religion is rightly defined as something more than communion between the man and the Almighty, as being besides the communion between man and man, and the sum of Mankind and the Almighty, then the poet is the immediate servant of God and Man. 14

Thus Thompson, the symbolist, in the role of poet-priest is mainly concerned to reveal through the use of the image how all things, even the most minute, are linked to one another and sealed with the likeness of larger things, and all form "multiplied representation of the one Simple Essence of God."<sup>15</sup> In

---

14 Ibid., p. 151.

15 Ibid., p. 163.

"The Orient Ode" his symbolism links the rising of the sun in the East to Christ who is to rise glorious and immortal on Easter Sunday morning.

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

However, Thompson's images were not always so intricately designed with the splendor of liturgical symbolism; as for instance in "Daisy" where the simplicity with which he recalls the sorrow occasioned by her parting wins instant pathos from the most casual peruser of verse.

She looked a little wistfully,  
 Then went her sunshine way:-  
 The sea's eye had a mist on it,  
 And the leaves fell from the day.

Again in "The Poppy" Thompson descends from the lofty mountain tops of spiritual fervor and marks time after the fashion of Wordswoth to the delight of all who hold childhood most dear.

A child and man paced side by side,  
 Treading the skirts of eventide;  
 But between the clasp of his hand and hers  
 Lay, felt not, twenty withered years.

And his smile, as nymphs from their laving meres,  
 Trembled up from a bath of tears;  
 And joy, like a mew sea-rocked apart,  
 Tossed on the waves of his troubled heart.

Thompson was actually a great romantic poet. "Although his faith demanded that he forsake the physical world and search for spiritual values, his strongest emotions sprang from  
 16  
 the very flesh which he must renounce."

He was sensuous, passionately emotional, acutely sensitive to every sound, taste, and colour in the world about him. His imagery is as rich as Keats's, though sometimes lacking in the restraint which Keats finally learned, and his sense of light, of the disembodiment of all natural objects is not unlike Shelley's. He even tried the rhythms of Swinburne. He was not a thinker, but a man of such keen sensibilities, such vehement feelings, that he must arrive at any ultimate rather through his reactions to the physical world than through any intellectual conviction. This was the struggle that went on within him; he was a devout Catholic, and he was a romantic poet. His mysticism springs from the resultant struggle. 17

---

16 Claude Williamson, O.S.C., (Editor) Great Catholics (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939), p. 415.

17 Ibid., p. 415.

The world and human life were to Thompson, "crammed with Heaven and aflame with God."<sup>18</sup> He differs from Wordsworth Tennyson and Browning through the intensity of his relation of his spiritual experiences. To them many things were uncertain, to Thompson everything was so real because he never wrote about the unknown, only that which had actually fallen within his experience. Thompson's romantic temperament sought and found great happiness in the contemplation of the abundant beauty of nature, the exquisiteness of childhood, and the vision of human love. However, despite the rewards apparent to an appreciation of these "outer garments of life" Thompson failed to derive complete satisfaction for his soul as well as his heart until he had penetrated the spiritual and beheld the vision of God and God's work in all things.

One cannot deny that Thompson's poetry will survive along with Shelley's and Keats' because his work embodies the essential qualities which everywhere and in all ages are known as the mark of true poetry. Most of his poems are a fusion of the two tendencies, the romantic and the Catholic mystic. For this reason very little of his work can be interpreted without the guidance and understanding of Catholic doctrine, the only keynote to much of his symbolism. Particularly is this true

---

<sup>18</sup> John Thomson, Francis Thompson: Poet and Mystic (London: Simpkin Marshall, Hamilton Kent and Co., Ltd., 1912) p. 90.

to appreciate Thompson's attitude toward beauty. To him the most perfect beauty is the Divine Ideal. "Earthly beauty is but heavenly beauty taking to itself flesh."<sup>19</sup> To Thompson, poetry fulfills the special office of revelation; the revelation of beauty enhanced through allegiance to the Divine Ideal.

If religion be useful, so is poetry.  
 For poetry is the teacher of beauty;  
 and without beauty men would soon  
 lose the conception of a God, and  
 exchange God for the devil: as in-  
 deed happens at this day among many  
 savages where the worship of ugliness  
 and of the devil flourish together.  
 When it was, doubtless,  
 that poetry and religion were of  
 old so united, as is seen in the  
 prophetic books of the Bible.  
 Where men are not kept in mind  
 of beauty they become lower than  
 the beasts... . 20

Thompson reveals how closely associated to religion are the sources of beauty in the spirit of man.

If the Trinity were not revealed,  
 I should nevertheless be induced to  
 suspect the existence of such a master-  
 key by the trinities through  
 which expounds itself the spirit of  
 man. Such a trinity is the trinity

---

<sup>19</sup> Francis Thompson, Works, "Nature's Immortality" Vol. III, p. 87.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., "A Renegade Poet on the Poet," p. 106.

of beauty--Poetry, Art, Music. Although its office is to create beauty, I call it the trinity of beauty, because it is the property of earthly as of the heavenly beauty to create everything to its own image and likeness. Painting is the eye of passion, Poetry is the voice of passion, Music is the throbbing of her heart. For all beauty is passionate, though it may be a passionless passion. 21

