MISTRESS OF VISION

Amy Hereford

FRANCIS THOMPSON DESCRIBES in poetry the bleak autumn night in 1887 when he attempted suicide by drug overdose as 'that nightmare-time which still doth haunt':

> I had endured through watches of the dark
> The abashless inquisition of each star; …
> Stood bound and helplessly
> For Time to shoot his barbed minutes at me.[1]

Yet this time of desolation would be a wellspring from which poetry would flow abundantly over the next two decades. 'Mistress of Vision' is one such poem, which also illustrates Thompson's powerful and original theological imagination.

Thompson grew up near Manchester, in England, the son of a physician. After failed attempts at seminary and medical school he made his way to London where his life deteriorated and within a few years he was a homeless vagrant with an opium addiction. In the spring of 1887, at the urging of Canon John Carroll, a family friend, Thompson submitted some of his poems to *Merry England*, a Roman Catholic literary journal in London; the submission did not receive immediate attention. Meanwhile, still living on the streets of London, Thompson's situation worsened and he made his suicide attempt. He was rescued by a young woman, perhaps a prostitute, who sheltered him through the winter. The following spring, *Merry England* published one of his poems, and Thompson began a lifelong friendship with Wilfred Meynell, the editor of that journal. Meynell, his wife, Alice, and their family were a significant influence, helping Thompson in establishing his literary career and in his battle with opium addiction.

[1] Francis Thompson, 'Sister Songs', in *The Poems of Francis Thompson*, edited by Brigid M. Boardman (London: Continuum, 2001), 68–69.

The Way, 50/1 (January 2011), 71–83

Francis Thompson in 1893

Following the publication of Thompson's first poem in *Merry England*, his works appeared regularly there as well as in other literary journals. The most famous of his poems is 'The Hound of Heaven', published in the summer of 1890 in *Merry England*. It was immediately recognised for its exceptional quality and has been reprinted more than any of Thompson's other poems. He published over 100 poems and and over 400 essays during his short career. Some of his finest poems of spirituality were published in the 1897 collection *New Poems*, including 'Mistress of Vision', discussed below.

Gender in the Poems

Thompson's treatment of gender contrasts strikingly with that of his late Victorian contemporaries, whose notions of a feminine ideal are sharply critiqued by modern feminists. Thompson writes respectfully of women, and his language is unusually inclusive for his time. His poems tend to speak directly *to* women, but more distantly *about* men. They often adopt a feminine authorial voice, and the voice may even switch genders in the course of a single poem. These characteristics have a profound effect on the images of God that appear in Thompson's work.

Speaking to Women, and about Men

In nearly every poem whose central figure is a woman, Thompson addresses that female figure in the second person. On the other hand, in those poems that centre on a man, the poem is in the third person and speaks about the man. This is true even when the poems are written in honour of men whom Thompson knew well.

A comparison may be made between poems dedicated to two very close friends of Thompson, both of them poets. The first is written for Coventry Patmore, whom Thompson met in Patmore's later years,

when the latter poet had already established his reputation. The poem 'A Captain of Song' is written about a portrait of Patmore: 'Look on him. This is he whose works ye know; / Ye have adored, thanked, loved him, no, not him!'[2] Thompson goes on to speak of the fine poetry Patmore has written, and how much greater a man he is in person than in his portrait or even in his poetry. Nevertheless, the poem never addresses Patmore directly; instead, keeping his distance, Thompson only speaks about him.

Thompson wrote 'To a Poet Breaking Silence' to a female poet, Alice Meynell, another close friend. Meynell had written poetry in her youth, but then fell silent for many years. Finally she had started to write again, and Thompson's own poem celebrates her new-found voice:

> Too wearily had we and song
> Been left to look and left to long,
> Yea, song and we to long and look,
> Since thine acquainted feet forsook
> The mountain where the Muses hymn
> For Sinai and the Seraphim.[3]

By contrast with the poem about Coventry Patmore, this one is addressed directly to its subject, rejoicing that the world can once again hear her song. Thompson speaks directly to Meynell throughout the poem, and in several other poems addressed to her.

Gender Reversals

Thompson often uses a poem's title to set the stage and create a context for the work but then, as the poem unfolds, makes no further reference to the title, although the entire poem remains in its shadow. 'The Singer Saith of His Song' is the last poem in a posthumous collection, *The Works of Francis Thompson*, edited by Wilfred Meynell, the poet's lifelong mentor. In this late poem Thompson is reflecting on the purpose and intent of his own poetry. The 'singer' of the title is masculine, but in the poem itself takes on a feminine gender, more appropriate to some of the images that Thompson uses there.

