

Firewatch in the Belly of the Whale: Imagery of Fire, Water, and Place in *The Sign of Jonas*¹

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Cooled in the flame of God's dark fire
Washed in His gladness like a vesture of new flame
We burn like eagles...
"The Quickening of John the Baptist" (1949)

May my bones burn and ravens eat my flesh
If I forget thee, contemplation!
"The Captives—A Psalm" (1949)

When Thomas Merton ends *The Seven Storey Mountain* with a phrase about his vocation to follow "the Christ of the burnt men," he unwittingly foreshadows the primary imagery of his next autobiographical writing in *The Sign of Jonas*. During his first autobiography, he permeates his story with images of water, both the water of cleansing and the water of the abyss, and yet the framework of the narrative is that of climbing the fiery purgative mountain. During his second autobiographical journal, in contrast, the framework suggests the waters which engulf Jonah's whale, but the imagery that permeates the entries is much more redolent of fire than of water. In the prologue written for *The Sign of Jonas*, he describes a young monk during this historic time of monastic transformation as "walking into a furnace of ambivalence."² Yet Merton ends the prologue with a mixture of water and fire imagery that, I will show, embodies a number of tensions which Merton was going through between 1947 and 1952 as he sought his right "place" in the world of the monastery: "I feel that my own life is especially sealed with this great sign [of Jonah], which baptism and monastic profession and priestly ordination have burned into the roots of my being . . ."³

In this paper, I explore four dimensions of the fire imagery in this journal and their relationship to Merton's four major struggles during this period. First, the imagery of fire as expressing the

human need for *purification* during Merton's struggle with the tensions between being a monk and being a writer. Second, the imagery of fire as expressing the painful human *desire for contemplation* in a world of activity, a tension Merton felt throughout this period at Gethsemani. Third, the imagery of fire as embodying the exhausting *consolation of divine presence* in human experience, which Merton experiences during this period along with a great degree of sickness and pressure. Finally, the imagery of fire as used in the Bible to signify *apocalyptic transformation*, and which Merton uses to suggest the final transformation from possessive to pure love of God and all things in God. I then conclude with a few comments on the relationship between his combined use of water and fire imagery in both his autobiographies and his poetry of this period.

In the rough-hewn wooden structure of Gethsemani in the late 1940s, of course, built for seventy but housing two hundred and seventy monks, fire was more than just a poetic image or metaphor. It was a constant physical threat. Although omitted from *Jonas*, Merton records in his posthumously published journal a fire in the gatehouse of the monastery on January 25, 1948, an event that he feared might burn up his own manuscripts.⁴ He records the story of a former abbot at Gethsemani who was so upset at a hermit monk who had criticized the monastery that the abbot burned down his hermitage.⁵ In May of 1949, he records fires on the hillside and the next month reveals that they had fought similar fires in 1946, a fact that he mentions again near the end of the journal.⁶ He seems almost obsessed with the danger of fire to the place of his life as a writer and monk. In mentioning the 1946 fire again on June 27, 1949, he expands on the beauty of the *place* in which his monastic vocation is lived: "Gethsemani looked beautiful from the hill. It made much more sense in its surroundings. We do not realize our own setting and we ought to: it is important to know that you are put on the face of the earth. . . . If we only knew how to *use* this space and this area of sky and these free woods."⁷ In December of that same year, he describes himself as "elevated to a position" on the newly formed fire department at the monastery, remarking that "fire fighting [is] serious business."⁸ On March 10, 1951, he mentions that he had almost set the woods on fire while burning brush on St. Gertrude's slope near the lake, and concludes: "Many lights are burning that ought to be put out. Kindle no new fires. Live in the warmth of the sun."⁹ Except for

several mentions of burning manuscripts by Dom Frederic and himself, Merton's final portrait of the danger of fire at the monastery takes place during the famous epilogue titled "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952."