And just as closely associated as is this trinity to religion, so also is love to poetry. "Now, without love no poetry can be beautiful, for all beautiful poetry comes from the heart."<sup>22</sup> The pagan regarded Love as

a transitory and perishable passion, born of the body and decaying with the body. On the wings of Christianity came the great truth that Love is of the soul, and with the soul coeval. It was most just and natural that from the Christian poets should come the full development of this truth. Therefore, sings Dante, and sing all noble poets after him, that Love in this world is a pilgrim and a wanderer, journeying to the New Jerusalem: not here is the consummation of his yearnings, in that mere knocking at the gates of union which we christen marriage, but beyond the pillars of

---

21 Ibid., "Nature's Immortality," p. 83.

22 Ibid., "Paganism: Old and New," p. 40.



death and the corridors of the  
grave, in the union of spirit  
to spirit within the containing  
spirit of God. 23

Thompson's love was human as well as Divine, and found expression towards the Meynell family almost exclusively. He recognized the necessity of pain and sacrifice in true human love and that through these channels it could become Divine. In fact, to Thompson, "all human love was to me a symbol of divine love; nay, human love was in my eyes a piteous failure unless as an image of the supreme Love which gave meaning and reality to its seeming insanity."<sup>24</sup> Thompson bears kinship with Coventry Patmore in his approach to love and they are equally emphatic in their denouncement of that shallow type of human love which seeks pleasure without sacrifice and dies in the face of pain. It was perhaps this realization of Patmore's which made him see "no difference between marriage and poetry!"<sup>25</sup> In this way he may be said to have gone a step farther than Thompson who exalted the Divine in human love, whereas Patmore exalted the Divine in married love. Commenting upon how complete was Patmore's influence, Thompson wrote:

---

23 Ibid., "Paganism: Old and New," p. 47.

24 Meynell, Life p. 173.

25 Calvert Alexander, S. J., The Catholic Literary Revival p. 60.

What I put forth as a bud, he blew on and it blossomed. The contact of our ideas was dynamic. He reverberated my idea with such and so many echoes that it returned to me greater than I gave it forth. He opened it as you open an oyster, or placed it under a microscope and showed one what it contained. 26

Although Thompson was in his time a faithful disciple of Patmore, the influence of Patmore upon the present time is partly direct, and partly exercised through Thompson, and his works. Through Patmore's idealization of wedded love in "The Angel in the House" and "The Unknown Eros" he labored for the return to English literature the essential Catholic spirit which had been neglected and ignored and beyond the cope of most of the lineage of poets since the days of Dante. Patmore's doctrine on marriage is as daring and as original as Thompson's combined doctrines on beauty, love and death in an age in which the rights of the lover were in general, construed to be above reproach in departing from the honored traditions of by-gone days. Following his conversion to Catholicism, Patmore's doctrine deepened, for, "he had caught glimpses of great and awful truths."<sup>27</sup> He, himself remarked:

---

26 Terence Connolly, S. J., Francis Thompson: In His Paths p. 66.

27 Alexander, op. cit., p. 64.

"I have hit upon the finest metre that ever was invented, and the finest mine of wholly unworked material that ever fell to the lot of an English poet."

The mine was Catholic mystical theology, especially the idea, so dear to the mystics, of setting forth the intimate union of the soul of the individual with Christ in the language of the most exalted type of earthly union--the soul as the spouse of Christ. He saw, as the one great reality of life, the love of God, to which all other loves are tributary. 28

Thompson and Patmore devoted their entire poetic talents toward the reviving in literature of the spirit of Christ which once it had become a part of them directed all their desires toward bringing the joy of it to others. They recognized that they met upon the same common ground as is evidenced in a letter from Patmore to Thompson.

I see with joy, how nearly we  
are upon the same lines. My  
heart goes out to you as to  
no other man; for are we not  
visited by a great common de-  
light and a great common sorrow?  
Is not this to be one in Christ? 29

---

28 Ibid.

29 Meynell, Life p. 221.

Their friendship was terminated after three years by Patmore's death, and to his memory Thompson dedicated New Poems with the following lament, attesting on his part again their great affinity.

You, only, spake the tongue I spake  
 And my poor song is thus born dumb:  
 Alas! why did you me forsake,  
 And this poor child of mine, born dumb?  
 And this poor child, we both did make,  
 You father, as I mother?

To view the simultaneous stimulation of the efforts of the Catholic Revival Movement through the works of Catholics like Thompson, the Meynells and Patmore during the nineties, is gratifying and yet more or less what we could expect from such inheritors of the faith. The road which led Lionel Johnson to their circle was the road which led to Rome and it is within his experience that we see mirrored the actual drama of the transition from the *maladie de siècle* of the dying century to a new spiritual concept of life and the world. Johnson has been called the most definite personality of the nineties. "In him all the ardors, the zeals, the fanaticisms that clustered about the 'new Romanticism' are focused." <sup>30</sup> He bears a

---

<sup>30</sup> Calvert Alexander, S. J., The Catholic Literary Revival p. 131.

definite affinity to Thompson in his physical sufferings and their relationship to the products of his literary genius. He became acquainted with "Lady Pain" early in life and was often engaged in the struggle against forces which seemed at times greater than himself. Marked he surely was by the sickness of the century, but he cannot be classed as a decadent in the same sense as Dowson, Beardsley or Wilde. He was a scholar. In "The Precept of Silence" he identifies the Decadence and the lengths to which he had succumbed to it.

I know you: solitary griefs,  
Desolate passions, aching hours!  
I know you: tremulous beliefs,  
Agonized hopes, and ashen flowers!

The winds are sometimes sad to me;  
The starry spaces, full of fear;  
Mine is the sorrow on the sea,  
And mine the sigh of places drear.

Some players upon plaintive strings  
Publish their wistfulness abroad:  
I have not spoken of these things,  
Save to one man, and unto God.

