

## Praise for *Here at Last is Love*

“Father Hopkins wrote, ‘This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal diamond, / Is immortal diamond.’ Dunstan Thompson is an immortal diamond too long lost to poetry readers. Here are poems that show the workings of a complex interiority in touch with history’s quirks, the world at war, personal relationships, and struggles of the human heart. Even at their most fervently erotic, they disclose a yearning for something that would allow the poems’ various speakers to be more so that they may love more fully. From the elaborate sensuality of the early poems to the plainspoken urbanity and wit of the later, one constantly encounters an exuberance for life, a quest for meaning in a turbulent world, and openness to the divine spark in all things. This is a volume to be cherished, one that brings us back into touch with a vital American voice.”

—Jerry Harp, author of *Creature*, *Gatherings*, and *Urban Flowers, Concrete Plains*

“This remarkable volume should complicate efforts to make a conversion narrative out of Thompson’s poetry. Theological and erotic ‘loneliness’ in the early work are inextricable from and further enriched by an astonishing sensibility concerning war. What could belong more to Catholic tradition than poetry which joins contemplation, eroticism, and physical suffering? Without the critical constrictions of sexual identification, we can compare Thompson’s formal poems to Millay’s impassioned sonnets as well as to Crane’s intricate music and metaphors. We are freed to consider breadth rather than trajectory: his insistent rhymes, striking meter, and haunting addresses that, in later works, move toward relaxed cadences, sublimated references, and less directly personal subjects. Lucky for us, we don’t have to choose between binaries. Much gratitude to the editor for presenting the strongest of Thompson’s work as a whole and highlighting for us its power and its revisionary place in modern poetics.”

—Martha Serpas, author of *The Diener* and *The Dirty Side of the Storm*

“From the very beginning, with the 1943 publication of his volume *Poems* and his editorship of the influential Modernist literary magazine *Vice Versa*, Dunstan Thompson established himself as one of the most rigorous, formally adept, and brilliant poets of his generation. Here, for the first time, Gregory Wolfe draws poems from the poet’s entire writing life, including his harrowing, erotic wartime poetry and his almost entirely unavailable, more reflective work of maturity. In doing so, he brings to new audiences the work of an essential mid-century poet, one I am confident will become much more important as his readership expands.”

—Kevin Prufer, co-editor of *Dunstan Thompson: On the Life and Work of a Lost American Master*

“The bubble reputation is unreliable. Nearing the end, both Melville and Crane believed themselves forgotten. After Auden came to the United States and renewed the faith he had earlier put aside, much of his audience devalued his later poems. Dunstan Thompson’s fame underwent a similar eclipse, an injustice this volume strives to remedy. The preface by Gregory Wolfe and afterword by Dana Gioia begin the task of locating and elucidating Thompson’s excellence, both as a novice and a mature poet. His choice to be celibate in later life is one he likely would not make today, given that we now have support organizations for gay Catholics like Dignity. But that choice has no bearing on the value of his work, which exchanged the lushness and romantic difficulty of the early poems for a simpler and more vulnerable approach. Early and late, he enjoyed a skill with meter and rhyme that few twentieth-century poets have equaled.”

—Alfred Corn, author of *Unions*

“Dunstan Thompson’s poetry first became known to me in Oscar Williams’ *The New Pocket Anthology of American Verse*, one of my English texts from high school. His lovely poems in that book—‘Nor Mars His Sword,’ ‘The Lay of the Battle of Tombland’—were lost to me when I lost the anthology somewhere along the way. Now I am happy to see these poems restored, with much else of value, in this selection edited by Gregory Wolfe. *Here at Last is Love*, indeed, and here again is Dunstan Thompson, with a lyricism and a faith that remain rare in our poetry.”

—Mark Jarman, author of *Bone Fires: New and Selected Poems*

“How often are we gifted with a collection of poems like Dunstan Thompson’s, which have been uncovered and restored to life again by Gregory Wolfe and Dana Gioia? Thompson was an American poet (1918–1975) in a tradition that encompasses, among others, Hart Crane, T.S. Eliot, and W.H. Auden, and also includes the Greek and Roman classics in a fashion reminiscent of Robert Lowell. Thompson’s early homoerotic poems—rising as they do from the fever and exhaustion of World War II—still have an amazing capacity to enchant and terrorize us. Add to that a Catholic vision which manages to embody the darkness of Baudelaire’s flowers of evil as well as the hard-won redemptive vision of Augustine, John of the Cross, and Hopkins, and you have a sense of what Thompson has to offer us. This volume is a truly significant addition to twentieth-century American poetry and, even more, a vivid, heartbreaking, and authentic contribution to the core poetry of the Catholic imagination.”

