

FRANCIS THOMPSON: THREE POEMS

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Francis Thompson (1859–1907) was an English poet and Catholic mystic whose work outlines the numinous basis of reality. His work has been neglected of late and needs to be more widely read. The selection that follows is from a collection entitled, *Poems*, which was published in 1909.



Before Her Portrait in Youth

As lovers, banished from their lady's face
And hopeless of her grace,
Fashion a ghostly sweetness in its place,
Fondly adore
Some stealth-won cast attire she wore,
A kerchief or a glove:
And at the lover's beck
Into the glove there fleets the hand,
Or at impetuous command
Up from the kerchief floats the virgin neck:
So I, in very lowlihead of love,—
Too shyly reverencing
To let one thought's light footfall smooth
Tread near the living, consecrated thing,—
Treasure me thy cast youth.
This outworn vesture, tenantless of thee,
Hath yet my knee,
For that, with show and semblance fair
Of the past Her
Who once the beautiful, discarded raiment bare,

It cheateth me.
As gale to gale drifts breath
Of blossoms' death,
p. 4So dropping down the years from hour to hour
This dead youth's scent is wafted me to-day:
I sit, and from the fragrance dream the flower.
So, then, she looked (I say);
And so her front sunk down
Heavy beneath the poet's iron crown:
On her mouth museful sweet—
(Even as the twin lips meet)
Did thought and sadness greet:
Sighs
In those mournful eyes
So put on visibilities;
As viewless ether turns, in deep on deep, to dyes.
Thus, long ago,
She kept her meditative paces slow
Through maiden meads, with wavèd shadow and gleam
Of locks half-lifted on the winds of dream,
Till love up-caught her to his chariot's glow.
Yet, voluntary, happier Proserpine!
This drooping flower of youth thou lettest fall
I, faring in the cockshut-light, astray,
Find on my 'lated way,
And stoop, and gather for memorial,
And lay it on my bosom, and make it mine.
To this, the all of love the stars allow me,
I dedicate and vow me.
I reach back through the days
A trothed hand to the dead the last trump shall not raise.
The water-wraith that cries
From those eternal sorrows of thy pictured eyes
Entwines and draws me down their soundless intricacies!



"Manus animam pinxit"

Lady who hold'st on me dominion!
 Within your spirit's arms I stay me fast
 Against the fell
 Immitigate ravening of the gates of hell;
 And claim my right in you, most hardly won,
 Of chaste fidelity upon the chaste:
 Hold me and hold by me, lest both should fall
 (O in high escalate high companion!)
 Even in the breach of Heaven's assaulted wall.
 Like to a wind-sown sapling grow I from
 The clift, Sweet, of your skyward-jetting soul,—
 Shook by all gusts that sweep it, overcome
 By all its clouds incumbent: O be true
 To your soul, dearest, as my life to you!
 For if that soil grow sterile, then the whole
 Of me must shrivel, from the topmost shoot
 Of climbing poesy, and my life, killed through,
 Dry down and perish to the foodless root.

Sweet Summer! unto you this swallow drew,
 By secret instincts inappeasable,
 That did direct him well,
 p. 9 Lured from his gelid North which wrought him wrong,
 Wintered of sunning song;—
 By happy instincts inappeasable,
 Ah yes! that led him well,
 Lured to the untried regions and the new

Climes of auspicious you;
 To twitter there, and in his singing dwell.
 But ah! if you, my Summer, should grow waste,
 With grieving skies o'er cast,
 For such migration my poor wing was strong
 But once; it has no power to fare again
 Forth o'er the heads of men,
 Nor other Summers for its Sanctuary:
 But from your mind's chilled sky
 It needs must drop, and lie with stiffened wings
 Among your soul's forlornest things;
 A speck upon your memory, alack!
 A dead fly in a dusty window-crack.

O therefore you who are
 What words, being to such mysteries
 As raiment to the body is,
 Should rather hide than tell;
 Chaste and intelligential love:
 Whose form is as a grove
 Hushed with the cooing of an unseen dove;
 Whose spirit to my touch thrills purer far
 Than is the tingling of a silver bell;
 Whose body other ladies well might bear
 As soul,—yea, which it profanation were
 For all but you to take as fleshly woof,
 Being spirit truest proof;
 Whose spirit sure is lineal to that
 Which sang *Magnificat*:
 Chastest, since such you are,
 Take this curbed spirit of mine,
 Which your own eyes invest with light divine,
 For lofty love and high auxiliar
 In daily exalt emprise
 Which outsoars mortal eyes;

This soul which on your soul is laid,
 As maid's breast against breast of maid;
 Beholding how your own I have engraved
 On it, and with what purging thoughts have laved
 This love of mine from all mortality
 Indeed the copy is a painful one,
 And with long labour done!
 O if you doubt the thing you are, lady,
 Come then, and look in me;
 Your beauty, Dian, dress and contemplate
 Within a pool to Dian consecrate!
 Unveil this spirit, lady, when you will,
 For unto all but you 'tis veiled still:
 Unveil, and fearless gaze there, you alone,
 And if you love the image—'tis your own!



The Hound of Heaven

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.
 Up vistaed hopes, I sped;
 And shot, precipitated
 Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
 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—
 “All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.”