I. The Fires of Purification: Monk and Writer

As Victor A. Kramer has demonstrated in an article on the literary patterns in *The Sign of Jonas*, Merton's primary conflict while writing this journal was between his sense of a vocation to be a contemplative monk and the call of his superiors (and his own talents) to be a writer. Kramer asserts that Merton learned through this conflict that "the secret both for being a successful writer, as well as a good monk, was acceptance of one's place within a particular monastery."¹⁰ But this secret was not learned without several years of great pain and purification, expressed repeatedly through images of fire. As he says on May 23, 1947 in a long discourse on his frustrations over the conflict between writing and contemplation, "At this [Cistercian life] is to be my purgatory."¹¹ A few weeks later, he extends this burning conflict to include the insufficiency of the entire world in comparison to his contemplative life: "Even the consolations of prayer, lights in the intellect and sensible fervor in the will: everything that touches me burns me at least lightly. I cannot hold on to anything."¹² On September 7, the feast of the Nativity of Mary, after celebrating his happiness in his devotion to the mother of Jesus (a surprising theme throughout his longer journal), Merton complains that everything except solitude with God causes him purifying "pain"—affection, words, singing, writing, reading. The next sentence connects this pain with the "new torches" like "burning hearts upon poles" during Benediction in the monastic chapel.¹³ Two weeks later, in a passage that he did not put into *The Sign of Jonas* (about his struggle for solitude), Merton repeats the theme of purification through Cistercian life: "With my whole heart I want all the things in community life that burn and purify me of all my selfishness, of that in me that excludes others and shuts them out. I give myself to those flames with all desire, that the walls of my false solitude may be destroyed . . ."¹⁴

Throughout his journals, Merton continues to complain about American monasteries becoming not "Eden[s] of contemplation" but "hells of heat and activity."¹⁵ But his use of fire imagery about his own struggles with writing and contemplation disappears af-

ter two events during 1948 – the death of Dom Frederic, his first abbot and the one who insisted that he become both a writer and a contemplative, and Merton's first visit to the outside world on a trip to Louisville during which he says "I met the world and I found it no longer so wicked after all. . . . I found that everything stirred me with a deep and mute sense of compassion."¹⁶ By July 20, 1949, after his ordination, he admits that he has lost his recurrent desire for "running off to the Carthusians" for more solitude: "I no longer have the right to prefer one place to another."¹⁷ The next day, he is writing: "I am finding myself forced to admit that my lamentations about my writing job have been foolish. . . . The writing is one thing that gives me access to some real silence and solitude. Also I find that it helps me to pray, because when I pause at my work I find that the mirror inside me is surprisingly clear, and deep and serene and God shines there and is immediately found." He recalls singing that day a Latin hymn *Ardens est cor meum*, or "My heart is on fire . . ."¹⁸ The fire imagery recurs but now as a sign of desire for God and not only of personal purification.

Merton's acceptance of his place at Gethsemani deepens during the rest of 1949 so that by January 18, 1950, he is able to give up dreams of a literal hermitage and admit that "[his] work is [his] hermitage because it is *writing* that helps [him] most of all to be a solitary and a contemplative here at Gethsemani."¹⁹ The very next entry after this dramatic admission by Merton is a poem on the "Eve of Saint Agnes" which begins with fire imagery: "O small Saint Agnes dressed in gold / With fire in rainbows round about your face / Sing with the seven martyrs in my Canon."²⁰ In this poem, the fire of purification has become the rainbow fire of sanctity and joy. Only in a few later references during his illnesses in 1950 does Merton revert to wishing he were free of the fire of conflicts: "now [in the infirmary on Palm Sunday] I burn with a desire to forget all the complex stupidities that my own mind can place between me and God."²¹