—Paul Mariani, author of *Epitaphs for the Journey: New, Selected, and Revised Poems*

Here at Last is Love



Drawing by Barry Moser

# Here at Last is Love

SELECTED POEMS OF  
DUNSTAN THOMPSON

EDITED BY **Gregory Wolfe**  
WITH AN AFTERWORD BY **Dana Gioia**

SLANT



HERE AT LAST IS LOVE  
Selected Poems of Dunstan Thompson

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# Introduction

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GREGORY WOLFE

In place of gold, he sets  
    A banished life between  
Driftwood, and out of fish nets  
    Roofs his loss with sea green.

Thus lives unexiled, though  
    Abandoned, stranded, scanned  
By the Dog Star only, for so  
    Based, his poems are his own land.

—DUNSTAN THOMPSON, “Ovid on the Dacian Coast”

Until quite recently, the life and work of the mid-twentieth century American poet Dunstan Thompson were known only to a dwindling number of literary historians and aging contemporaries. For those few who were acquainted with his story, the narrative had a familiar—even comforting—shape: it was a tragic tale of “rise and fall.” There was Thompson’s rise to prominence in the Anglo-American literary world during the 1940s, followed by his equally sudden disappearance from the scene.

Thanks to the efforts of his longtime partner and literary executor, Philip Trower, and the investigations of a few literary sleuths, a much more complete and nuanced version of Thompson’s story has begun to emerge, leading many of the poets and critics who have

rediscovered him to hail Thompson as a lost and unsung American master.

At the same time—even in the early days of this revival—Thompson’s biography and poetry have generated controversy, as will become clear. Among his current admirers there has been a tendency to claim him in the name of a larger cause or worldview. But it is to be hoped that the publication of this book will temper the debate over—and deepen the appreciation of—Thompson’s *oeuvre* by offering a fuller account of his life and gathering much of his best work written over the course of four decades.

Encountered in a single volume, these poems demonstrate that while there are clear differences in style and subject matter between the two major phases of Thompson’s writing life, there are also unities of theme and expression that have yet to be fully grasped and valued. In William Blake’s beautiful image, there is a “golden string” winding through Thompson’s poetry that is worth tracing.

I give you the end of a golden string,  
 Only wind it into a ball:  
 It will lead you in at Heaven’s gate,  
 Built in Jerusalem’s wall....

Finding that golden string will require a revision of the received wisdom. The sketchy version of Thompson’s story—the one that has lodged in the minds of the few who have even heard of him—begins with Thompson as a young poet who made his mark at Harvard University in the late 1930s and the New York literary scene in the early 1940s. The next chapter recounts the publication of two volumes of highly acclaimed “baroque” poetry that explore both the experience of World War II and the complex emotional territory of homosexual desire. In the words of poet Edward Field, he and others of his generation considered Thompson one of the rising “stars of modern poetry,” worthy of comparison to Hart Crane, W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and Dylan Thomas. Then, without warning—so the story goes—Thompson, who had been a lively fixture in

the literary circles of both New York and London, disappeared from the scene. There were rumors that he had reverted to the Catholic faith of his youth, renounced his gay identity, and gone to live as a recluse in rural England, never to be heard from again.

The epilogue to the tale was added when a collection of his later poetry—*Poems: 1950–1974*—was published posthumously.<sup>1</sup> The collection provided evidence not only that Thompson had returned to Catholic faith and practice, but wrote insipid devotional poetry that abandoned the flamboyant style of his youth for a wan, bookish classicism. Just as Robert Browning lamented William Wordsworth’s turn from youthful radicalism to a more conservative vision in the poem “The Lost Leader,” so Thompson has been characterized as a self-hating homosexual who embraced a faith that suppressed his true identity and genius.

Alongside this version of the narrative lies its inverted mirror image, espoused by Catholic and other religious readers who have hailed Thompson as a champion of the true faith who rejected a hateful way of life and utterly self-absorbed, decadently romantic poetry for a noble austerity of style and vision.

Like all such pieces of received wisdom, these parallel versions of the narrative I have recounted are caricatures, ones that perhaps few hold in such extreme forms. But in the absence of more available information about Thompson’s life and ready access to his poetry, these and other two-dimensional accounts have left a strong impression. This can readily be seen in the recently published book *Dunstan Thompson: On the Life and Work of a Lost American Master*, edited by D.A. Powell and Kevin Prufer. The editors demonstrate a gracious desire for inclusion by publishing essays from the entire spectrum of opinion about Thompson—noting, however, that the result is a “cacophony.”

No doubt that cacophony will continue, but in making the best of Thompson’s poetry from all periods of his life available in a single volume, it may be possible for readers of every persuasion to detect the glint of a golden string that runs through this newly restored tapestry.

Terry Dunstan Thompson was born on August 30, 1918, at Lawrence and Memorial Hospital in New London, Connecticut.<sup>2</sup> His background has been called “patrician,” but that is misleading on several levels. Certainly there was some wealth in the family on his mother’s side, and professional and literary distinction on his father’s side, but his immediate family had limited means, and Thompson’s relationship to exalted social circles was marginal at best.

