

FRANCIS THOMPSON: POET OF CHILDHOOD

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THE old Latin saying, "The highest reverence is due to children," find its consummation in the "Poems on Children" and "Sister Songs" of Francis Thompson. It is true that the old Roman referred specifically to boys, perhaps because of the comparative unimportance in which women and girls were held in the old pagan days, whereas the shrine at which Francis Thompson worshipped, and at which he found inspiration and cleansing power, was that of two beautiful and innocent little girls who were sisters; but this does not alter the essential spirit underlying these immortal poems. To quote a phrase from Dr. Hutton, Francis Thompson alone of that notable group of poets and literary men who flourished in the 'nineties, had "the consecrated eye for childhood". He tells his little godchild that when she reaches heaven she is not to look for him amid "the bearded counsellors of God," but "in the nurseries of Heaven". In his well known poem "Ex Ore Infantium", there is enshrined all the daring and familiarity, all the innocence and beauty of children and of saints. It is reminiscent of the "Songs of Innocence" of Blake, rather than Stevenson's "Songs of Childhood", which deal more with a child's thoughts of its own life and surroundings;

And didst thou play in Heaven with all
The angels, that were not too tall,
With stars for marbles? Did the things
Play "Can you see me," through their wings?

There is no need here to recapitulate the now well-known story of Francis Thompson's life and sufferings. Suffice it to say that the turning point in his life came when he was rescued from his destitution and misery in London by Wilfred and Alice Meynell, and that most of the rest of his life was spent with them and their two little daughters, Monica and Sylvia, who were the source of inspiration to him for these poems. In "A Child's Kiss", dedicated to Sylvia, the poet tells us more of his own life and sufferings than in any of his other poems. The innocent kiss of the little Sylvia brings back to his mind another kiss given to him by a

poor street girl in London when he had reached the lowest depths and was contemplating suicide:

A child; like thee a spring flower; but a flower
 Fallen from the budded coronal of spring
 And through the city streets blown withering...
 Therefore I kissed in thee
 Her, child! and innocency
 And spring, and all things that have gone from me
 And that shall never be.

The whole passage is one of the most poignant and beautiful in the realm of poetry. Once again one can only say that it is one of those strange paradoxes of life that a man of genius who had reached such depths as Francis Thompson should have found new hope and inspiration to re-dedication in the eyes of a little child. Another beautiful poem in this series is "Daisy", with two at least of its verses an echo of Wordsworth's "Lucy":

She went her unremembering way,
 She went and left in me
 The pang of all the partings gone,
 And partings yet to be.
 She left me marvelling why my soul
 Was sad that she was glad;
 And all the sadness in the sweet
 The sweetness in the sad.

It is the old cry of the Hebrew prophet, "A little child shall lead them". From out the sordid past the poet catches a fleeting vision of something purer and nobler, and is at once uplifted and saddened.

But the great gulf which lies between the natural innocence of childhood and the unavailing regrets and momentary hopes of the poet's years can never be fully crossed. This thought is brought out with pathetic beauty in the poem "The Poppy", addressed to Monica:

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

Monica plucks a poppy and bids him keep it as long as he lives, but the poet

Saw what she did not see,
 That—as kindled by its own fervency—
 The verge shrivelled inward moulderingly.

At one sad moment of crisis he writes a tragic little poem to "Monica thought dying". In her delirium the child had babbled little and laughable things, but to the poet's spirit Death, which was now claiming a child's light words, came in more tragic guise than in the case of a grown woman dying, whose words of wisdom were remembered after her passing. He pictures Death

As when he sits among
His sepulchres to play
With broken toys your hand has cast away,
With derelict trinkets of the darling young

In another fine poem, "The Omen", the poet deals more specifically with the psychological moment when the sight of little Monica standing between her father's knees changed the whole future for him. Alice Meynell has described this great moment in the poet's life. "In this ambiguous world," she says, "the face of Monica settled Thompson's soul on the side of faith".

At this picture of faith and innocence the poet bursts out:

A cry impetuous from its depths was drawn;
I take the omen of this face of dawn!
And with the omen to my heart cam'st thou.

A world of feeling and of love was pent up in the heart of the poet. All that was needed was some magic touch to set it free. And with this freedom there comes a deepening of faith because of the deep emotions. We are reminded of some verses in the "In Memoriam", in which Tennyson tells us that when overwhelmed with doubt and the cold logic of reason

A warmth within the breast would melt
The freezing reason's colder part,
And like a man in wrath the heart
Stood up and answered "I have felt."

It was just the child's innocence and calm, rather than anything she said or did, that kept the poet more steadfast to his ideal:

As the innocent moon, that nothing does but shine,
Moves all the labouring surges of the world.

But the poet now begins to pursue in imagination the child's future. As yet her sex is but in her soul!

Wild Dryad all unconscious of thy tree.

In a passage reminiscent in thought of Wordsworth's immortal

Shades of the prison house begin to close
Upon the growing boy

he speaks of Monica

Who wear'st thy femininity
Light as entrailed blossoms, that shalt find
It ere long silver shackles unto thee.

This poem "The Child-Woman" is in some ways the most remarkable of the series and needs close study, for it goes on to tell of how the maiden must be brought into contact with evil, but may be preserved from contamination by the sheath of her own innocent spirit.

A magnificent consummation is reached in the final passage, which sums up the eternal mystery and paradox of life:

For supreme Spirit subject was to clay,
And Law from its own servants learned a law,
And Light besought a lamp unto its way,
And Awe was reined in awe
At one Small House of Nazareth;
And Golgotha
Saw Breath to breathlessness resign its breath,
And life do homage for its crown to death

Pursuing still further the same train of thought, the poet goes on to think of the day when one, the girl's future husband,

Shall dip his hand to drink
In that still water of thy soul...
The destined paramount of thy universe,
Who has no worlds to sigh for, ruling thee.

But the poet too will have his share in that day through the power of his songs:

So through his river mine shall reach thy sea
Bearing its confluent past.

My days may be past and over, he says, but

I have caught you fast for ever in a tangle of sweet rhymes;
With this thread from out the tomb, my dead hand shall tether thee.

And so we come to the haven of our songs in the stately and beautiful "Epilogue".

In a poet's vision of the future he sees the spirits of his beloved
Monica and Sylvia:

Two shapes they were familiar as love.

To their feet many poets and lovers bring their rich garlands of
poesy and love, but one there was who lingered behind as if in fear
that his frail garland was not worthy of that fair company:

And dropped his frightened flower when all were gone;
And where the frail flower fell, it withered.
But yet methought those high souls smiled thereon.

In the hearts of those who have thus felt the spell of his song
and whose love has so profoundly uplifted the soul of the poet,
his immortality is assured.