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Moving Towards the Kingdom of God: Analysing Francis Thompson's Mystical Poetry

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Abstract:

The ultimate desire of a mystic is to have an eternal union with the God. For whole of his life, a mystic walks on the paradigm of spirituality to achieve salvation and harmony with the Absolute Self of God. Being an English mystic poet of a high cadre, Francis Thompson's poetry sketches in depth the various shades of a mystic and his mystical experiences. His poetry is an epitome of spiritual excellence. The present paper brings forth Francis Thompson's mystic temperament and his treatment to the concept of a mystic's union with the God. The paper focuses on his mystical poetry to chalk out a mystic's journey towards the kingdom of God. Seeing and believing the God as a transcendent being, Francis Thompson, in his mystical writings always stands firm on the man's ultimate union with God, as he is of the opinion that there exists something divine inside the man; a manifestation of God's divine nature and as such, he strongly holds a view about man's (Seeker's) merger with God.

Keywords: Mysticism, Transcendence, Love, Union with God, Soul Purification.

Born at Preston in 1859, Francis Thompson, the son of a physician was a true Christian and a great mystic poet whose poetry echoes Christian mystic thought to its full. His works include; Poems, Sister Songs, New Poems, Selected Poems, The Hound of Heaven. In prose he has written "Shelly," "Health and Holiness," and "The life of St. Ignatius Loyola".

In the nineteenth century, the term 'mysticism' was very much abused and misunderstood. Mysticism almost included everything from myths to mysteries in Thompson's times. Francis Thompson, however, knew that there was a general confusion regarding the term mysticism and people usually linked it with mere emotional outburst of self. So, he tried his level best to work out the proper concept of mysticism and the poetry associated with it and hence tried to frame the concept of mysticism in its proper shape. Regarding the developing skeptical attitude towards mysticism, Coventry Patmore significantly wrote to Francis Thompson saying "I look to you to crush all this false mysticism' Crush it; you can do it if you like; you are the man to do it" (Meynell 18).

Francis Thompson belonged to the English creed of mystics and as such shared the very English Christian mystic temperament that quietly came vivid in his mystic poetry. In addition to it, his own personal acute experience of pain and sorrow (identifiable with

the Christian virtues of humility and suffering) added to his vision of God; the true sustainer of world and of the goal of human life as a merger with the Absolute self of God. As the other English Mystics, Francis Thompson, too was a practical mystic. To him, mysticism was a fact free of vagueness. According to Francis Thompson, “The core of mysticism is a fact, not an understanding or feeling. Still less is it an endeavor after a something nameless and unattainable. All true mystics know well about what they seek; and that it can be gained or missed according to fidelity of their own effort. The thing sought is Union” (Meynell 20). Thompson associated clarity and precision with genuine mysticism and did not approve of false mysticism that was in vogue during his days. For Thompson, a mystic poet, hence too should be able to write through a clear idea that could help in generating a clear view of the facts related to mysticism. A mystic’s teachings should come quite clear in his writings. In this regard he says, “A Mystic poet who is vaporous fancy will not go far. Every such poet should be able to give a clear and logical resume of his teaching as terse as a page of scholastic teaching” (Butler 19).

In Thompson’s mystical writings, we sense his belief in God’s transcendence. The transcendental feeling of God is strongly present in the poet’s constant craving for the spiritual delights of the heavenly state. It is revealed to us in his sense of his own wretchedness and smallness, accentuated by his contemplation of the joys of divine union which he so passionately, and sometimes pathetically, hungers after. Seeing and believing the God as a transcendent being, Francis Thompson, in his mystical writings always stands firm on the man’s ultimate union with God, as he is of the opinion that there exists something divine inside the man; a manifestation of God’s divine nature and as such, he strongly holds a view about man’s (Seeker’s) merger with God. For Francis, the stage of childhood depicts something of the divinity. It is the state of innocence that he values most. For Francis, childhood depicts the primal state of man before fall. He valued innocence and simplicity, associated with childhood, as the spiritual qualities and cultivated consciously by the persons aspiring to the mystic state. Referring to the innocence and simplicity in children, Thompson actually points towards the inward purity, a characteristic quite necessary and mandatory to be a mystic. For a mystic’s perception should be fresh and unspoiled as the child’s. In one of the Thompson’s significant essays on Shelley (a renowned Poet of Romantic period of 19th century), describing him as “The enchanted child,” he characterizes the state of the child as:

Know you what it is to be a child? It is to be something different from the man of today. It is to have a spirit yet streaming from the waters of baptism; it is to believe in love, to believe in loveliness, to believe in belief; it is to be so little that the elves can reach to whisper in your ear; it is to turn pumpkins into coaches, and mice into horses; lowness into loftiness, and nothing into everything, for each child has its fairy god-mother in its own soul; it is to live in a nutshell and to count yourself the king of infinite space (Francis Thompson 28-29).