His paternal grandfather, Charles T. Thompson, spent most of his career on the staff of the Associated Press, rising to chief of the Paris and Washington, D.C., bureaus. Among Charles’s crowning achievements was detailed reporting from the Italian front during World War I, including the retreat from Caporetto (an episode made famous by Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*), which he later chronicled in book form. For his reporting, the French government made him a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor, and the Italian Army gave him a decoration. A sophisticated man of the world, Charles was something of a *bon vivant*, equally at home in news rooms and casinos.

Charles’s wife, Flora McDonald, was also a journalist and writer. According to Trower, she was more of an intellectual than her husband. Flora wrote both political tracts (one of which elicited a response from pioneering feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton) and fiction. At one point she was asked to write a book attacking the Catholic Church, but in the course of her research she was won over by her supposed enemy and received into the church. Charles, too, became a Catholic, though whether before or after his wife is not known. The marriage eventually became strained and the couple lived apart. Flora spent her later years in Washington, D.C., where she became the hostess of a salon for Catholic clergy and cultured lay people. Though he may have been too young to experience this salon, Dunstan would certainly have inherited an awareness of Catholicism as a living tradition, capable of generating serious intellectual thought and dialogue.

Thompson's father, Terry Brewster Thompson, was one of Charles and Flora's three children. Thanks to Charles's job, the family lived in the town of Giverny, near Monet, but to Thompson's regret, his father could remember little of the painter other than catching glimpses of him at work *en plein air*. Terry attended schools in France and England, where he seems to have imbibed a highly traditional sense of moral rectitude and public duty.

One of the few family stories that survives about Charles—and which provides some insight into the differences between father and son—is that when he was asked to look after his grandson Dunstan, he ended up taking him to a casino, where the child found much to amuse himself. Thompson's father was likely not amused.

Indeed, there is some evidence that Terry reacted against his father's worldly, cosmopolitan way of life. He chose a more regimented life as a career naval officer, specializing in naval engineering, and his Catholic spirituality has been described by Trower in his unpublished memoir of Thompson as “French Cistercian”—referring to the austere order of reformed Benedictine monks.

Thompson's mother, Virginia Leita Montgomery, came from a wealthy Catholic family that had its roots in Louisiana but became well established in Washington, D.C. Through her mother, Leita was related to the Carrolls and Lees, pioneering Catholic immigrant families who had arrived in Maryland in the late seventeenth century. Charles Carroll was the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence. His cousin Daniel Carroll was a signer of the U.S. Constitution.

According to Trower, Thompson's mother “was shy, devout, innocent, and unworldly in a way now difficult to imagine.” He continues: “his mother unwittingly imbued him with many of her fears and anxieties as well as her shyness and nervousness.... When I think of Dunstan and his mother together I see, not so much a mother and child, as two children deeply entwined emotionally, struggling to cope with the adult world, and with the younger child often having to take the initiative.”

Leita experienced a number of miscarriages before and after the birth of her son. Sensing that she would not be able to bring another child to term, Thompson's parents adopted a girl named Betty when he was about seven years old. Given their difference in age and Thompson's eventual boarding school education, brother and sister never became close. In Trower's words, Thompson's experience growing up was closer to that of an only child.

The member of his mother's family who would prove most influential in Thompson's life was his great-aunt Leita, who had married the second Catholic chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Edward Douglass White. In contrast to Thompson's mother, Trower describes his great-aunt, known throughout the family as "Aunt Leita," as a stable, sensible woman. She took a shine to young Dunstan, and when she died in 1934 left a legacy to him that would enable him to live and work as a poet throughout his life without having to hold a job.

Thompson's childhood followed a pattern of sorts. The family moved whenever his father shifted to a new naval base, and then Terry would be gone on long deployments, leaving the boy to grow extremely close to—and protective of—his mother. There is no evidence that Thompson feared his father or had a fraught relationship with him, other than anecdotes arising out of typical adolescent arguments (for example, over the consumption of alcohol). Still, even in Trower's lengthy memoir of Thompson, the father remains a rather distant, nebulous figure.

One constant in Thompson's childhood was the liturgical life of the Catholic Church. A commentator has made much of the family having ties to various Catholic dignitaries, including cardinals and archbishops, but for Thompson the experience of faith had less to do with high-ranking clerical friends of the family than with the sacramental life of the church. From a young age Thompson was an altar boy, often getting up early in the morning to serve at the first Mass of the day. In stark contrast to Thompson's father's "French

Cistercian” sensibility, Trower calls his mother’s faith “highly colorful and Italianate,” an element of Leita’s disposition the son seems to have shared.