In "Dark Angel" he tells the story of his struggle against the spirit of the Decadence and his determination to escape the inevitable nadir to which it led.

I fight thee, in the Holy Name!  
Yet, what thou dost, is what God saith:  
Tempter! should I escape thy flame,  
Thou wilt have helped my soul from Death...

Do what thou wilt, thou shalt not so,  
 Dark Angel! triumph over me;  
 Lonely, unto the Lone I go;  
 Divine, to the Divinity.

Johnson became a Catholic in 1891 and like Thompson  
 "he was obsessed by religion. Even literature came second and  
 appears in his letters mainly as the handmaid or religion."<sup>31</sup>  
 One of his classmates wrote of Johnson: "he walked through life  
 aloof, like some ascetic saint... ." <sup>32</sup> Like Thompson he was  
 capable of infinite silences, and when he talked he was an in-  
 temperate talker. He loved Shelley as fervidly as did Thompson  
 and would have his friends love him as he did. Following his  
 conversion he became as zealous a champion of Catholicism as  
 were Patmore, the Meynells and Thompson and in "Te Martyrdom  
 Candidatus" reveals how thoroughly his gift of faith penetra-  
 ted his entire being.

Ah! see the fair chivalry come, the companions of Christ!  
 White Horsemen, who ride on white horses, the Knights of  
 God!

They, for their Lord and their Lover Who sacrificed  
 All, save the sweetness of treading, where He first trod!

These, through the darkness of death, the dominion of night;  
 Swept, and they woke in white places at morning-tide:  
 They saw with their eyes, and sang for joy of the sight,  
 They saw with their eyes the Eyes of the Crucified.

---

<sup>31</sup> Katherine Tynan, "Lionel Johnson: Wykehamist,"  
Catholic World, Vol. 113, p. 508.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 509.

Now, whithersoever, He goeth, with Him they go:  
 White Horsemen, who ride on white horses, oh fair to see!  
 They ride, where the Rivers of Paradise flash and flow,  
 White Horsemen, with Christ their Captain: for ever He!

Like Thompson, Johnson's verse "treats of the ideals of man symbolically, rather than the transitory things of the world... his spirit faces forward."<sup>33</sup> Elbridge Colby gives us a general view of Johnson's similar reaction to Thompson's when faced with the spirit of their age.

The early years of the nineteenth century had shown many poets with a belief in the infinite perfectability of the human soul. The progress in science soon made this wild groping seem ridiculous, and then the poets became despondent and sought perfection in the past, reviving buried centuries.. Lionel Johnson and these other Catholic poets took then the station of the music-makers who stood beside the men of old, and so shall stand forever; and they taught that, amid a maze of doubt, the only spiritual certainty lay in the Catholic Faith. They sang victory amid defeat. 34

Johnson, from the early days of his youth seemed destined to play a role in the return to English letters the essential spirit of Catholic doctrine, even as Patmore and

---

33 Elbridge Colby, "The Poetry and Prose of Lionel Johnson," Catholic World. Vol. 96, p. 724.

34 Ibid., p. 730.

Thompson. He loved the Classics and most of his early reading was characterized by a choice selection in healthy literature; his favorite English authors of the 18th century being Smollett, Richardson, Lamb, Gray, Fielding, Goldsmith and Addison.

His conversion "implied no sudden change of faith, for he seems to have been Catholic almost from the first by some intuitive yearning." <sup>35</sup> His vocation was to

the mystical apostolate of the inward life. And although he deemed himself better suited to a literary than to a priestly career, he served his art with almost cloistral consecration, finding in this long and painful service a blessedness beyond the pride of kings. 36

Like Thompson, Johnson was preoccupied with spiritual concerns. He possessed poetic insight and prophetic clearness. He devoted his sympathies to numerous public movements, the most important of which was the Catholic Literary Revival. To it he consecrated his work, and his entire support. The Celtic Renaissance shared a similar adherence. Again he approximates his contemporary, Thompson, in that the two greatest passions of his life were his religion and Ireland. His allegiance to Ireland in "Ireland" compares to Thompson's loyalty to England

---

35 Katherine Bregy, "Lionel Johnson: Poet and Critic," Catholic World, Vol. 83, p. 468.

36 Loc. cit.,



in "To the English Martyrs," for here his passion runs the gamut of the bitter story of wrong and martyrdom, the cold terrible arraignment of the land's oppressors, and the majesty of death and the hope of victory.

How long? Justice of Very God! How long?  
 The Isle of Sorrows from of old hath trod  
 The stony road or unremitting wrong--  
 The purple winepress of the wrath of God:  
 Is then the Isle of Destiny, indeed,  
 To grief predestinate;  
 Ever foredoomed to agonize and bleed  
 Beneath the scourging of eternal fate?  
 Yet against hope shall we still hope, and still  
 Beseech the eternal Will:  
 Our lives to this one service dedicate.