According to Thompson, man shares God's divinity, the proof of which lies in the innocence of children. That is why, Francis speaks high about his divine meetings with children; a spiritual affinity Thompson feels in the company of children equals that of the company of God. Hence, he is of the view, that if not childhood, but the innocence in its bosom should be carried all along the life of a man as it is this innocence that ties the soul of a man with that of God. According to Francis Thompson, a mystic can be a mystic only if he possesses an innocent bent of mind, pure and clear as only a pure soul can commune with the absolute pure self of the God.

For Francis, "Union with the Divine," is the ultimate reality/fact that mysticism holds about. This union however, can't be had by each and everyone. Being in the final stage of mystical experience, it requires a mystic to undergo all the stages preceding the stage of mystical experience. According to Francis, a seeker can only seek the God, after he firmly adheres himself to the doctrine of his religion. For Francis did not see mysticism alien to religion (Christianity). He is of the view that adherence to religion (in his case Christianity) disciplines a man; the rules and regulations (Religions laws) need to be followed; for a mystic's adherence to all the pillars of religion is a must. In this connection Francis says, "Mysticism is an interior ladder, at the summit of which is the God. The mystic endeavors, by a rigid practical virtue, combined with prayer, meditation, and mortification of the senses, to arrive at a close union with the creator" (Connolly 17-18).

The central Idea behind the concept of mysticism in Christian terms lies in the ultimate communion with the God. And Thompson's English mystic poetry is a testimony of the said idea. Christian mystics throughout the world view the relation between the lover (Seeker) and the God (the object of worship) as one based on mutual love. Thompson captures the relation of seeker and the God in the following lines of '*In Her Paths*'

Ah! Foolish pools and meads! You did not see

Essence of old, essential pure as she,

For this was even that Lady, and none other,

The man in me calls 'Love', the child calls 'Mother' (Connolly 17-18)

In the above lines it's clear that Thompson sees the relation of a child and mother as a prototype of his relation with the divine. In our human approach, the relation between the child and the mother is the most selfless relation based on love. Hence, Thomson has personified the God's love by the very image of a mother.

Francis Thompson is of the view, that due to the man's limited vision, he has fallen prey to the materialistic instincts of life that as a result has distanced him from the God. Hence man has turned incapable to recognize the true master who alone is best entitled to his love. In his poem '*The Fair Inconstant*', Francis says.

*Dost Thou still hope thou shalt be fair,
 When no more fair to me?
 Or those that by thee taken were
 Hold their captivity?

 But thou too late, too late shalt find
 Twas I that made thee fair;
 Thy beauties never from thy mind
 But from my loving were;
 And those delights that did thee stole
 Confessed the vicinage of my soul (Connolly 74).*

Man usually flees from God, in search of love for worldly things. Thompson says, in *The Hound of Heaven*:

*'I fled him, down the nights and down the day;
 I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
 I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
 Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
 I hid from Him, and under running laughter,
 Up vistaed hopes I sped;
 And shot, Precipitated,
 Adown Titanic glooms of Chasmed fear (O'Conor 3)*

Through these lines Francis Thompson tries to put before the audience, the image of man's fleeing from God in search of worldly happiness. For man finds the God's love ever pursuing. But still man is not alone satisfied with the sole love of the God. Man wishes other things besides the God and hence turns ready to sacrifice the God. But Thompson, reminds man of the unbound and selfless love that the God has for man. And says, the eternal love of God tries to mould the man towards him. The concept of 'mutual love' is truly woven in Thompson's '*Hound of Heaven*' eg.

*'From those strong feet that followed, followed after
 'But with unhurrying chase,
 And unperturbed pace,
 Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
 They beat and a voice beat
 More instant than the feet (O'Conor 4)*

The above lines are a testimony of the fact that even if man goes astray, the God continuously chases his soul, for God loves man unconditionally. According to Thompson, not every person can be a mystic. A person can be a mystic only when he realizes his ultimate goal--- the goal of uniting with the absolute self of the God. For the Union, the man has to be motivated that his ultimate happiness lies in the company of God. No other creature can replace the God's place in man's life. And even if a man possesses all in the world but remains out of touch with the God, he ultimately feels restless, and to check in for his restlessness, the only cure is the submission of self to the God. No other creation of God can be fulfilling as the God's grandeur. Thompson says,

'I tempted all his servitors, but to find

My own betrayal in their constancy,

In faith to Him their fickleness to me,

Their traitorous trueness and their loyal deceit (O'Conor 4)

Man tries to tempt God's creatures, but finds them constant, faithful to God and himself betrayed.

