

THE HOUND OF HEAVEN

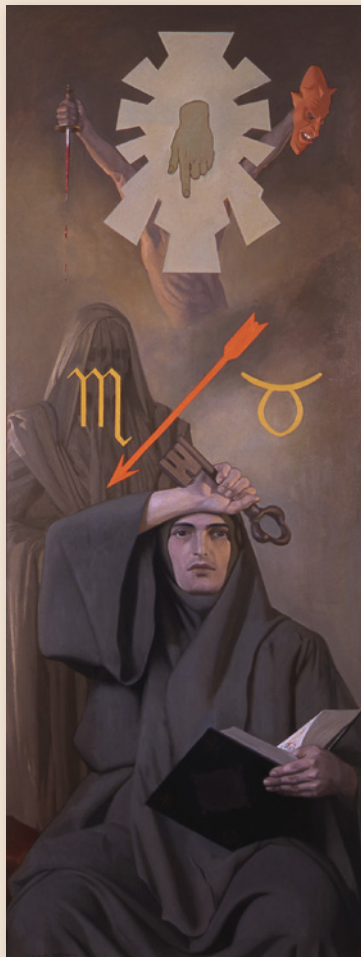
In late February 1887, the editor of a Roman Catholic literary magazine called *Merry England* received an essay and some poems with a covering letter that said, "In enclosing the accompanying article for your inspection, I must ask pardon for the soiled state of the manuscript. It is due, not to slovenliness, but to the strange places and circumstances under which it has been written." Attempts to trace the poet were unsuccessful and it was not until the following spring that the anonymous author—Francis Thompson—saw one of his poems in print and presented himself at the *Merry England* office.

Thompson was born in the north of England in 1859. He was a reserved child who harbored a love for classical literature, especially Shakespeare. In his adolescence, he attended a Catholic college with the thought of becoming a priest. Thompson was eventually deemed unsuitable for an ecclesiastical career and sought to become a medical doctor like his father. He studied medicine for six years, during which time he became addicted to laudanum, an opiate. Some months after a third failed attempt to pass his medical exams, Thompson moved to London with hopes of pursuing a more literary lifestyle. A series of setbacks followed and he ended up penniless, homeless, suicidal and still drug-dependent—the "strange places and circumstances" to which he referred in his correspondence to *Merry England*.

After Wilfrid Meynell, the publication's editor, became aware of Thompson's plight, he arranged for an extended monastery stay as a means of overcoming the addiction. The Norbertine Priory at Storrington, West Sussex, was the site of this retreat. During that stay, in 1889-1890, Thompson began his most famous poem, the autobiographical "The Hound of Heaven." Its 182 lines describe God's pursuit of wayward souls and expanded upon an idea that first came to him when he was living on the London streets.

Meynell and others in his circle ultimately spent twenty years looking after Thompson, who relapsed into addiction on several occasions. He nonetheless continued to write celebrated prose and poetry. Despite these successes, he never truly recovered from his life on the street and he died of tuberculosis in 1907.

G.K. Chesterton considered Thompson one of England's greatest poets and at one time, "The Hound of Heaven" was a work with which nearly every Catholic schoolchild was familiar. J.R.R. Tolkien admired it and Eugene O'Neill could recite it from memory. The poem also impressed Boston-based painter R.H. Ives Gammell (1893-1981). He first read it while a 16-year-old student, several years before he entered the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



R.H. Ives Gammell (American, 1893-1981), "I. . ."
Panel I from *A Pictorial Sequence* by R.H. Ives Gammell Based on "The Hound of Heaven,"
1941-1956, oil on canvas, 79" x 31"; Gift of the
R.H. Ives Gammell Studios Trust, 2000.14.2,
Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art.



As a young man, Gammell left Boston for Paris, where he studied at the Académie Julian, Atelier Baschet and elsewhere. He returned to America at the beginning of World War I but was posted to Paris in 1918–1919. Returning to Boston, he concluded that William McGregor Paxton (1869–1941) “was the only teacher available who could guide me along the way.” He also decided that Boston, rather than any European city, was “the best place for me to work.” With Paxton’s instruction and encouragement Gammell sought particularly to improve his drawing and composition skills and by the 1930s he had developed a reputation for portraits, allegorical paintings and murals.