"This love of Ireland did not with Johnson, as is so often the case, carry with it a corresponding hatred of England. In fact he frankly owns "In England" that

Within the English seas,  
 My days have been divine." 37

While a student at Oxford, Johnson came directly under the influence germinated there by Newman and "when he left Oxford he carried with him, as an abiding inspiration for life, the sweet reasonableness, the reverence for tradition, and the love of scholarship and the life of ideas."<sup>38</sup>

---

37 Cornelius A. Weygandt, Tuesdays at Ten p. 71.

38 Arthur Waugh, "The Poetry of Lionel Johnson," The Nineteenth Century, Vol. 79, p. 420.

"His passion for intellect and an almost religious loyalty to tradition were Oxford's gifts to Lionel Johnson and it was with these for beaconing guides that he came up to London in 1890."<sup>39</sup> These bear a direct relation to his poetry which was actually the sincere and deep expression of his spiritual life; which statement has been made by many regarding Thompson. He was out of place in the Rhymers' Club for he was not a revolutionary and had no desire to break away from tradition. He felt no need for new ideas, but he recognized truth in the old. Johnson recognized in Francis Thompson a brother poet in Christ and addressed his lines "Sursum Corda" to the one in whom he, himself, was mirrored.

Lift up your hearts! We lift  
                   Them up  
 To God, and to God's gift,  
                   The Passion Cup.  
 Lift up your hearts.' Ah, so  
                   We will:  
 Through storm of fire or snow,  
                   We lift them still... .

There actually are so many points of similarity between these two men that it would be difficult to discern of which one these lines were written.

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 420.

Lionel Johnson held his pen in trust to art for God's sake. From the first there was on him 'the seal of something priestly and monastic.' He looked abroad on life with a vision which did not mistake defilement for beauty, nor debase tragedy to sordidness, nor change the truth of God into a lie. From a short life, pitifully fated, he managed, so great was his spirit, to wrest bright achievement. Had he lived the allotted span of years... he would help to stem the drift toward rationalism, toward flippant perversity, toward neo-paganism, and bland indifferentism. The influence of his high seriousness lives on to inspire Catholic litterateurs to battle with the prevailing irreligion. In his work, there is a 'whiteness' a 'candor' indescribably felt, through purity and cleanliness of it, as though there were a 'sort of moral purity' in art of so scrupulous and dainty a distinction. 40

Each was endowed with genius. The classical influence permeates the work of each, and was the culture which very largely moulded their individual literary styles. Scholarship breathes forth from every line. Both exhibit a brilliant masterly control of passion and imagination. Each had a characteristic message for the world and through their faith led their

---

40 Florence Moynihan, "Lionel Johnson as a Critic," Catholic World. Vol. 107, p. 763,

followers directly to the feet of God. Each has attained a sure place among English poets for the grave eloquence of their verse, its austerity, and dignity.

The purpose of their lives was a parallel one and their destiny a common goal. Thompson, we can be certain has definitely arrived. Their mark upon the literature and life of the 1890's has outlived the more boisterous sway of the decadents among whom they stood as sentinels of wholesome-ness. Milton Bronner views their position in retrospect:

There are not a few observers who have confidently predicted the gradual return of England to the Church of Rome. Whether this is based upon truth or upon a dream, this much is clear, Catholicism has certainly manifested its attractions for more than one fine mind. Leaving out of the account entirely John H. Newman, one of the princes royal among our prose writers, there are among poets, Coventry Patmore, Aubrey de Vere, Lionel Johnson and Ernest Dowson, all of whom became converted to the Church, and these men with Francis Thompson, born into the faith, form no inconsiderable group in the poetry of the latter part of the nineteenth century. 41

---

41 Milton Bronner, "The Art of Lionel Johnson," The Bookman, Vol. 36, p. 179.

Bronner was not alone in recognizing the importance of the influence of Thompson. William Lyon Phelps remarked in 1917, "the strange figures of speech, the molten metal of his language, the sincerity of his faith, have given to his poems a persuasive influence which is beginning to be felt far and wide, and which, I believe will never die."<sup>42</sup> "One critic complains that

'the young men of Oxford and Cambridge have forsaken Tennyson, and now read only Francis Thompson... .'

It is rather a matter of joy that Thompson's religious poetry can make the hearts of young men burn within them. Young men are right in hating conventional, empty phrases, words that have lost all hitting power, hollow forms, and bloodless ceremonies. Thompson's lips were touched with a live coal from the altar. 43

Lines written in his own day by Wilfrid Meynell to Sister Mary Austin on Francis Thompson's influence in the contemporary Catholic Revival are equally as timely for us today.

---

<sup>42</sup> William Lyon Phelps, The Advance of Modern English Poetry p. 9.

<sup>43</sup> Loc. cit.,

... Lovers of Francis Thompson-- what brothers we all are! Here in England "The Hound of Heaven" has had a great deal to do with the Christian revival that has marked the last few months. Especially are the young non-conformists (other than Catholics) affected by it. And the advance towards the Church made by the "Anglo-Catholics," who now accept nearly all our doctrines and practices, is due, in many cases, to the influence of Francis Thompson on their spiritual lives. I think that the lovely summer has been also a great help. Christ, the Light of the World, has seemed nearer when His symbol became more evident than ever before, even in the memory of an ancient like myself. 44

When his message had been voiced to his satisfaction, Thompson laid down his pen with austere reserve and prepared for the inevitable end. Contrary to the decadents, who died fighting, tormented, and unhappy, Thompson, whose faith had made him whole, was ready to meet his Creator and how pleased He must have been with the record of his stewardship we who love the poet and share his faith, can well surmise.

---

44 Quoted from An Account of Books and Manuscripts of Francis Thompson, edited by Terence L. Connolly, S. J., (Massachusetts, Boston College) p. 66.