> The touches of man's modern speech
> Perplex her unacquainted tongue;

[2] *Poems of Francis Thompson*, 165.
[3] *Poems of Francis Thompson*, 6.

> There seems through all her songs a sound
> Of facing tears. She is not young.[4]

The male poet, in conversing in the world of men, characterizes his poetic project, 'his song', as feminine. In the English language, with its lack of grammatical gender, this shift in pronouns is striking.

This poem also demonstrates another characteristic of Thompson's poetry: that of using the feminine gender specifically when he is talking about himself, and his own experience of poetry and its ability to illuminate the deeper realities of life.

> Within her eyes' profound arcane
> Resides the glory of her dreams;
> Behind her secret cloud of hair.
> She sees the Is beyond the Seems.
>
> Her heart sole-towered in her steep spirit,
> Somewhat sweet is she, somewhat wan;
> And she sings the songs of Sion
> By the streams of Babylon.[5]

As Thompson describes his experience as a poet and his poetic project, he uses the feminine gender to portray the intuition that penetrates to the 'Is beyond the Seems' and enables him to speak of divine realities, 'the songs of Sion', while still walking on earth, 'by the streams of Babylon', in exile from the heavenly homeland.

In another poem, 'Whereto Art Thou Come?', Thompson uses the betrayal of Jesus by Judas as a type for the fundamental moral choice that each of us makes between commitment to Christ and betrayal of him and of our own highest calling. The title and first line are taken from Matthew's Gospel.[6]

> 'Friend, whereto art thou come?' Thus Verity;
> Of each that to the world's sad Olivet
> Comes with no multitude, but alone by night,
> Lit with the one torch of his lifted soul ….[7]

[4] *Poems of Francis Thompson*, 437.
[5] *Poems of Francis Thompson*, 438.
[6] Matthew 26:50. The line is taken from the Douay-Rheims translation of the Bible which was the standard English translation used by Catholics of late nineteenth-century England. The King James version, commonly used among Protestants of the day, translates the line: 'Wherefore art thou come?'.
[7] *Poems of Francis Thompson*, 195.

In the Gospel the question in the first line is asked by Christ of Judas; but here it is put to each of us by the archetypal figure of Verity. In our moments of infidelity we are compared to Judas in his moment of betrayal. But we come alone, not with men armed with clubs and spears, and for us the moment of weakness and of sin is likened to a personal encounter with Christ.

Then Thompson makes the gender of Verity explicit, and has the betrayer 'Seeking *her* that he may lay hands on *her*'. Christ/Verity becomes the woman who is sought and violated by man's betrayal. Verity 'waits answer from the mouth of deed': it is not words that Christ seeks, but the deeds that speak much more surely. The next line re-emphasizes the gender shift:

> Truth is a maid, whom men woo diversely;
> This, as a spouse; that, as a light-o'-love,
> To know, and having known, to make his brag.[8]

Truth occupies the place of Christ, but here 'Truth is a maid'. The (explicitly male) protagonist's relation to Christ may be like loving one woman faithfully for life, making her 'Mother of all his seed!' Or it may be that of someone whose love is fleeting and who readily betrays it. Thompson astutely observes that it is not only Christ who is betrayed in this case, but the person's own self: 'So he betrays, / Not Truth, the unbetrayable, but himself'. This poem reverses gender expectations in order to make use of human love, with its fidelity and betrayal, as an image to describe the challenge of fidelity in our relationships with Christ.

These examples of how Thompson uses gender in poetry show that his practice is quite distinctive and sets him apart from other writers of his era. The next section will look at Thompson's images of God, providing a basis for exploring the use of gender in those images.

Images of God

Two particular features of Thompson's images of God are relevant here: the gender neutrality of many of them, and the sense of relationality—of intimate relationship—that they associate with God.

[8] *Poems of Francis Thompson*, 195.

Gender Neutrality

Thompson shows a preference for images of God that are based in nature and without gender, seeing God particularly in the sun: 'And the Sun comes with power amid the clouds of heaven!'[9] God 'bends down, sun-wise';[10] and Christ is described as the 'true Orient'.[11] Along with the sun, 'heaven' is another favourite way of referring to God, as in the title of Thompson's most famous poem, 'The Hound of Heaven'. The name of God is used in so many different contexts that it brings with it preconceptions: God grows angry, and God sits on a throne.[12] But Thompson's God is too benevolent to grow angry, and is too grand for a throne. Like such a God, Heaven is unstintingly good; it is grand beyond measure; and it is greater than the human smallness of anyone who might sit on a throne. In a sense, Heaven is a God-image that is beyond image; and it is also beyond gender.