Another formative experience was foreign travel, something that came naturally to Thompson’s father, given his naval career and European upbringing. There were trips to places like Panama, England, France, Belgium, and Germany (where the family attended the Passion Play at Oberammergau and visited the Catholic mystic Therese Neumann, who experienced the stigmata, the wounds of Christ’s Passion, in her flesh). On a trip to Rome they had an audience with Pope Pius XI, who gave them one of his white silk skull caps.

When he was twelve, Thompson was sent to Georgetown Prep in Washington, D.C., at first as a day student but then as a boarder. Perhaps sensing that his long deployments had left too much distance between himself and his son, Terry brought him out to Villanova Prep in the Ojai Valley when he was stationed in California, but then left on another long deployment.

It was at yet another Catholic school—Canterbury School in New Milford, Connecticut, which he attended for most of his high school years—that Thompson’s literary abilities began to be noticed. One of his teachers, Jimmy Doyle, encouraged him to write poetry. And despite what he would later call his “shyness from my youth,” Thompson also began to demonstrate a genius for friendship at Canterbury. In fact, Thompson stayed in touch with a number of his Canterbury teachers and classmates for many years, some to the very end of his life.

When it came to the choice of which college or university Thompson should attend, there was some discussion within the family. In those days most Catholics were expected to send their children to Catholic institutions such as Georgetown, Notre Dame, or Boston College, but Thompson’s uncle Frederick had long championed Harvard as the pinnacle of higher education in America. And so, being the faithful Catholic family they were, ecclesiastical dispensation was sought for and granted so Thompson could attend Harvard.

By all accounts, Thompson flourished at Harvard in many ways. He gravitated quickly to the faculty who were also poets, especially Robert Davis, Theodore Spencer, and Robert Hillyer. The latter, a High Anglican with a decidedly traditionalist preference for form and romantic diction, was to have the most lasting influence on Thompson. Many years later, in a tribute to Hillyer, Thompson would call him a “gonfalonier of ‘Reaction,’” a critic of Modernists like Eliot and Pound who championed the “gentlemanly” verse of the sixteenth and late nineteenth centuries.<sup>3</sup>

Equally important were his close friendships with some of the most gifted writers among his Harvard classmates. Two of the most important and longest-lasting were with Harry Brown and Billy Abrahams. Brown, who would go on to write a World War II novel, *A Walk in the Sun*, which was made into a film starring Dana Andrews, ended up as a Hollywood screenwriter. But in his Harvard years Brown was immersed in literature and poetry. Trower describes Brown as temperamentally the opposite of Thompson, a “typical man’s man, as practical as Dunstan was impractical.”

Abrahams was more like Thompson on a number of levels. Both had a homosexual orientation and valued literary conversation, wit, and repartee. They were “romantic over a rock-bed of realism... brothers in a savage world,” in Trower’s words. Abrahams would eventually have a distinguished career as an editor and publisher. During their Harvard years they would have only one significant falling-out: when Abrahams tried to enlist Thompson’s support for the cause of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. Whether because of his Catholic background or an innate sense of moderation in political matters, Thompson disappointed Abrahams when he expressed ambivalence about that cause.

Thompson’s extracurricular activities centered on *The Harvard Monthly*, a campus magazine originally founded by George Santayana and others that had gone defunct and only just been revived when Thompson arrived at Harvard. He served as contributor, editorial board member, and, eventually, as editor. Among the poems

he contributed was “To Hart Crane,” whose poetry had already exerted considerable influence on him.

Thompson’s *Monthly* essay contributions also revealed a satirical and contrarian streak that would manifest itself in various ways throughout his life and literary career. They included a *jeu d’esprit* imagining communists taking over Harvard, a piece mocking Isabella Stewart Gardner (the eccentric Boston socialite and patron of the arts), and “Ants on the Ash Heap,” an attack on the Harvard English department that spared only Robert Hillyer.

The one *Monthly* piece that caused the greatest stink was “Fragrant Futility,” a send-up of the Cowley Fathers, a monastic order within the Episcopal Church. Thompson had visited the monastery in Boston with seemingly benign intentions and was received graciously, but the essay, according to a memoir by his classmate Sanford Gifford, “made fun of their High-Church efforts to be more Catholic than their Episcopal denomination.” As Gifford writes, Thompson’s “own Catholic background made him the perfect critic,”<sup>4</sup> but the essay infuriated Hillyer, who forced the young satirist to apologize to the good Fathers.

While his Catholic identity might have provided Thompson with the proper satirical angle for his essay, it is clear that he had lost his faith at some point late in high school or soon after arriving at Harvard. There seems little doubt that this loss of faith coincided with the beginning of his liaisons with men. As the poet Katie Ford notes: “It seems that it was not a crisis of faith that drove Thompson into a ‘lapsed’ period of Catholic practice. Perhaps sexual and social, what was forbidden created a crisis of desire, not of belief.”<sup>5</sup> Trower adds that Thompson’s memory of the period was of living in an anguished limbo: he attempted to play the fashionable skeptic, but retained an instinctive sense that belief was vital to human flourishing. And yet he could not embrace the only two grand belief systems that seemed open to him in the late thirties: Catholicism and Marxism.