## CHAPTER IV

### FRANCIS THOMPSON--PROPHET OF AN AGE

Francis Thompson not only recognized and understood the changes taking place in his time, but interpreted in prose and poetry the significance attached to such changes. He recognized his role in life as a poet. He believed the poet to be the immediate servant of God and man and felt it is left to the poet to prophesy. This he was capable of doing because of his remarkable foresight and intellectual powers. He read the signs of the times so accurately because he interpreted them in the light of Divine inspiration. For this reason no study of his relationship to his age is complete without considering him not only in the role of poet but also that of prophet, for it was as a prophet he distinguished himself apart entirely from most of his contemporaries.

"Thompson had sung the praise and blame of the century that was then drawing to a close and hailed the century just dawning with grave misgivings."<sup>1</sup>

Young Century, born to hear  
The canon talking at its infant ear--  
The Twentieth of Time's loins, since that  
Which in the quiet snows of Bethlehem he begat,

---

<sup>1</sup> Terence Connolly, S. J., Francis Thompson: In His Paths p. 196.

Ah! with forthbringing such and so ill-starred,  
 After the day of blood and night of fate,  
 Shall it survive with brow no longer marred,  
 Lip no more wry with hate? 2

Sixteen years later his fears found confirmation in the outbreak of World War I. However, not until the close of World War II was another prophecy in the same poem to be realized.

Thence Asia shall be brought to bed  
 Of dominations yet undreamed;  
 Narrow-eyed Egypt lift again the head  
 Whereon the far-seen crown Nilotic gleamed. 3

In Thompson's two latest odes, "The Nineteenth Century" and "Cecil Rhodes," he adventures greatly in taking the growth of modern science and the growth of Pan-Teutonism as material for poetry. He is most occupied in these poems in summing the achievements of science and the dream of the empire builder that England shall guard the world's destiny. There is genuine evidence in them of his interest in the detail of science and the detail of world politics. Few poets have displayed such vivid interest in the affairs of his country as Thompson and this thought for the greatness of England and his loyalty and

---

2 "The Nineteenth Century"

3 Ibid.



admiration for his native land are chanted throughout his masterly "Cecil Rhodes."

A hundred wheels a-turn  
All to one end--that England's sons may learn  
The glory of their sonship, the supreme  
Worth that befits the heirs of such estate.

The Boer War was still in progress as the nineteenth century ended and Thompson commemorates in his ode entitled "Peace," the signing of the treaty that concluded the war. But his plea is for a lasting peace and he beseeches his country to go down on her knees and beg a just God for the peace which only He can give.

And now, Lord, since Thou hast upon hell's floor  
Bound, like a snoring sea, the blood-drowsed bulk  
of war,  
Shall we not cry, on recognizing knees,  
This is Thy Peace?

In his ode "For the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria," Thompson expresses his sincere admiration for the Queen and for her life's accomplishments. He exalts the glories of his nation in the procession of the great personages which he imagines to be proceeding through the streets of London to pay homage to the Empress. Poets and heroes of war down through the ages from the beginning of England's history are extolled, their greatness a reflection of the greatness of their native land. In the closing lines he echoes again his fear of a great

war, one which would break out in the Orient. His prophetic fear found confirmation in World War II.

If in the East  
 Still strains against its leash the unglutted beast  
 Of War; if yet the cannon's lip be warm;  
 Thou, whom these portents warn but not alarm,  
 Feastest, but with thy hand upon the sword,  
 As fits a warrior race:

"In 'Cecil Rhodes' and 'To England,' on his country's neglect of Greece in 1898, his last poems, he was of his time, dominated by its scientific and political interests... ."<sup>4</sup>

"He is, as it were a missionary poet. He wrote for his time and about his time, in the hope that he might be for it 'the poet of the return to God'--that his belief might prove beneficently contagious."<sup>5</sup>

Thompson has expressed in "The Nineteenth Century" a theme which is "chiefly a development of the external manifestations of the century in war, science, and imperialistic expansion."<sup>6</sup> He recognizes the evil that has grown up in the name of "science" and the nineteenth century's dumb acceptance and allegiance to the false doctrines brought forth by faithless scientists.

---

<sup>4</sup> Cornelius A. Weygandt, Tuesdays at Ten (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1928) p. 203.

<sup>5</sup> George N. Shuster, "Thoughts on Francis Thompson," Commonweal, Vol. 25, p. 432.

<sup>6</sup> Terence Connolly S. J., (Editor) Poems of Francis Thompson (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1932) p. 529.

She gave her heart; her heart she gave  
 To the blind worm that bores the mould,  
 .....  
 'Science,' ertswhile with ampler meanings known;  
 And all the peoples in their turns  
 Before the blind worm bowed them down,  
 .....  
 It is a thing of sightless prophecies.

Father Terence Connolly observes that the best commentary on these lines is to be found in Thompson's own essay "In Darkest England."

Vain is the belief that men can convert to permanent evil that which is in itself good. It has been sought to do so with science; and some of us have been seriously frightened at science. Folly. Certain temporary evil has been wrought through it in the present, which seems very great because it is present. That will pass, the good will remain; and men will wonder how they with whom was truth could ever have feared research. Scientists, those eyeless worms who loosen the soil for the crops of God, have declared that they are proving miracles false, because they are contrary to the laws of Nature. I can see that in fifty years' time they will have proved miracles true, because they are based on the laws of Nature. So much good, at least, will come from the researches of Nancy and the Charite, of the followers of Bernheim and the followers of Charcot. If any, being evil, offer to us good things, I say: 'Take; for ours must be the ultimate harvest from them. Good steel wins in the hands that can wield it longest; and those hands are ours.' 7

Also in "The Nineteenth Century" Thompson calls attention to that branch of astronomy just beginning and known as "celestial mechanics."