II. The Fires of Desire for Contemplative Union with God

As the purgative fire imagery dissipates after the middle of *The Sign of Jonas*, the unitive fire imagery emerges. Here, the conflict within Merton comes in part from what he considers the human desire for contemplative union with God and its conflict with the activism of his personal and monastic life. On May 10, 1947, he

turns from his desire for publication to a desire for union with God, "to love God *caste, sancte, ardentier* [chastely, wholly, ardently]." ²² He recalls a verse from John 14:2, "I go to prepare a place for you," and his desire for this place "burns within [his heart] with joy"; he affirms with St. Bernard that "we are made for the mystical marriage, it fulfills our nature." ²³ On Sept. 24, 1947, Merton is again taken up with the human desire for contemplation and so enjoys writing about it that he says in his unpublished journal, "My heart burns in my side when I write about contemplation . . . and I want to cast fire on the earth." ²⁴ His desire for contemplative union in the midst of small monastic irritations consumes him a year later: "I want to be poor; I want to be solitary . . . I am all dried up with desire and I can only think of one thing—staying in the fire that burns me." ²⁵ Three weeks later, this consoling desire enlarges itself in his writing to include love for other persons: "The fire of love for the souls of men loved by God consumes you like the fire of God's love, and it is the same love. It burns you up with a hunger for the supernatural happiness . . . of everybody. This fire consumes you with a desire that is not directed immediately to action, but to God." ²⁶ When Merton first gets to use the quiet rare book vault for his writing in January 1949, he enjoys a continuing sense of this consolation, expressing it in a mixture of fire and water imagery: "love, love, love burned in my heart. Still does. Waves of it come and go. I swim on the waves." ²⁷

When Merton prepares for ordination as a priest several months later, he experiences burning desire for God: "I burn with the desire for His peace, His stability, His silence, the power and wisdom of His direct action, liberation from my own heaviness." ²⁸ This consolation carries over to his first celebrations of the Eucharist as a priest: "the glowing radiance . . . fills the depths of my soul. [Yet it] is a dark radiance—burning in the silence of a faith without images—all the more radiant because I rejoice that it is dark." ²⁹ On August 8, this fiery consolation returns when he reads the Bible outdoors in the natural world: "By the reading of Scripture I am so renewed that all nature seems renewed around me and with me. . . the whole world is charged with the glory of God and I feel fire and music in the earth under my feet." ³⁰ This sense of consoling fire continues with Merton through the end of summer, and he mixes it with water imagery in a powerful entry on Sept. 14, 1949 where he realizes again that he cannot "possess created things":

I try to touch you [created things] with the deep fire that is in the center of my heart, but I cannot touch you without defiling both you and myself But this sadness generates within me an unspeakable reverence for the holiness of created things, for they are pure and perfect and they belong to God and they are mirrors of His beauty. He is mirrored in all things like sunlight in clean water: but if I try to drink the light that is in the water I only shatter the reflection.³¹

This consoling fire and water imagery associated with transforming reverence re-emerges in Merton's final meditation of *The Sign of Jonas*, the "Firewatch" epilogue.

III. Fire of Consolation from the Divine Presence

Perhaps the most memorable use of fire imagery in his journals comes when Merton uses it to express the power of God's presence that touches and consumes human experience. This common Biblical use of fire begins in two passages from April 26, 1947 that he did not transfer to *The Sign of Jonas* but which embody his feelings after taking solemn vows a month earlier: "I want to live in the middle of Your Trinity and praise You with the flames of Your own praise. . . . You will consume me in Your own immense love."³² But this usage of fire imagery disappears for almost a year and a half while he is undergoing the fires of purgation and desire. On October 15, 1948, Merton prays to St. Theresa of Avila to "ask our God to consume us with this passionate love [for the salvation of all persons], and fill the world with rivers of the fire of salvation—*fluvius igneus rapidusque egrediebatur a facie Dei!* [a swift stream of fire issued forth before the face of God! (Daniel 7:10)]."³³

In 1949, as he tries to write a theological treatise on contemplation in the works of St. John of the Cross, Merton chooses a title—*The Cloud and the Fire*—that expresses his own tension about trying to encounter God and letting God encounter him in contemplation. Later that same year, after his ordination, he emphasizes his experience of further purification, but this time not so much from Cistercian life as from divine Love trying to unite with him. As Merton says in his introduction to Part Five of *The Sign of Jonas*, "a priest . . . is bound to be purified by fire . . . the fire of divine charity, in which his soul must become one with the soul of Jesus