Perhaps this underlying turmoil contributed to Thompson’s academic troubles, for despite his brilliant literary achievements at

the *Monthly*, he regularly failed to attend classes and pass examinations. To the surprise of his peers, he dropped out of Harvard in 1939 after his third year, a move that Trower believes was intended to forestall expulsion.

Rather than sink into depression and lethargy, Thompson traveled. He had already been going on trips abroad the previous summers, including visits to Ireland, England, and Mexico. In the summer of 1938, he had spent a month in England studying with the poet Conrad Aiken, who was considered a major writer at the time. He returned in the summer of 1939 to spend another month with Aiken, who gave him a personal introduction to T.S. Eliot. Writing to a friend, Aiken described Thompson as the “cleverest” of his students, “a great rattler and improviser, a real gift of the gab, raconteur, mimic, clown, somewhat in a hurry but shrewd too, adaptable and imitative...but honest and psychologically alert.”<sup>6</sup>

After this trip, Thompson established himself in New York City—effortlessly, it would appear. His connections and literary gifts quickly placed him in the center of the city’s cultural life. He befriended many of the leading lights of the period, including George Barker, Horace Gregory, Marya Zaturenska, and the eminent critic and editor Malcolm Cowley. One of the most valuable connections he made was with Oscar Williams, the editor of widely read poetry anthologies—being included in those volumes gave Thompson’s work valuable exposure.

Beyond writing and publishing his own poetry, Thompson’s most ambitious project during this time was the founding, with his Harvard friend Harry Brown, of a “little journal” devoted strictly to contemporary poetry, called *Vice Versa*. It “exuded the austere and practical tone of a reformist enterprise,” according to poet and critic Dana Gioia, who also notes the “mordant humor and youthful high spirits” that were on a par with *The Harvard Monthly*.<sup>7</sup> Setting the tone of *Vice Versa* were its slash-and-burn reviews, which gleefully took down luminaries like E.E. Cummings, Wallace Stevens, and W.H. Auden. But at the same time, Brown and Thompson were

able to publish original poetry by the likes of Auden, Dylan Thomas, Ezra Pound, Weldon Kees, Edith Sitwell, and George Barker.

*Vice Versa* was funded by Thompson himself, but in spite of the legacy he was now receiving from his aunt Leita's estate, the money wasn't sufficient to cover all the printing bills and other costs associated with the magazine. Then came Pearl Harbor, and it became clear that *Vice Versa* would have to cease publication after three issues.

Everything was about to change.

Many years after the war, Thompson wrote to a friend: "I had a gallant war record—carrying Coca-Cola bottles to sergeants, and writing the Colonel's letters to his friends back home. I used to mess up the grammar afterwards to make it sound more authentic." He adds that he really shouldn't make fun since the officer in question had been quite kind to him. The humor here is not that much of an exaggeration in some ways, since none of his wartime assignments brought him near combat and most were tedious. He eventually ended up working for the Office of War Information in London, the branch of the war effort responsible for both information and propaganda. While his role there might have drawn upon some of Thompson's literary skills, the experience could not have been that interesting, since in the many years he and Philip Trower spent together after the war Thompson never found anything worth recounting about that job.

At the same time, the stresses and strains of the war—and some of its horrors—were never fully absent from his experience. In particular, he was present in London for much of the Blitz and impressed more than one friend with his fearlessness during bombing raids. A couple of his friends were working in London, which helped to break up the tedium between bombings. Throughout these years he continued to have furtive, short-lived sexual relationships with other men, including many in the military—but never

with anyone who might be considered one of his close friends. The pattern of these encounters can be traced in his early poetry: brief, intense infatuations followed by a sense of indifference or betrayal, whether on his part or that of his partners.

He must have been buoyed by the publication of his first collection, simply entitled *Poems*, in 1943 by Simon & Schuster. The reviews were mixed, but where some saw “selfish egotism” and poems full of “private symbols,” others praised the poems’ “dash and splendor” and the “living, speaking voice of youth enmeshed in war.” One critic who panned the collection nonetheless held that “the violence of his vision of the inner world, compounded of war, death, incertitude, isolation, reflects the cataclysm which traditional modes of thought and feeling are undergoing in the world today.”<sup>8</sup>

After his demobilization in December 1945, Thompson returned to New York, where his reputation had grown. But even as he prepared a second collection of poems, which would appear as *Lament for the Sleepwalker* (1947), he had to contemplate what his post-war adult life would look like. He set himself up at the Algonquin Hotel and was often seen with friends and acquaintances and a martini in hand. But there were signs that he was going through some internal strife. One of his best friends, Howard Turner, wrote that during this period Thompson was “nervous, sometimes intemperate, argumentative—I came to feel wary in his presence, unsure of his moods, wondering where he was headed.”