I pleaded, outlaw-wise,
 By many a hearted casement, curtained red,
 Trellised with intertwining charities;
 (For, though I knew His love Who followéd,
 p. 49 Yet was I sore adread
 Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside)
 But, if one little casement parted wide,
 The gust of His approach would clash it to
 Fear wist not to evade, as Love wist to pursue.
 Across the margent of the world I fled,
 And troubled the gold gateways of the stars,
 Smiting for shelter on their changèd bars;
 Fretted to dulcet jars
 And silvern chatter the pale ports o' the moon.
 I said to dawn: Be sudden—to eve: Be soon;
 With thy young skiey blossoms heap me over
 From this tremendous Lover!
 Float thy vague veil about me, lest He see!
 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.
 To all swift things for swiftness did I sue;
 Clung to the whistling mane of every wind.
 But whether they swept, smoothly fleet,
 The long savannahs of the blue;
 Or whether, Thunder-driven,
 They clanged his chariot 'thwart a heaven,
 Plashy with flying lightnings round the spurn o' their feet:—
 Fear wist not to evade as Love wist to pursue.

Still with unhurrying chase,
 And unperturbèd pace,
 Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
 p. 50 Came on the following Feet,
 And a Voice above their beat—
 “Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me.”

I sought no more that, after which I strayed,
 In face of man or maid;
 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.
 “Come then, ye other children, Nature's—share
 With me” (said I) “your delicate fellowship;
 Let me greet you lip to lip,
 Let me twine with you caresses,
 Wantoning
 With our Lady-Mother's vagrant tresses,
 Banqueting
 With her in her wind-walled palace,
 Underneath her azured daïs,
 Quaffing, as your taintless way is,
 From a chalice
 Lucent-weeping out of the dayspring.”
 So it was done:
 / in their delicate fellowship was one—
 Drew the bolt of Nature's secrecies.
 / knew all the swift importings
 On the wilful face of skies;
 p. 51 I knew how the clouds arise
 Spumèd of the wild sea-snotings;

All that's born or dies
 Rose and drooped with—made them shapers
 Of mine own moods, or wailful or divine—
 With them joyed and was bereaven.
 I was heavy with the even,
 When she lit her glimmering tapers
 Round the day's dead sanctities.
 I laughed in the morning's eyes.
 I triumphed and I saddened with all weather,
 Heaven and I wept together,
 And its sweet tears were salt with mortal mine;
 Against the red throb of its sunset-heart
 I laid my own to beat,
 And share commingling heat;
 But not by that, by that, was eased my human smart.
 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.
 Nature, poor stepdame, cannot slake my drouth;
 Let her, if she would owe me,
 Drop yon blue bosom-veil of sky, and show me
 The breasts o' her tenderness:
 Never did any milk of hers once bless
 My thirsting mouth.
 Nigh and nigh draws the chase,
 With unperturbèd pace,
 Deliberate speed majestic instancy
 p. 52And past those noisèd Feet
 A voice comes yet more fleet—
 "Lo! naught contents thee, who content'st not Me."

Naked I wait Thy love's uplifted stroke!
 My harness piece by piece Thou hast hewn from me,
 And smitten me to my knee;

I am defenceless utterly,
 I slept, methinks, and woke,
 And, slowly gazing, find me stripped in sleep.
 In the rash lustihead of my young powers,
 I shook the pillaring hours
 And pulled my life upon me; grimed with smears,
 I stand amid the dust o' the mounded years—
 My mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap.
 My days have crackled and gone up in smoke,
 Have puffed and burst as sun-starts on a stream.
 Yea, faileth now even dream
 The dreamer, and the lute the lutanist;
 Even the linked fantasies, in whose blossomy twist
 I swung the earth a trinket at my wrist,
 Are yielding; cords of all too weak account
 For earth with heavy griefs so overplussed.
 Ah! is Thy love indeed
 A weed, albeit an amaranthine weed,
 Suffering no flowers except its own to mount?
 Ah! must—
 Designer infinite!—
 Ah! must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst limn with it?
 p. 53 My freshness spent its wavering shower i' the dust;
 And now my heart is as a broken fount,
 Wherein tear-drippings stagnate, spilt down ever
 From the dank thoughts that shiver
 Upon the sighful branches of my mind.
 Such is; what is to be?
 The pulp so bitter, how shall taste the rind?
 I dimly guess what Time in mists confounds;
 Yet ever and anon a trumpet sounds
 From the hid battlements of Eternity,
 Those shaken mists a space unsettle, then
 Round the half-glimpsèd turrets slowly wash again;
 But not ere him who summoneth
 I first have seen, enwound

With grooming robes purpureal, cypress-crowned;
 His name I know, and what his trumpet saith.
 Whether man's heart or life it be which yields
 Thee harvest, must Thy harvest fields
 Be dunged with rotten death?
 Now of that long pursuit
 Comes on at hand the bruit;
 That Voice is round me like a bursting sea:
 "And is thy earth so marred,
 Shattered in shard on shard?
 Lo, all things fly thee, for thou fliest Me!

"Strange, piteous, futile thing!
 Wherefore should any set thee love apart?
 Seeing none but I makes much of naught" (He said),
 "And human love needs human meriting:
 p. 54How hast thou merited—
 Of all man's clotted clay the dingiest clot?
 Alack, thou knowest not
 How little worthy of any love thou art!
 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,
 Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?
 "Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
 I am He Whom thou seekest!
 Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me."

Featured: "The Mystical Flower," by Tintoretto; painted ca. 1588.

