

## **Aview on Francis Thompson's - the Hound of Heaven**

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Fear wit not to evade, as Love to pursue....The Hound of Heaven

The Hound of Heaven is the sweetest, deepest, strongest song ever written in the English tongue. **Bookman** adds it saying “the Hound of Heaven seems to us on the whole, the most wonderful lyric in the language”. It has the unique thing that makes for immortality. **Patmore** confirms his touch from hound of Heaven. **G.H Chesterton** says that Francis Thompson is the great poet and with him we lose greatest poetic energy since Browning. The great poetry of the Hound of Heaven transcended in itself and in its influence all conventions says **Wilfrid Meynell**. In many poems one reading suffices, and the mind is satisfied, for the whole depth is plummeted and all is revealed in a single view. It is not so with this poem. There is a depth that can be sounded, and deeper depths are still there. **Burne-Jones** cries out “since Gabriel’s blessed Damosel no mystical words have so touched me as the Hound of Heaven”<sup>i</sup>.

Francis Thompson leapt into fame among those able to discern true poetic genius by the chance discovery of the verse-set gems contained in short poem which he composed when on the verge of destitution and despair. Since the day this singer of golden song wrote on a soiled scrap of paper, picked up by him in a London street, the lines which first brought about his recognition, his works have been read and re-read with increasing appreciation, while the greatest critics have vied with one another in proclaiming his praise. But if there is one work more than the rest of the vagrant prodigal of Song which has fired the heart and glistened the eye, it is his religious ode entitled “The Hound of Heaven”. This wonderful lyric came as an inspiration amid the doubt, and darkness, and the imperfect faith of other Victorian poets<sup>ii</sup>. Throughout its lines God is no vague abstraction, but present most intimately loving, and eagerly pursuing the soul that would find satisfaction elsewhere than in Him.

Whether the original idea, which developed in course of time into “The Hound of Heaven,” was first planted in the author’s mind by the thought of the *pursuing love* in Silvio Pellico’s “Dio Amore,”<sup>iii</sup> or, as seems more likely, was suggested by one of the poems of the Spanish mystic known as St. John of the Cross or whether it arose solely out of the circumstances of the poet’s own life and the innate sense, which runs through so many of his verses, of the nearness of Heaven and the proximity of God is a matter of surmise. It is certain that no mystical words of such profound power and such soul-stirring sweetness have been written in modern times. The title, as apart from the subject-matter, may have been borrowed from Celtic mythology, in which the title “Hound” is a term of honour or been suggested, as

seems probable enough, by the “Heaven’s winged hound” of the opening act of Shelley’s “Prometheus Unbound.”<sup>iv</sup>

Though it may be said that in a certain sense Thompson viewed the world as but the footstool of the Highest, he was yet supremely conscious of the beauty displayed on every side, from the shadows of Divine beauty cast by the Designer Infinite upon the curtains of sky and cloud, down to the lowliest flower of the earth<sup>v</sup>. The exquisite glimpses of the things of Nature those shapers of his own moods, which he incidentally presents in the course of the poem as the tremendous Lover pursues His tireless quest strike at once the imagination, as surely as the impressive symbolism employed penetrates and illumines the soul. The deliberate speed, the majestic sweep of the lines, produce an impression of unrushing splendour but seldom equaled, even in the masterpieces of literature, outside the Hebrew prophets.

In poetry it is more or less essential that besides the outer gems that flash on all alike, there should be some that lie below the surface, and need some mental digging to unearth. In “The Hound of Heaven” these hidden gems abound, but they can hardly be said to be too deeply buried for the earnest seeker, when once the prevailing idea and the nobility of the poet’s thought are grasped. The symbolism employed, though often most daring, is free from the disfiguring “eccentricity” of many mystical poets: the thought and diction befit the exalted subject of the verse, and transcend all conventions.

The poem proceeds by way of striking similes, which hold the reader spellbound in an atmosphere of spiritual elevation: fresh and more towering peaks of mental conception come into view as the grandeur of the theme develops; the end is in the valley of Calm, where the surrender of the tired wanderer follows as a natural climax, in lines of the most touching and exquisite simplicity. The spell of “The Hound of Heaven” is such that hundreds of its readers date their drawing to the Feet of that “tremendous Lover” of whom the poet sings, to the day when the poem’s appealing music first broke upon their “encircling gloom of Newman coming from Charles Darwin.”<sup>vi</sup>

The chief interest lies, perhaps, in the genuine humanity which pervades the poem throughout, and in the wonderful mental pictures often conjured up, sometimes by a single line. In the few words—

Adown Titanic blooms of chased fears;  
I swing the earth a trinket at my wrist; and  
Yet ever and anon a trumpet sounds  
From the hid battlements of eternity;

A host of conceptions may arise in the mind without exhausting the full meaning of the poet’s words. Great alike in theme and execution, and in the completeness of its message, it is safe to

say that as a religious poem “The Hound of Heaven” has no superior. It stands unique, for the entire world and for all time!