He decided that he would do what successful authors did: propose a book and get an advance from a publisher to live on for a time. He’d conceived the idea some time back of traveling to the Middle East and writing a book of reflections about it. Thanks to the efforts of Margot Johnson, his literary agent, Dodd, Mead and Company agreed to publish the book, and he traveled to Cairo in 1946.

There he reunited with someone he had met in London in early 1945, Philip Trower, to whom he had been introduced by a mutual friend. Trower was serving in Cairo in a branch of the

British Foreign Office known as the Political Intelligence Department. After a couple of American diplomats vacated Trower's Cairo apartment, Thompson moved in. This was the beginning of a relationship that would continue without interruption for the better part of three decades.

Five years younger than Thompson, Trower had been educated at Eton and then completed a war-shortened BA in history at Oxford University. He joined the army in 1942 but was wounded at the battle for the Anzio bridgehead in Italy and returned to England to recuperate. His army service obligation was for five years, which his work in Cairo enabled him to complete.

In Trower Thompson not only found an admirer and a lover, but also someone of fierce loyalty and great kindness. It was to become the first and only stable, long-term relationship that Thompson would ever experience. Though he was the younger man, Trower had an education equal to that of Thompson and his own literary and intellectual ambitions. They were well matched.

Thompson's experiences in the Middle East were rich and varied, but the book that came out of the six months he spent there, *The Phoenix in the Desert*, not published until 1951, was really more of a collection of sketches and impressions than a serious inquiry into the history, culture, and politics of the region. In the same way, his one published novel, *The Dove with the Bough of Olive* (1954), would not catch fire with readers. Drawing on the satirical fiction of writers like Evelyn Waugh and Ivy Compton-Burnett, it was made up primarily of conversations rather than extended description, character development, or attention to plot. The limited success of his two prose books would provide no incentive for him to abandon poetry.

When they returned to London in early 1947, Thompson and Trower found a flat together, but it wasn't long before they realized that Thompson's inheritance didn't leave much left over after the expensive city rent. Trower, who had once intended to pursue a career in law, had decided to try his own luck as a full-time writer.

So he contacted a cousin who found an inexpensive house for let on the northern coast of Norfolk in the village of Cley next the Sea. Neither Thompson nor Trower imagined at the time that their sojourn to Norfolk would be anything but temporary. But they were to remain there until Thompson's death in 1975.

Given the course of Thompson's literary fortunes from this point forward, and his eventual return to his Catholic faith in 1952, it has been tempting for some to conclude that he made some sort of conscious decision to become a recluse. This was not his intention. Travel to London, even by car, was a long and tiring journey, but right up until their move Thompson and Trower had continued to meet socially with the likes of T.S. Eliot, Stephen Spender, Cyril Connolly, Rose Macaulay, Laurie Lee, Roy Fuller, and many others, indicating the opposite of a desire for retreat. At the same time, it is also true that to some extent, they simply moved into a more settled phase of life together.

There were other signs, however subtle, that Thompson was settling into himself. The poems at the end of *Lament for the Sleepwalker*, for example, show a dramatic shift from self-preoccupation to a focus outside his immediate experience. Not only that, but there is also a clear move toward simplified diction and direct syntax. In the moving "Sonnets to My Father," written after his father's death in 1945, Thompson's lines have gone from "baroque" to "austere":

Ah, Captain, you died at peace, although a war  
 Broke your heart, as once before your son had.  
 The years like roses darken, die: so fade  
 The roses on your grave. How the dead are  
 Easily put by. How the incomparable dead  
 Are easily forgotten. How still the dead.

Similarly, in "This Life, This Death," the speaker of the poem surveys the various fears and temptations that assail him in his loneliness, yet concludes:

This life, this death, to be met with everywhere,  
I know now to be my good hope and not despair.

In “The Moment of the Rose,” a title that seems a deliberate reference to the line “The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree / Are of equal duration” in Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, the poet can say:

The end of love is that the heart is still  
As the rose no wind distresses, still as light  
On the unmoved grass, or as the humming bird  
Poised the pure moment by an act of will.

Knowing as he does now the experience of human friendship “my childhood promised me,” quietly acknowledged in the next stanza, the poet not only finds peace but also the capacity to act. The phrase “act of will” seems an almost unconscious borrowing from traditional Catholic theology. St. Augustine famously equated will with love: “*Amor meus, pondus meum*”—my love is my weight. When we will something, it is because we love it. Whether Thompson knew the quotation or not, there is also an echo here of Kierkegaard’s “purity of heart is to will one thing.”

The exact sequence of events that led to Thompson’s return to Catholic faith and practice is uncertain. From various accounts, including letters he wrote to others about it, it is clear that at some point he began to say the rosary again. He also purchased the contemporary translation of the Gospels by Monsignor Ronald Knox, himself a well-known convert to Catholicism.