'But still within the little children's eyes

Seems something, something that replies,

They, at least, are for me, surely for me!

I turned me to them very wistfully;

But just as their young eyes grew sudden fair

With dawning answers there

Their angel plucked them from me by the hair (O'Conor 4-5)

Thompson states soul's run away from God, to find its happiness in creatures, likewise in children, nature & knowledge but finds it doesn't find a return of love in these all, nor in man, or any children. Exhausted by his search for love, man turns restless, comes to know about the God's excellence in loving and returning soul's love to man. Man comes to know the reality; the truth of existence. A man turns a mystic; the moment he realizes the truth of the God, the truth and purpose of his own being and off-course about the nature of reality of the relation between God and man. There only he realizes, the aim of his life lies in the union with God.

Union with God being the ultimate aim of a mystic, calls for complete surrender before God. And a complete surrender calls for burning out of all pride, sensuality and inordinate affection. The uncontrolled desires of the human heart must be bridled,

subdued, conquered, and before Divine love can use that heart, all merely human dross must be burnt away, and the heart should be purified of all earthly desires. This purification of soul, in Christian theology is attained by leading the soul to pain and affliction; sorrow and suffering. As an English Mystic, Francis Thompson has beautifully captured the scene of a mystic undergoing the procedure of soul purification. He Says.

Ah! must –

Designer Infinite!

Ah! Must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst limn with it?(O' Conor 6)

Thompson says that Before God can draw, in the infinite design of his providence, and work with the soul as a fit instrument; it must be charred in the furnace of suffering. Upon the soul must be carved the very image of Jesus Christ and him crucified. The pride of human life must be charred by humiliation deep and bitter. The sensuality of man must be burnt to a charred stick by physical pain, intense suffering and denial of the senses. Only, after undergoing suffering and pain, the soul of a mystic comes to realise the worth of having a pure heart and soul. There only the heart and soul of the mystic becomes fit to be used by the God as his abode. Now, at this stage, the mystic, clean and pure in his heart, understands the true concept of God and the reason behind his own existence. The soul of the mystic is ready to commune with the Absolute soul of the God. There only the God calls for a merger with the mystic soul. In this regard Thompson says,

Rise, claps My hand, and come,

Halts by me that footfall.(O'Conor 7)

Through these lines, Thompson, clearly points towards the God's assurance of protective grace. The moment soul realizes the concept of true love of God, he understands his mistake/folly in running away from the God's shade and regrets his inability to understand the source of all love, all excellence and all happiness lies within God. Thompson says:

Is my gloom, after all,

Shadd of His hand, out stretched caressingly?

“Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest, I am He whom thou Seekest!

Thou dfavest love from thee, who dravest Me”(O'Conor 7)

Thompson in these lines describes the stage of the soul where the soul questions his self about his misunderstandings related to God's nature. About the above quoted verses of Thompson; O Conor. J.F.X in his 'A Study of Francis Thompson's Hound of Heaven states:

the gloom that seemed to darken each joy and to take away all happiness in life; was it after all the shade of His hand caressing me? Is it not now all brightened by the Joy and the Glory of the love that has come? The love that I drive away, when I drive my Lord away. I drive love from me, when I drive Him. Ah! Love Divine. Stay with me forever- more to be my joy. Now that I know Thee, Divine Love, shall I ever drive this love from me? May it not be said of me, "Thou dravest love from thee when thou dravest Me? (16)

'*In No Strange Land*' (1908), probably the last the poet wrote, carries a sure mark of what mystics mean by the unitive experience. The confident love of the poem leaves one in no doubt that the poet has realized the unseen. The below verses are an account of divinity seen close at hand but one whose "doors of perception" are open and no longer sealed.

*O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!
Does the fish soar to find the ocean,
The eagle plunge to find the air
That we ask of the stars in motion*

If they have rumour of thee there ?(Connolly 293)

Now, the mystic feels at peace with his self and in the world sees everything as sacramental, animated by the immanent principle. Francis Thompson's concept of God adheres to the Christian theology. Likewise, Thompson's mystic poetry bears witness to the fact that God's being is that of transcendental one and ultimately the aim of human soul is a merger with the God ie Union with the God.

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