Christ. . . . The fire by which he [the contemplative priest] is purified is the fire of God, in solitude."³⁴ Merton emphasizes this fire of divine power over him as priest and prophet in a famous passage in which he speaks of his devotion to the prophets and evangelists: "I know well the burnt faces of the Prophets and the Evangelists, transformed by the white-hot dangerous presence of inspiration, for they looked at God as into a furnace and the Seraphim flew down and purified their lips with fire."³⁵

This encounter with divine love after his ordination causes Merton a season within what he calls a "hidden volcano" of anxiety, bad health, and new peace and happiness. On February 12, 1950, after passing through this difficult period, he is able to reflect on his experience as "being sealed" by God: "Our souls are sealed with fire. Our souls are sealed with Life. Our souls are sealed with the character of God as the air is full of sunshine."³⁶ A month later, he reflects on his growth in relation to that of the people of Israel, who "were afraid to come too close to God. They wanted Moses to protect them and stand between them and God, lest God come down too close to them, and lest His fire consume them."³⁷

During 1951, Merton begins his assignment as Master of Scholastics, in which he finally assimilates the solitary and community dimensions of his vocation. The community is no longer so much a source of purification as a source of contemplative life for Merton. He recognizes the touch of Christ in both himself and his brothers: "our souls momentarily spring to life at the touch of His hidden finger. This flash of fire is our solitude; but it binds us to our brethren. It is the fire that has quickened the Mystical Body since Pentecost so that every Christian is at the same time a hermit and the whole Church, and we are all members one of another."³⁸ He concludes that the active work of writing and teaching (which he thought would interfere with solitude) "is in fact the only true path to solitude." He resolves this conflict by answering his own questions: "What is my new desert? The name of it is *compassion*."³⁹ As he concludes the journals, Merton expands these theological reflections to explain three levels of his consciousness: the level of practical thinking and acting, the second level of ordinary prayer that he writes about in his spiritual books, and the third level of pure, wordless contemplation. He describes this third level: "Here is where love burns with an innocent flame, the clean desire for death . . . everything in order. Emergence and deliverance."⁴⁰ As he continues, Merton shifts from fire imagery to water

imagery in which the sign of Jonas becomes central to his explanation of one's final entry into the death and resurrection experience. There he meets God "whose pure flame respects all things."⁴¹

IV. The Fire of Apocalyptic Transformation: Ultimate Union of Love with God

At this point, the journal concludes, and Merton adds an epilogue entitled, significantly, "The Fire Watch." This section becomes a meditative review of his life as a contemplative in the form of a walk through the entire monastery during his duty as night watchman looking for signs of fire. The danger of fire in the monastery had long coincided within Merton's imagination with the apocalyptic fires of a nuclear bomb that might trigger the end of the world. As he wrote on October 10, 1948, as his purification fire began to change to fires of desire for contemplation: "Sooner or later the world must burn, and all things in it . . . Sooner or later it will all be consumed by fire and nobody will be left—for by that time the last man in the universe will have discovered the bomb capable of destroying the universe . . ."⁴² The power of apocalyptic fire becomes important for more personal reasons during Merton's final meditation in his Epilogue, "The Firewatch, July 4, 1952." In this long review of his monastic journey, as Ross Labrie has recently shown, Merton finds himself confronting God's unanswerable question in the darkness and depths of himself and the monastery, a question that cannot be formulated or answered in words. As I would suggest, the question is primarily whether Merton will let God be God. During his meditative walk through the Abbey of Gethsemani, Merton tries to express what he has learned about answering this question during his years of fiery purification, desire, and union. First, he affirms that the answer to the question is beyond words or writing, and in fact beyond all created things.⁴³ Second, he tells us that the answer is a sort of renunciation of all questions and conceptual thinking, but must still be dealt with in the depths of his being through contemplation and silence: "Silence shall be my answer."⁴⁴ Third, he has come to see that this question/answer process itself is a form of "death" and apocalyptic fire that helps Merton transform all things in his monastic life into their final stage in preparation for ultimate union with God. As he concludes his walk, he finds the apocalyptic Eternity of God to be in the monastery at the present mo-