In a letter written later in his life Thompson recalls being in London in the mid-1940s, needing to get from Grosvenor Square to Berkeley Square, when he decides to take something of a “short cut” through the Jesuit Church of the Immaculate Conception, commonly known as Farm Street Church. There he witnesses an elderly priest rocking back and forth in the pulpit as he preaches to the congregation on the topic of love. As Thompson leaves the

church he takes note of the priest's name, should he ever need to contact one.

There were also liturgical events that Thompson felt drawn to. Living as they did on the north Norfolk coast, he and Trower were only seven miles from Walsingham, England's oldest shrine to the Virgin Mary. One day the two of them bicycled there to witness a procession of pilgrims from all over Britain and France. Representatives from various communities and sodalities carried large white crosses. When a priest carrying a monstrance passed by—a highly ornate object with a consecrated host contained between glass panes within a golden sunburst pattern—Thompson knelt before it, as Catholics are expected to do.

He also proposed to Trower a more ambitious trip to Rome in 1950 for the Jubilee—a special holy year devoted to pardon and the remission of sins (a tradition with roots going back to Judaism). Specifically, Thompson wanted to witness the proclamation made *ex cathedra* by the Pope confirming the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, the dogma asserting that the Virgin Mary was “assumed,” body and soul, into heaven, without experiencing death as we know it. They got tickets that put them atop Bernini's colonnade for the ceremony.

The trip wasn't all given over to piety, however. One night they attended a party at the Villa Aurelia where they saw Leonard Bernstein and Alberto Moravia. Thompson spent the evening talking about literature with Robert Lowell while Trower danced the night away with Lowell's wife, Elizabeth Hardwick.

They then went on to Assisi, Ravenna, and Venice. Trower would later reflect that the addition of Assisi to the itinerary should have signaled more clearly to him Thompson's movement back toward faith.

It wasn't until two years later—late summer or autumn of 1952—that Thompson told Trower that he intended to go to London to the priest he had heard at Farm Street Church to make his confession and return to the practice of the faith: “If he took this

step, Dunstan explained before he set out for London, the nature of our relationship would have to change. We should have to live chastely. It is also possible he would be told we could no longer live together. Was I prepared for this. I said Yes.”

Though Trower goes on to explain that he had had his own misgivings about their way of life, it is hard not to admire the generosity and selflessness of his response. Six months later, Trower was himself received into the Catholic Church. The question about whether they would be allowed to continue to live together was resolved in an unusual manner, given the assumptions many of us would make about the pre-Vatican II church. It was decided that they would, indeed, be allowed to stay together on the grounds that the strength of their love for one another would enable them to live chastely.

Needless to say, the subject of turning away from homosexual practice in the context of a religious conversion is a controversial one today. What should simply be noted here is that some of the conjectures that might be made about this experience in Thompson’s life were not operative, for instance that a lack of intimacy due to age or some traumatic breakup might have caused the change. In 1952 Thompson was only thirty-four, and he made his decision seven years into what had become a stable, loving relationship.

From Thompson’s perspective, at least, he would most likely have embraced the notion that he had in fact experienced, to use Katie Ford’s words again, “a crisis of desire” rather than “a crisis of belief.” But this particular crisis he felt as a call to re-order his desire toward the infinite rather than the finite, according to the teachings of the church he had always loved. What cannot be disputed is that the choice brought him joy, relief, and peace.

The debate that is likely to be more heated and long-lasting is the one about the quality of his later poetry. That Thompson continued to write and to have his literary agent represent him is not in question. Margot Johnson continued to send out both poems and entire collections that Thompson had put together, but they found

no takers. After *Lament* was released, a few poems were printed in the multilingual journal *Botteghe Oscure*. Then, years later, “Images and Reflections” (his tribute to T.S. Eliot upon his reception of the Nobel Prize) was published in the *Paris Review* in 1963, while “Ovid on the Dacian Coast” appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1965.

No doubt there were many factors at play when it came to Thompson’s failure to find publishers willing to take on his work. While not a recluse per se, he certainly did not keep up with literary circles as he once had. Then there was the shift in his style: known for writing in his self-revealing, baroque manner, the plainer style and greater reticence of the later poetry didn’t fit the picture many had formed of his literary genius. This was the period, after all, of the emergence of Confessional poetry. Thompson’s subject matter had also changed: much of it focused on history, culture, and memories of the places where he had grown up or traveled to.

In “Ovid on the Dacian Coast,” Thompson imagined himself into the experience of the Roman poet, who had been exiled to a remote fringe of the Roman Empire while still at the height of his literary powers.

The marsh birds wheel and shriek  
 Above him, as he takes  
 Word after word from their bleak  
 Coast of love: his heart breaks.

The tone here is not one of anger or resentment but of elegiac melancholy as the poet seeks to “translate” the stones on the bleak coast into words and poems that become “his own land.”