Nor were they all o' the dust, as witness may  
 Davy and Faraday;  
 And they  
 Who clomb the cars  
 And learned to rein the chariots of the stars;

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica it is "that branch of applied mechanics which, by deductive processes derives the laws of motion of heavenly bodies from their gravitation toward each other and from the mutual action of the parts which form them."<sup>8</sup>

To Francis Thompson belongs the singular distinction of all of the artists of the nineties the remarkable spiritual insight of faith. To know and comprehend the credible things of scientific discovery and progress is one achievement, but in the light of such illumination, Thompson spiritualizes the findings of modern science as in this stanza from "The Anthem Earth."

In a little sight, in a little sight,  
 We learn from what in thee is credible  
 The incredible, with bloody clutch and feet

---

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from Terence Connolly, S. J., Poems of Francis Thompson p. 531.

Clinging the painful juts of jagged faith.  
Science, old noser in its prideful straw,  
That with anatomising scalpel tents  
Its three-inch of thy skin, and brags 'All's bare'--  
The eyeless worm, that, boring, works the soil,  
Making it capable for the crops of God;  
Against its own dull will  
Ministers poppies to our troublous thought,  
A Balaam come to prophecy,--parables,  
Nor of its parable itself is ware,  
Grossly unwotting; all things has expounded,  
Reflux and influx, counts the sepulchre  
The seminary of being, and extinction  
The Ceres of existence: it discovers  
Life in putridity, vigour in decay;  
Dissolution even, and disintegration,  
Which in our dull thoughts symbolize disorder,  
Finds in God's thoughts irrefragable order,  
And admirable the manner of our corruption  
As of our health. It grafts upon the cypress  
The tree of Life--Death dies on his own dart  
Promising to our ashes perpetuity,  
And to our perishable elements  
Their proper imperishability; extracting  
Medicaments from out mortality  
Against too mortal cogitation; till  
Even of the caput mortuum we do thus  
Make a memento vivere. To such uses  
I put the blinding knowledge of the fool,  
Who in no order seeth ordinance;  
Nor thrust my arm in nature shoulder-high,  
And cry--'There's naught beyond!' How should I so,  
That cannot with these arms of mine engirdle  
All which I am; that am a foreigner  
In mine own region? Who the chart shall draw  
Of the strange courts and vaulty labryinths,  
The spacious tenements and wide pleasancess,  
Innumerable corridors far-withdrawn,  
Wherein I wander darkling, of myself?  
Darkling I wander, nor I dare explore  
The long arcane of those dim catacombs,  
Where the rat memory does its burrows make,  
Close-seal them as I may, and my stolen tread  
Starts populace, a gens lucifuga;  
That too strait seems my mind my mind to hold,  
And I myself incontinent of me.  
Then go I, my foul-venting ignorance  
With scabby sapience plastered, aye forsooth!

Clap my wise foot-rule to the walls o' the world,  
 And vow--A goodly house, but something ancient,  
 And I can find no Master? Rather, nay,  
 By baffled seeing, something I divine  
 Which baffles, and a seeing set beyond;  
 And so with strenuous gazes sounding down,  
 Like to the day-long porer on a stream,  
 Whose last look is his deepest, I beside  
 This slow perpetual Time stand patiently,  
 In a little sight.

Father Connolly gives us Florence Moynihan's interpretation of this stanza, which elucidates the insight Thompson applies to the process of life and death in the supernatural order.

Science, probing the mysteries of being has lighted upon the law of order amid chaos. It has discovered in death the occasion of renewed life. In asserting that the elements liberated at death are taken up again in other forms of life, it has repeated involuntarily the scholastic dictum: Corruptio unius est generatio alterius. This theory that death is not really the end of life in the natural order is to Thompson a figure or analogy of the doctrine of immortality. For, explaining all things as influx and reflux, it declares death is but a stage in the process of being: it counts the sepulchre the seminary of being, discovers life in putridity, vigor in decay, and finds admirable the manner of our corruption as of our health. The eye of faith, the facts of science point to a Supreme Designer behind the complex things, Who out of broken arcs fashions a perfect round, out of bewildering discords educes an overruling harmony. So in human life Thompson comes to

resolve evil in a higher synthesis of good, and to discern in pain and death, a Divine recompense. Thus: 'in a little sight,' he has learned a new standard of values by which he finds in the shadows of the human lot but the 'Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly.' 9

In his religious poems Thompson was equally advanced in his thinking and these also display prophetic insight. In "The Orient Ode," published for the first time in 1897 he established himself as the first deliberate poet to express the vital doctrines of the Mystical Body of Christ.

Thy proper blood dost thou not give  
 That Earth, the gusty Maenad, drink and dance?  
 Art thou not life of them that live?  
 Yes, in glad twinkling advent, thou dost dwell  
 Within our body as a tabernacle!  
 Thou bittest with thine ordinance  
 The jaws of Time, and thou dost mete  
 The unsustainable treading of his feet.  
 Thou to thy spousal universe  
 Art Husband, she thy Wife and Church:

He had his own special fears about this poem at the time it was published, not because it was dangerously mystical, but because it was too scientific. "The Orient Ode on its scientific side must wait at least fifty years for understanding."<sup>10</sup>

---

9 Ibid., p. 508.

10 Calvert Alexander, S. J., The Catholic Literary Revival p. 172.

Father Calvert Alexander explains the meaning of Thompson's statement:

The science he spoke of was, of course, not the science of the nineteenth century. It was the science he confidently envisioned for the future, when cataclysmic world events, among them very probably the World War, would blast away the last remnants of the materialistic scientisme of his day, and men should again find the new cosmology of Christ where he himself had found it, hidden away in the bosom of the Church. 11