Coincident with the advent of a second war in Europe, Gammell suffered a nervous breakdown. The prescribed rest forced him to take an extended hiatus from painting. During this period a line from Thompson’s “The Hound of Heaven” came to mind and Gammell—who knew the entire poem from memory—concluded that it might explain his illness:

“Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand, outstretched
caressingly?”

This personal epiphany encouraged the artist and by 1941, he had begun planning a “Hound of Heaven” sequence that embraced many of the themes he had pondered throughout his career. In the artist’s statement that accompanied the 1956 exhibition of the completed series he said:

Over a long period of years Francis Thompson’s poem evoked in my mind pictorial ideas for which I remained unable to find imagery susceptible of conveying my meaning Eventually I decided . . . to consider “The Hound of Heaven” as a history of the experience commonly called emotional breakdown rather than as the story of a specifically religious conversion. The change did not, it seemed to me, traduce the poet’s intention [T]his interpretation immediately brought within range a quantity of pictorial ideas which had haunted my thoughts for many years but for which I had never found a connecting link capable of giving them artistic unity.

The link was then provided by C.G. Jung’s book, *The Psychology of the Unconscious*. For an artist interested in the imaginative appeal of his thesis more than in its lasting scientific, validity, Jung demonstrates convincingly the close relationship between myths, symbols, and poetic imagery, and the perpetually recurring emotional patterns of human life from which they evolved



The 23 paintings that make up *A Pictorial Sequence* by R.H. Ives Gammell Based on “The Hound of Heaven” illustrate Francis Thompson’s poem with images and symbols drawn from diverse ancient and modern sources and they evoke deep human responses. They are together Gammell’s greatest artistic achievement and they represent the zenith of his artistic aims and ideas.

Steven L. Grafe, *Curator of Art*

Further Reading

- Ackerman, Gerald M., and Elizabeth Ives Hunter. *Transcending Vision: R.H. Ives Gammell, 1893-1981*. Boston: R.H. Ives Gammell Studios Trust, 2001.
- Boardman, Brigid M. *Between Heaven and Charing Cross: The Life of Francis Thompson*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.
- , R.H. Ives Gammell and Francis Thompson. *The Hound of Heaven: A Pictorial Sequence*. Boston: Sigo Press, 1994.
- Gammell, R.H. Ives. *A Pictorial Sequence*. Cambridge, MA: University Press, 1956.
- . *The Boston Painters, 1900-1930*. Orleans, MA: Parnassus Imprints, 1986.
- . *Twilight of Painting: An Analysis of Recent Trends to Serve in a Period of Reconstruction*. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1946.

The Hound of Heaven exhibit and related programs are supported by the R.H. Gammell Trust Fund. The fund was established in 2000 to support the care and conservation, exhibits and education of the public concerning *The Hound of Heaven* series by R.H. Ives Gammell.

Lower front:
R.H. Ives Gammell (American, 1893-1981), Notes and sketches for *A Pictorial Sequence* by R.H. Ives Gammell Based on “The Hound of Heaven,” 1941-1956, pencil on paper, all roughly 11” x 8”; Gift of Robert and Elizabeth Hunter, 2001.10.2, .3, .6 and .8, Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art.

This page (top to bottom):
R.H. Ives Gammell (American, 1893-1981), “. . . and under running laughter,” Panel VI from *A Pictorial Sequence* by R.H. Ives Gammell Based on “The Hound of Heaven,” 1941-1956, oil on canvas, 79” x 31”; Gift of the R.H. Ives Gammell Studios Trust, 2000.14.7, Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art.

R.H. Ives Gammell (American, 1893-1981) “Drew the bolt of Nature’s secrecies” Panel XII from *A Pictorial Sequence* by R.H. Ives Gammell Based on “The Hound of Heaven,” 1941-1956, oil on canvas, 79” x 31”; Gift of the R.H. Ives Gammell Studios Trust, 2000.14.13, Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art.

R.H. Ives Gammell (American, 1893-1981), “Halts by me that footfall . . .,” Panel XXI from *A Pictorial Sequence* by R.H. Ives Gammell Based on “The Hound of Heaven,” 1941-1956, oil on canvas, 79” x 31”; Gift of the R.H. Ives Gammell Studios Trust, 2000.14.22, Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art.



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