Relationality

> Short arm needs man to reach to Heaven,
> So ready is Heaven to stoop to him.[13]

This example of the use of Heaven as a name for God is found in the poem 'Grace of the Way'. But these lines also point to a second characteristic aspect of Thompson's images of God: their relationality or sense of relationship. In 'Love and a Child', Thompson describes a young child restlessly wriggling free of the embrace of loving arms, concluding,

> To the tender God I turn:
> 'Pardon, Love most High!
> For I think those arms were even Thine,
> And that child was even I'.[14]

Thompson's God is is always benevolent, gentle and loving—a God who can be addressed with intimacy and tenderness, and who understands and forgives human weakness.

[9] 'From the Night of Forebeing', *Poems of Francis Thompson*, 117.
[10] 'Any Saint', *Poems of Francis Thompson*, 131.
[11] 'Retrospect', *Poems of Francis Thompson*, 144.
[12] See, for example, Psalms 78:31 and 47:8.
[13] *Poems of Francis Thompson*, 143.
[14] 'Love and a Child', *Poems of Francis Thompson*, 258.

Feminine Images of God

Because of the shifting and ambiguous treatment of human gender in many of his poems, it is understandable for readers to look in them also for feminine images of God. The relational and nurturing God to be found in 'Love and a Child', indeed, is powerfully maternal.

However, Thompson was living in Victorian England and his Church was in the midst of the Modernist crisis. Too overt a use of such feminine images could lead to suspicion and censure by society and by church authorities seeking to enforce strict orthodoxy. I would argue that these images are found in Thompson, but they are quite subtle, and have often been mistaken for images of Mary—a much safer interpretation, then as now, but an interpretation that does not seem adequate to their centrality and importance in poems such as 'Grace of the Way' and, most especially, 'Mistress of Vision'.[15]

'Grace of the Way' is a poem from the collection *Sight and Insight*, a poetic sequence that Thompson identified as his most important work, containing his central message. The speaker in this poem moves beyond images based on the senses into deeper union:

> I failed against the affluent tide;
> Out of this abject earth of me
> I was translated and enskied
> Into the heavenly-regioned She.[16]

If Thompson had used the pronoun 'He' at the end of this passage, no one would doubt that it referred to God, but the use of 'She' is more open to question. The language in this passage is typical of the way Thompson writes about the personal relationship with God, particularly in the *Sight and Insight* collection where the poem is found. Some would assume that the poem refers to Mary,[17] but Thompson has written poems about Mary elsewhere: these tend to focus on her relation to Christ in his earthly life and their language is more sensory, more

[15] The principal interpreter of Thompson, Terence L. Connolly, believes Mary is the Mistress; this is not surprising coming from an Irish Catholic Jesuit from Boston writing in the 1930s. He presents his interpretation not as a theory but as the only logical understanding, pointing to just two passages in the 188-line poem that support it. John Cowie Reid, another commentator, proposes that the Mistress is opium, referring to Thompson's lifelong struggle with addiction to the drug.
[16] *Poems of Francis Thompson*, 143.
[17] See *Poems of Francis Thompson*, edited by Terence L. Connolly (New York: Century, 1932), 429–431.

earthly. The feminine image here could plausibly be seen as expressing the notion of a gentle, caring God. Another clue that Thompson is referring to God is the capitalisation of the feminine pronoun. And notice that the other God-image used here is 'heaven'.

The Mistress of Vision

'The Mistress of Vision' is the opening poem of the *Sight and Insight* sequence, and one of Thompson's most remarkable works, but it presents the familiar difficulty of identifying the central image. Who is the 'mistress of vision' about whom Thompson is writing? Once this is understood, everything else fits together. Like 'Grace of the Way', 'Mistress of Vision' describes the relation of the speaker to God as it moves beyond the world of sense into a deeper union with the divine.

I should like to suggest that the central image of this poem, the mistress of vision herself, first refers to the woman who saved Thompson's life, and is then used as an image of God's saving love for the human person. Seen in this light, the entire poem makes sense.

The Trackless Fugitive

Little is known about Thompson's suicide attempt: Thompson himself is the only witness, the woman who saved him having disappeared. Moreover, by his own admission, Thompson had purchased a lethal dose of opium and had consumed half of it when he was rescued. Therefore the only witness to the event was in a drugged stupor.