Amid all the artistic trope and perfect poetic imagery, certain passages will appear more noteworthy to some than to others, but it will surely be of special interest to most to note that it is in the little children’s eyes that the soul approaches nearest the object of its quest, ere it sinks beneath the hand outstretched caressingly.

What is Hound?

The meaning is understood as the hound follows the hare, never ceasing in its running, ever drawing nearer in the chase with unhurrying and imperturbed pace, so does God follows the fleeing soul by His Divine grace. But the soul feels its pressure forcing it to turn to him alone in that never ending pursuit.

## **MYSTICAL APPLICATION**

### **I. THE SOUL FLEES FROM GOD.**

The soul flees from God by the love of creatures, by sin, by self-love, by turning from God, by refusing to listen to the inspiration of grace and ‘road way unifying humanity to the One’<sup>vii</sup>. It turns away from God. Plotinus has called it, “the flight of the alone to the alone”<sup>viii</sup>.

1. “All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.”  
Fear wist not to evade, as Love wist to pursue.
2. “Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me.”  
Children and nature.
3. “Lo! Naught contents thee who content’st not Me.”  
Naked I wait thy loves uplifted stroke.
4. “Lo! All things fly thee for thou fliest Me.”  
Strange, piteous, futile thing!
5. “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.
6. “Rise, clasp My hand, and come.”  
Halts by me, that footfall:
7. “Ah fondest, blindest, weakest,  
“I am He Whom thou sleekest!”  
“Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me.

The soul seeks for happiness in the creatures, in human sympathy, in knowledge, study and science. In nature: All is failure. It can find it only in God. Without whom all is emptiness. The very unlovableness of all is to teach the loveableness of God. He has recompense for all. Only

He loves. He only is worthy of being loved. When the soul drives Him away it drives away happiness. It turns from God the true happiness to look for happiness in something that is not God. It turns away from God ever pursues the soul that yearning to win it back to true happiness, while it pursues false happiness. This false happiness it looks for in creatures, in human beings, in human sympathy and love, in the love of little children, in the love of nature, in the love of knowledge, earth, sea and sky, the stars, in the seasons.

## 2. GOD PURSUES THE SOUL.

When the soul turns from God to love creatures inordinately instead of loving God, he places disappointment in the object loved, to make it turn back to God who alone can satisfy the capacity of the soul. "Union with God alone is the goal of life".<sup>ix</sup>. He follows and reproaches the disloyalty of the soul, and creatures are disloyal to it, at the time they seem loyal, with "traitorous trueness" and "loyal deceit".

God reproaches the soul, chides it, and pleads with it. Send it many inspirations by means of a word, a sermon, a line, a sorrow of life, sickness and suffering. The soul finds all failures, bitterness, with despondency and occasional Glimpses of eternity and the thought of decay and death.

Then, sounds a voice like a bursting sea. The love that was sought is broken in pieces like a vessel of clay. All things fail to answer the yearning for love of the human soul which only God can fill.

It is a curious fact, not devoid of significance, that the poem was constructed at the time that Thompson was composing melodies of a very different order the lines varied, sweet, and gay, which make up his volume of "Sister Songs," published in 1895. As "The Hound of Heaven" appeared in Thompson's first volume of poems, issued in 1893, it would seem that the actual year when the "poem for all time" was written may have been either 1892 or 1893. Strange and startling fancies in words; adjectives that illumine like "furnaces in the night"; deep sounds and echoes the sounds of restless humanity in search of the world's witchery, the echoes of the message of the Psalmist and underlying all, the pleading of the Father for His prodigal son:- such, in short, is "The Hound of Heaven."

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<sup>i</sup> J.F.X. O'Conor, S.J., A Study of Francis Thompson's Hound of Heaven, John Lane Company, New York, 1914. P. 4.

<sup>ii</sup> Garvin, J., L, " Francis Thompson", The Bookman, March 1894, P. 164

<sup>iii</sup> John Thomson, Francis Thompson: Poet and Mystic, The Ballantyne Press, London, 1913. Pg. 96.

<sup>iv</sup> Connolly, Terence L. S.J., Poems of Francis Thompson, D. Appleton Century Company, New Yark, 1941, P. 350

<sup>v</sup> Ibid. P. 157.

<sup>vi</sup> Chesterton, Gilbert K., The Victorian Age in Literature, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1913. P.38

<sup>vii</sup> Spurgeon, Caroline, Mysticism in English Literature, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York,1913, P.13

<sup>viii</sup> Segar, G.M., "Alexandria and Mystical Writings of the Middle Ages", The Catholic World, August 1924, p. 505

<sup>ix</sup> Jones, Rufus M., The Flowering of Mysticism, The MacMillan Company, New York, 1939. P.30