CHAPTER-VI
CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to offer a fresh perspective on the mysticism in English literature. It specifically looks at the mystical poetry of Coventry Patmore and Francis Thompson through new doors of perception, from a point of view important in the study of both poets. There are perceptive discriminations made between immanent and transcendental experience between ‘purgative’ and ‘illuminative’ stages of the Mystic Way, and all these subtle distinctions have been illustrated from individual works of the two poets.

Through this study we sought to define and characterize mysticism in literature with particular reference to the poetry of Coventry Patmore and Francis Thompson. We noticed a striking similarity in the views expressed by the two poets regarding mysticism; both attached considerable value to imagery and symbolism as the only means of conveying mystical truths. Also, both saw a close connection between Sanctity and Song and, therefore, considered the roles of the seer and the poet as complementary. This similarity of outlook can largely be attributed to the common sources of their religious and literary inspiration. There are affinities between Patmore and Thompson as mystical poets too, but the divergences are more marked. In both, however, the mysticism is religious in motive and inspiration overtly Christian in reference but not without a universal bearing. As we have seen, it
assumes two forms—inmanent and transcendental. In Patmore, the former type is pronounced though in the religious odes he is explicitly concerned with transcendental themes. In Thompson, both types of mysticism are well represented.

Patmore’s poems afford evidence of the Purgative and Illuminative stages of the Mystic Way, his final disposition in favour of silent contemplation holding a promise of the Unitive experience. Thompson’s poetry bears definite marks of the Purgative stage, lit up with flashes of Illumination. In a handful of his poems, the Illuminative stage is unmistakably suggested. Both Patmore and Thompson were influenced by the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. Patmore’s poetry bears an impress of these poets in a greater degree than Thompson's. As mystical poets, the two complement each other; taken together, their poems exemplify Christian mysticism in its varied forms.

In view of the overtly autobiographical character of many of Thompson’s poems, including those markedly mystical, it is comparatively easy to explore the poet’s progress on the Mystic Way. In Patmore’s case, the evidence regarding his own level of attainment in mystical contemplation is not so directly available, for not many of his poems are frankly autobiographical. The full blaze of Illumination that we come across in many of his odes is not evident in Thompson’s poetry, except in a handful of poems. We do, however, get definite glimpses of the Illuminative stage in a number of the latter’s poems. In a poem or two, a state of awareness close to
the Unitive experience is also not difficult to trace. On the whole, the painful note is all-pervasive and insistent in Thompson. It is the Purgative stage of the Mystic Way which is emphasized in his poems. In Patmore, the painful note attains a significant intensity in the ‘human’ rather than the ‘religious’ odes. As we have seen, some of his poetry, especially that of *The Angel*, is largely concerned with the earthly paradise. The cheerful tone of his poetry anticipates the joy of Illumination that permeates some of *The Unknown Eros* odes concerned with divine love. Thompson’s lines from the cancelled Preface to *New Poems*, quoted earlier, testify to his awareness of the difficulties of the Mystic Way. He was fully conscious that a rigorous ascetic discipline is the necessary preparation for progress on the path of spirituality:

Mysticism is an interior ladder, at the summit of which is God. The mystic endeavours, by a rigid practical virtue, combined with prayer, meditation, and mortification of the senses, to arrive at a closer union with the Creator.

The mysticism in Thompson is seen to take two forms—immanent and transcendental. The former is revealed in his attitude to Nature and the material universe. He takes a sacramental view of the natural world—a tendency inherent in him, which he does not owe specifically to his religious background. This links him with the general order of mystics who lean towards an ‘immanent’ type of religious experience.²

In case of Patmore we dwelt first on the mystical element in the poems of human love, *The Angel* and *The Victories*, and then traced its fuller
development in the odes. We shall now proceed along somewhat similar lines in dealing with Thompson’s poem though, content-wise, there could be several ways of classifying them in view of the wider range of their themes. Broadly speaking, we could group them as (i) poems of love, (ii) poems of Nature, and (iii) religious poems. A large body of Thompson’s verse, consisting of individual poems or portions thereof, is concerned with the origin and mystery of poetic inspiration—a theme in which the poet is vitally interested. This provides another important focus for studying Thompson’s poetic mysticism. Even before he came into contact with the powerful mind of Patmore, he had in him all the acuteness of feeling and perception that mark the sensibility of a mystic poet. This is revealed in a number of poems not ostensibly concerned with religious themes. We find them mystical in spirit, whether concerned with the love of children or of women or with Nature.

Poems of Human Love: Thompson’s love poems are often poems of aspiration rather than of fulfilment; they are generally not concerned with physical passion. In sharing these two qualities, they are distinguishable from the love poems of Patmore. The elder poet does not ignore the physical aspect of love even when he contemplates upon its transcendental significance. His poems (whether they deal with human or divine love) are the expression of an experience of love that involves knowledge of both its pains and delights. In relation to the object of love, he does not sing of aspiration alone but of fulfilment too. On the other hand, Thompson is
essentially “the poet of pain, though not of pessimism.” He is the poet of “Uranian” love. When he turns his love to human beings, it does not end there but goes beyond human beings to the Divine. It symbolizes his craving for union with the Divine. For him earthly love has no ultimate significance or any value of its own. It is immediately important to the extent it shares certain qualities with, and pre-figures, divine love. For Patmore, however, human love is, besides being a precursor of divine love, also its complement. Thompson wrote in a note-book: “The function of natural love is to create a craving which it cannot satisfy.” This sums up his attitude to love. His admiration of woman is purely spiritual; it reflects a clerical attitude which is in sharp contrast to “Patmore’s lusty enthusiasm for matrimony.” The beauty of woman as well as the innocence of child brings to his soul an intimation of the ultimate Beauty. His mystical adoration of woman reflects, in a limited way, the attitude of the Persian Sufis or the Spanish poets of the seventeenth century for whom earthly love “exists only as a metaphor with which to explore the love of the Soul for the Spirit.” The erotic strain in Patmore’s mysticism is in danger of being misunderstood when its analogical significance is overlooked or not grasped. The language of love Thompson employs is free from this danger; it does not smack of carnality or violate sanctity. The mysticism which we come across in his poems devoted to woman’s praise is sacred and often other-worldly in suggestion.

From the point of view of style, it is the relatively simple poems of Thompson, involving mystical themes, that represent the poet at his best.
“Impressed by certain styles” no doubt, the essential Thompson is to be seen in his shorter and simpler poems where his meaning is clear and the mysticism unmistakable. Even among his early poems, there are some (‘Daisy’ for example) which show the poet to advantage in terms of their simplicity and freedom from ‘excess’. The poems, written under Patmore’s influence, reveal care exercised in the selection of language. At any rate, in the poems which are more characteristic of Thompson as a mystical poet, he is content with saying things in plain language, at the same time making an effective use of his ability to bend language to his needs, as our analysis of some of these poems has established. It is here that he makes his mark as a stylist in his own right.
REFERENCES


4. Quoted in Everard Meynell, p. 228.