Thompson also composed quite a few poems with religious subjects, though they constitute perhaps only a third of his later work. These have come in for some sharp criticism. For example, Ford has argued against their merits on the basis that there is a clear distinction to be made between poetry, which depends on language that is surprising, and liturgy, which she contends is a communal language in which the surprise is felt within the believer rather than in the language itself.<sup>9</sup>

But this seems an odd way to construe the relationship between poetry and liturgy, given the long tradition in Western literature running from Dante and the Metaphysicals through Emily Dickinson and T.S. Eliot that hums with the resonance between these two forms of speech. Even in a brief, simple poem like “Fragment for Christmas,” Thompson’s capacity for wordplay and multiple levels of meaning is evident:

Dear Lord, and only ever faithful friend,  
 For love of us rejected, tortured, torn—  
 And we were there; who on the third day rose  
 Again, and still looks after us; descend  
 Into each wrecked unstable house; be born  
 In us, a Child among Your former foes.

The abruptness of “And we were there” suddenly implicates the reader in both the Passion and the Nativity of Christ (a pairing that goes back centuries in the theology and art of the church)—the way a dynamic baroque painting or sculpture can break the invisible plane between artist and viewer. “Wrecked unstable house” comes with its own set of surprises. Our homes are wrecked not only because they are broken by sin but also “recked” in that they are reckoned by God’s perduring love. Those homes are also not only “unstable” in an emotional sense but are in a state far from the simplicity and purity of the stable into which the Son of God was born.<sup>10</sup>

That Thompson suffered from his inability to be published is attested to by Philip Trower. At one point he had hoped that T.S. Eliot might be interested in publishing him through Faber & Faber, but it came to nothing. Still, it would be wrong to assume that the melancholy Thompson felt about his literary fate left him depressed or paralyzed. Indeed, he continued writing poetry until the end.

The last two decades of his life were spent almost entirely in Cley. For someone who had traveled as much as he had, this might seem evidence of withdrawal, but for much of the 1950s he was

actually embroiled in a legal wrangle with a contractor who had vastly overcharged for work done on one of the Georgetown townhouses in Washington, D.C., that constituted the source of his income. Then, by the 1960s, his health began to deteriorate.

For many years, the Marian shrine at Walsingham was a focal point—socially and spiritually—for Thompson and Trower, who frequently served at the altar. There were also trips to the nearby towns of Norfolk and Cambridge and, less frequently, to London. A steady stream of visitors—British and American—came to Cley. Thompson’s Harvard friend Billy Abrahams came for many visits along with his partner, the writer Peter Stansky. Bishops, priests, seminarians, and other church friends were also among the regulars. Even when there were no visitors, the two men would faithfully observe happy hour, which consisted of gin and tonics and animated conversation.

Thompson’s health began a rapid decline in the mid-1970s, and he finally became bedridden. According to Trower, he had been reluctant to see doctors but eventually did see a specialist who in December of 1974 diagnosed liver cancer. Only a few weeks earlier he had written a small poetic fragment that reads: “How small / everyone looks / in the great hall / of death.”

Once during this period when Thompson became short-tempered with Trower, he later apologized: “It’s my past sins coming out.” About a week before he died he told Trower, “I’m so blessed. I’ve had a lot of discomfort, but no great pain.”

The end came on January 19, 1975. Thompson was attended by his parish priest, who gave him the last rites. His gravestone bears the inscription: “O Crux ave, spes unica,” a quotation thought to be from the sixth-century hymn, “Vexilla Regis Prodeunt,” translated: “O hail the cross, our only hope.” Trower recalls that at the burial there was a violent wind. “If it had been the funeral of anyone else, anyone who had a life like his own, [Thompson] would have said: ‘Someone is furious. He has been defeated.’”

## INTRODUCTION

There is a moment late in Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited* when the protagonist, Charles Ryder, encounters Cordelia Flyte, the youngest daughter of the Catholic family he had known and loved years earlier. When Ryder first met her she was a vivacious, mischievous child. But when he sees her again after many years she has grown into a plain woman, devoting her time to working with an ambulance service in World War II. "Tell me, Charles," she says. "When you first met me last night, did you think 'Poor Cordelia. Such an engaging child, grown into a plain and pious spinster, full of good works'? Did you think 'thwarted'?"

Ryder's answer is: "Yes, I did. But now I'm not so sure."

Near the end of his life, Thompson wrote a short "shape poem" entitled "On a Crucifix" that is startling in its simplicity.

See  
Here at last  
Is  
Love.

Those who have known only a very partial and sketchy account of the life and work of Dunstan Thompson may think of him as "thwarted." But after learning more of the story and dwelling with the achievement of his best work, the reader may begin to perceive the golden string that runs through the narrative. Perhaps the reader may even come to believe that Thompson experienced—and gave voice to—the love for which he had waited so long.





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