Our witness tells two rescue stories, both of which have a certain mythic quality, following the pattern of incidents in the lives of earlier English writers, Chatterton and De Quincey. Most of what is known about the suicide attempt and rescue is found in the writing of Thompson's close circle, particularly the *Life of Francis Thompson* by Everard Meynell.[18] There is no direct account of the incident by Thompson's own hand, but he alludes to it in a few passages, where he describes the woman as his saviour. In 'Sister Songs', Thompson writes:

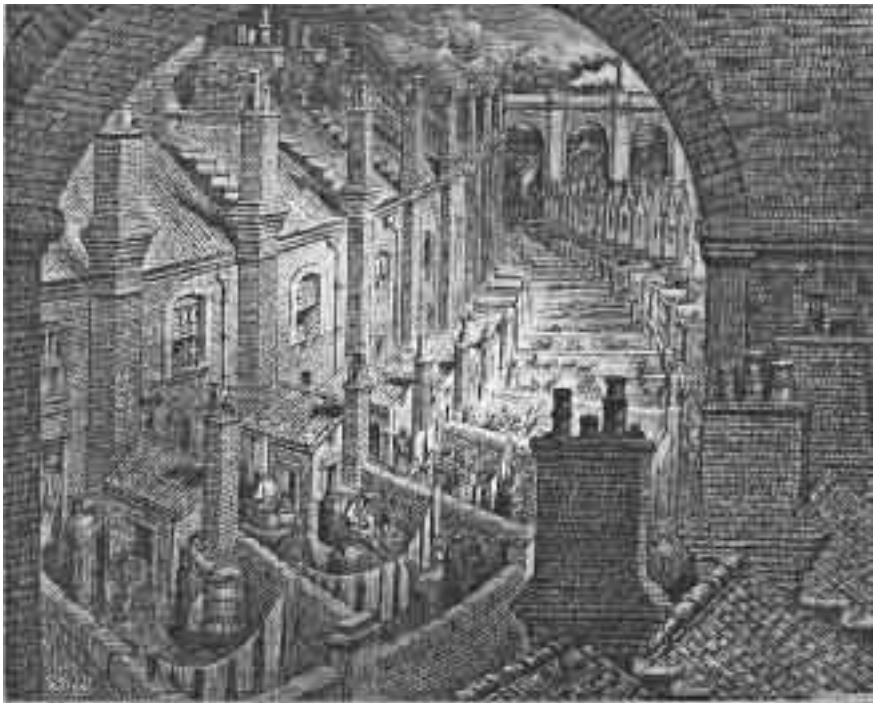
> Then there came past
> A child; …
> She passed, O brave, sad, lovingest, tender thing!

[18] Everard Meynell, *The Life of Francis Thompson* (London: Burns and Oates, 1913).

> And of her own scant pittance did she give,
> That I might eat and live:
> Then fled, a swift and trackless fugitive.

Once Thompson had a chance at literary success his saviour fled, believing herself to stand in the way of that chance. But who was this girl? Why did she intervene to help a desperate addict on the streets of London? Why did Thompson listen to her when she came to him in his despair? Who was this 'brave, sad, lovingest, tender thing!' whose self-sacrifice first saved Thompson, then withdrew that he might find success without her?

Thompson had been on the streets of London for nearly three years, and it is likely that the girl too was without job, home or hope. Meynell's *Life* reports that Thompson was known among the homeless of London for his gentle ways and poetic speech; he appears to have brought his sense of beauty even to the darkest experiences, as is witnessed by some remarkable poetry found in his notebooks from that period. Perhaps the 'trackless fugitive' knew Thompson; perhaps she saw, not another desperate addict, but a poet; she saw and loved in



Over London by Rail, *by Gustav Doré*

him the beauty he brought into the dark streets of London, a beauty he could no longer see in himself. At any rate, Thompson never forgot her.

In another poem, written at the end of his life, Thompson alluded once again to his suicide attempt (which took place near Charing Cross station), as a symbol of the coming of God into the darkest places of life:

> 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![19]

The girl becomes an image of Christ walking on the water, coming forth from Heaven to Charing Cross.

Who is the Mistress of Vision?