In "Lilium Regis" published after his death there is prophecy again of "the world-war that in 1914 ushered in those fearful years, when literally, the nations (lay) in blood, and their kings a broken brood, a purification of the world, as it were, before the spiritual rejuvenation so beautifully described in the last prophetic stanza."<sup>12</sup> "With the clairvoyance of approaching death, Thompson foresaw the world-struggle, the temporary eclipse of the Christian Church and its ultimate triumph."<sup>13</sup>

---

11 Ibid.

12 William Lyon Phelps, The Advance of English Poetry in the Twentieth Century (New York: Dodd, Mead Co., 1918) p.13.

13 Loc. cit.





the past nor the present, but a distant future, the rumblings of which he feels in his soul. He shall not live to visualize "the red breaking of the waters" nor the victorious "queening" of Christ's church.

O Lily of the King! I shall not see, that sing,  
 I shall not see the hour of thy queening!  
 But my Song shall see, and wake like a flower that  
     dawn-winds shake,  
 And sigh with joy the odours of its meaning.

However, he, believer in the immortality of the soul, knows that he will experience the joy of the triumph of Christ's lily on earth when "the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it." His song is full of prophetic hope and trust in a Divine Providence, yet fully aware of the blackness of the night which shall precede the "dawn-winds."

O Lily of the King, remember then the thing  
 That this dead mouth sang: and thy daughters,  
 As they dance before His way, sing there on the Day  
 What I sang when the Night was on the waters!

Thompson's knowledge of the struggle of the Catholic faith to endure throughout the blackest days for Christianity in England is most complete in every detail. In his lines "To the English Martyrs" he eulogizes the heroic sacrifice of a company of about one hundred martyrs who were put to death at Tyburn between the years 1535 and 1681 resulting in England's apostasy.

The shadow lies on England now  
Of the deathly--fruited bough:  
Cold and black with malison  
Lies between the land and sun;  
Putting out the sun, the bough  
Shades England now!

"Thompson, though primarily a lyrist, frequently shows us that his feet were firmly planted on the earth even though his head was among the stars. In such poems as "The English Martyrs" "The Nineteenth Century," and his other historical poems, he gives undoubted evidence that he had read aright the signs of the times."<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusion

The 1890's have been identified as turbulent years from various points of view; and the complexities of the period have found expression in every type of literature. Despite the widespread assertion of the decadent trend as an almost exclusive characteristic of this period, we know that in reality this decadence had at least two main trends--one into mysticism and religion, the other into debauchery. The most noteworthy aspect of this final decade of the nineteenth century is that there actually took place in many writers, an almost unbelievable transition from the soulless and Godless materialism

---

15 Terence Connolly, S. J., Poems of Francis Thompson  
p. 390.

of the dying century to a new spiritual concept of life and the world. Even the most perverse of the decadents, namely Oscar Wilde, made this transition in his personal life before it was too late.

Born into such a period, Thompson, and his decadent contemporaries suffered in common a spiritual soul-sickness which was the natural heritage of their age. Each attempted his own solution and was sincere in varying degrees in his attempt to meet life's challenge. If Thompson's contemporaries sought a fuller life through art, or experience, or sensation, or reform, or revolt, or possession, and failed to reap the satisfying spiritual rewards their souls demanded, it is significant that in the throes of cynicism and despair they, one by one, gradually sought the solace of religion, and thus, before the decade drew to a close, had actually contributed to the momentum which was to make the Catholic Literary Revival a world-wide movement.

The similarity of Thompson to his decadent contemporaries begins with their common malady. The chief characteristics of the decadence converged in Thompson's experience; despair, the knowledge of sin, repentance, agonized hopes and solitary griefs, he knew. Because this way of life was not unknown to him, and because he, on the other hand, faced the challenge of the decade with a remarkable background, he proved to be the most truly representative writer of the period. He not only understood the problems of the age, but he interpreted these problems in

the light of Divine revelation and demonstrated his responsibilities to his age as no other man had succeeded in doing.

In the face of pessimism and despair Thompson believed supremely in God and held that suffering is essential for the development and perfection of the soul. The understanding of the Christian and the mystic in regard to the world is upheld everywhere in his poetry. Using his own personal problems as a center he evolves the conflicts of human nature against the world about him and through his depiction of these personal struggles with their resulting negation of the futile materialism of the age in preference to submission to Divine authority, Thompson aims to lift his people to God.

Thompson parts company with the decadents when we consider certain of his gifts, the most important of which is the rare gift of insight, sorely lacking in the reflections of the decadents in general. He recognized with remarkable insight the responsibility of the poet to the world in which he lived, and his contemporaries rejected that responsibility in various ways. from simple escape to an attempt to substitute a fictitious world for the one which had proved so disappointing to them. Setting forth his gospel of renunciation of the various avenues of escape the modernist would hold out to the thinker and the dreamer, Thompson, girded with his precious Catholic heritage, his broad education in many fields besides literature, his knowledge of the liturgy and his love of nature, abandoned

himself to poetic and prose expression with a characteristic humility, faith and hope to preach the word of God to a society ill for want of convictions.

From the sanctuary of the Meynell home where his fire of devotion to God was sure of constant kindling, Thompson burst upon the English public with so startling a message that his hearers reacted in extreme ways; by loudly denouncing him or by falling upon their knees in recognition of one who has witnessed awful truths.