The suicide rescue story, as a type of salvation in Christ, is the central image in 'Mistress of Vision'. Christ is the mistress of vision, effecting salvation by a love which sees and calls forth the beauty and goodness placed at creation in the 'secret garden' in the depths of the human soul:

> Secret was the garden;
> Set i' the pathless awe
> Where no star its breath can draw.
> Life, that is its warden,
> Sits behind the fosse of death. Mine eyes saw not, and I saw.[20]

Thompson's secret garden, hidden from his own view on the starless night of his suicide attempt, was the place of life, but for him it sat behind the 'fosse of death'; his eyes 'saw not'. Into this 'nightmare-time' came the 'brave, sad, lovingest, tender thing!', described here as the 'Lady of

[19] 'Kingdom of God', *Poems of Francis Thompson*, 299.
[20] *Poems of Francis Thompson*, 95–96.

fair weeping, / at the garden's core'. She came to Thompson as a 'Light most heavenly-human / like the unseen form of sound'. At her arrival, the sun—always a metaphor for God—arose for Thompson:

> The sun which lit that garden wholly,
> Low and vibrant visible,
> Tempered glory woke ….

Then Thompson, whose eyes saw not, saw the eyes of his rescuer: 'But woe's me, and woe's me, / For the secrets of her eyes!'. The eyes that saved him from self-destruction stayed with him; they spoke of a love that could see through the 'pallid-dark … of a night that is / but one blear necropolis'. These eyes could see to the secret garden that still flourished in the depth of his heart. 'And her eyes a little tremble, in the wind of her own sighs.' While the mistress of vision sees the beauty within, she does not miss the pain of a life which is not unlike her own. Others had tried to reach out to Thompson, people with means and with more stability, but they were too high for him, and only made him feel more desperate. But this girl could not frighten him; gently she came to him as one who knew his own despair, and she could bring the Love which set him on the road to freedom:

> Many changes rise on
> Their phantasmal mysteries.
> They grow to an horizon
> Where earth and heaven meet.

The final image in this section of the poem, 'the horizon where earth and heaven meet' is again reminiscent of the later poem 'Kingdom of God', in which Thompson sees Christ coming to him in his suicidal despair: '… Jacob's ladder / Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross'.

At verse ten, 'Mistress of Vision' changes without warning, turning to more biblical and overtly Christological images, breathlessly tracing God's creative love from the first sunrise at the dawn of time through to the flood, when Noah plants the vine that will bear fruit on Calvary. It is easy to relate the first ten verses of the poem to Thompson's suicide attempt and rescue. The shift to biblical imagery is at first surprising, until we realise that Thompson is thinking all along of that story as an image of Christ's redemptive love. The shift is simply to assure us that his tender story of a love that saves is indeed a story

about the God who hung the stars and planted the mountains. Thompson returns to his own story and exclaims:

> O dismay!
> I, a wingless mortal, sporting
> With the tresses of the sun?

'A wingless mortal', not even an angel, has caught the attention of God and the poet presumes to engage with the divine. Here, as always, the sun is a God-image for Thompson but, strikingly, the sun has feminine 'tresses'.

One might ask what Thompson accomplishes through the use of this double image, the mistress representing the rescuer during his suicide attempt, who in turn represents Christ. The poem presents several ideas: self-sacrificing love, love that sees the beauty in the other, effective redemptive compassion, and gentleness in offering that gift. The particular nuances of redemptive love would have been different had Thompson chosen to write about the 'master of vision'. But because he is writing poetry, Thompson does not have to work out the theological significance of his image, he simply offers it as an exploration of the richness of God, an invitation to expand our own God-concept.

Images of Redemptive Love

In a letter, Thompson speculated that his work would not be truly appreciated for 100 years. Now that those years have passed, we may wonder what prompted Thompson's remark. It is certain that he was right with regard to the feminine images of God found in his poetry. Feminist theological reflection over the last few decades has provided a theoretical basis to help us understand and appreciate his poetic experiments.[21] There are many ways of thinking about gender in relation to God and the Trinity, involving a balance between masculine and feminine images of God, gender-neutral images of God and depersonalised images of God. Thompson uses all three in his poetry, but he is subtle enough to allow for other interpretations as well.

[21] See for example Rebecca Oxford-Carpenter, 'Gender and the Trinity', *Theology Today*, 41/1 (April 1984), 7–25.

However, if one accepts his feminine images as God-images, the verse is made richer in its exploration of the divine and of God's redemptive love. The images found in 'The Mistress of Vision' present the very tender, maternal aspect of that love, a love that seeks out what is lost, gently drawing forth and nurturing the goodness and beauty placed in each person at his or her creation.

Amy Hereford CSJ is a Sister of St Joseph of Carondelet from St Louis. She works as an attorney and canonist with CSJ Ministries, where she consults with religious institutes on a variety of legal matters.