Through his prophecies regarding the future of the Church, the inevitable wars brooding in the distance, the mysteries to be unravelled by science and the necessity of allying ourselves with the Almighty Power behind these forces, he achieves the rank of the most modern of his contemporaries. His prophetic insight permits him to scale the confining walls of the 1890's and he ascends with the dignity of Spenser to the hall of fame of England's greatest.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES:

The Works of Francis Thompson (London: Burns & Oates Ltd., 1913) Vols. I, II, and III.

SECONDARY SOURCES: (Books)

Alexander, Calvert, S. J., The Catholic Literary Revival, Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co., 1935.

Bendz, Ernest, The Influence of Pater and Matthew Arnold on Oscar Wilde, London: H. Grenel & Co., 1914.

Buck, Philo M., The World's Great Age, Massachusetts: The MacMillan Co., 1943.

Burdett, Osbert. The Beardsley Period. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925.

Connolly, Terence, S. J., (Editor) Poems of Francis Thompson, New York: The Century Co., 1932.

-----, (Editor) An Account of Books and Manuscripts of Francis Thompson, Massachusetts, Boston College.

-----, Francis Thompson: In His Paths, Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co., 1944.

Daiches, David. Poetry and the Modern World, Chicago University Press, 1940.

De Quincy, Thomas. Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, London: Taylor and Hessey, 1823.

Dowson, Ernest. The Poems and Prose of Ernest Dowson, New York: Boni and Liveright Inc., (Editors) 1919.

Freeman, John. The Moderns, London: Robert Scott, Roxburghe House, 1916.

- Gosse, Edmund. Coventry Patmore, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905.
- Henderson, Archibald. Interpreters of Life, New York: Mitchell Kennerling, 1910.
- Jackson, Holbrook. The Eighteen Nineties, London: Grant Richards Ltd., 1913.
- Le Gallienne, Richard. The Romantic 90's, New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1925.
- Longaker, Mark. Ernest Dowson, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944.
- Meynell, Everard. The Life of Francis Thompson, London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1913.
- Meynell, Viola. Alice Meynell, A Memoir, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929.
- Mowat, R. B., The Victorian Age, London: George G. Harrap and Co., Ltd., 1939.
- Muddiman, Bernard. Men of the Nineties, London: Henry Danielson, 1920.
- O'Connell, Sister M., Francis Thompson, the Poet of Modern Catholicism, Chicago: Loyola University, 1941.
- Olivero, Federico. Francis Thompson, Torino, Italy: E. Lattes & Co., 1938.
- Phelps, William Lyon. The Advance of English Poetry in the Twentieth Century, New York: Dodd, Mead Co., 1918.
- Rooker, K., Francis Thompson. Thesis: University of Paris, 1912.
- Schwarzman, Edna B., Romantic Criticism of the 1890's, University of Chicago Press, 1927.
- Shuster, George N. The World's Great Catholic Literature, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1943.
- Smith, Chard P., Annals of the Poets, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935.



- Symons, Arthur. Dramatis Personae, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1923.
- Thomson, John. Francis Thompson: Poet and Mystic, London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., Ltd., 1912.
- Trese, Thomas E., S. J., Francis Thompson: A Metaphysical Poet, Loyola University, Chicago, 1944.
- W. Ward and A. R. Waller, (Editors) Cambridge History of English Literature, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1928.
- Weygandt, Cornelius A., Tuesdays at Ten, Philadelphia, Penn., University of Pennsylvania Press, 1928.
- Wilde, Oscar. Intentions: Essay on "The Critic as Artist," New York: Boni and Liveright.
- , De Profundis, G. P. Putnam's Sons: New York, 1905.
- Williams, Rev. Claude, O.S.C., (Editor) Great Catholics, New York: Macmillan Co., 1923.
- Wingfield-Stratford, Esme. The Victorian Cycle, New York: William Morrow and Company, 1935.

## (Periodicals)

- Allen, H. A., "Poet of the Return to God." Catholic World. Vol. 107, pp. 289-304.
- Bregy, Katherine. "Poetry of Francis Thompson." Catholic World. Aug. 1905.
- Bregy, Katherine. "Lionel Johnson: Poet and Critic." Catholic World. Vol. 63, p. 468.
- Bronner, Milton. "The Art of Lionel Johnson." The Bookman. Vol. 36, pp. 179-183.
- Colby, Elbridge. "The Poetry and Prose of Lionel Johnson." Catholic World. Vol. 96, pp. 723-732.

- Ketrick, P. J., "Francis Thompson, the Poet of Two Worlds," Catholic World. Vol. 147, pp. 422-427.
- Meynell, Wilfrid. "Francis Thompson, the Poet of High Thinking," Living Age. Vol. CCXV. p. 804.
- Moynihan, Florence. "Lionel Johnson as a Critic," Catholic World. Vol. 107, pp. 758-763.
- Shuster, George N. "Thoughts on Francis Thompson," Commonweal, Vol. 25, pp. 431-433.
- Tynan, Katherine. "Francis Thompson," Living Age. Vol. 298, pp. 630-632.
- Tynan, Katherine. "Lionel Johnson: Wykehamist," Catholic World. Vol. 113, pp. 507-513.
- Warren, Herbert. "An Appreciation of Francis Thompson," Harper's Weekly. Vol. 512, p. 1868.
- Waugh, Arthur. "The Poetry of Lionel Johnson," The Nineteenth Century. Vol. 79, pp. 416-427.

APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Mary J. Kearney has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

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

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

June 12, 1947  
Date

James J. Young  
Signature of Adviser