ment: "Eternity is in the present. Eternity is in the palm of the hand. *Eternity is a seed of fire*, whose sudden roots break barriers that keep my heart from being an abyss."⁴⁵ In this image of a "seed of fire," Merton suggests that God's presence in his life and this world is transforming his possessive love of creatures (including his own monastic life) into a love of God in itself and in all creatures. Just as Job's "answer" was God himself (234-36), so Merton's "answer" to the inexpressible question is God himself, transforming him into the purity of loving communion. In Merton's own words expressing what can only be suggested as being beyond words: "You, Who sleep in my breast, are not met with words, but in the emergence of life within life and of wisdom within wisdom. You are found in communion: Thou in me and I in Thee and Thou in them and they in me."⁴⁶ Thus, through the "seed of fire," he has finally reached an apocalyptic sense of time, eternity, and place, which he unites in a final Biblical image of fire and now associates with Gethsemani itself

This is the land where you have given me roots in eternity, O God of heaven and earth. This is the burning promised land, the house of God, the gate of heaven, the place of peace, the place of silence, the place of wrestling with the angel.⁴⁷

Conclusion: Transformation Through the Baptism of Fire, Water, and Spirit

This study of the frequent use of fire imagery in approximately one hundred passages in *The Sign of Jonas* and *Entering the Silence* could well be supplemented by a study of similar fire imagery in the poetry of Merton published in the same period. In *Figures for an Apocalypse* (1947) and *The Tears of the Blind Lions* (1949), Merton uses most of the same fire images in poetry to dramatize the purgative, illuminative/connotative, and unitive stages of the spiritual journey leading toward the apocalyptic transformation.⁴⁸ In addition, many of these images derive from or are related to similar images of fire in the Bible.⁴⁹ Among these latter, fire imagery can signify a variety of conflicting powers of God—to inspire, to foreshadow judgment, to purify, to symbolize the ultimate, and so forth. This ambiguous use of inspirational, prophetic, purificatory, or apocalyptic fires within the Bible only makes Merton's use of

fire imagery more complex in this journal. Finally is the Biblical image of the Holy Spirit coming in tongues of fire as well as through the waters of baptism.

What is more significant, however, for a study of Merton's use of image patterns in this journal is his fusion of water, fire, and place imagery at the beginning and ending of *The Sign of Jonas*. As we have noted, he begins the journal by saying that the sign of Jonas in the belly of the whale is "burned into the roots of [his] being" by means of the water of baptism and by his vow of stability at Gethsemani.⁵⁰ This mixing of paradoxical images (water as life-giving and death-dealing; fire as purifying, destroying, and transforming) indicates that Merton is trying to move beyond words toward what can be expressed only dimly through images. It is no surprise, then, that he concludes his journal with another mixed image of the fire of the sun and the water of dew at dawn at the end of "The Fire Watch." These images merge and give way to a traditional symbol of the divine Spirit: "There are drops of dew that show like sapphires in the grass as soon as the great sun appears, and leaves stir behind the hushed flight of an escaping dove."⁵¹

Notes

1. This paper was delivered in conjunction with Ross Labrie's presentation entitled "The Unanswered Question in Merton's 'Firewatch'" at the 2003 Conference of the International Thomas Merton Society in Vancouver, Canada. Labrie's paper was later published in *Christianity and Literature*, 52 (2003), pp. 557-568.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Doubleday, 1953), p. 5.

3. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 11.

4. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer* (Journals 2; 1947-52; ed. Jonathan Montaldo; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 159.

5. *Entering the Silence*, p. 129.

6. *Entering the Silence*, pp. 308, 329, 487.

7. *Sign of Jonas*, pp. 201-202.

8. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 250.

9. *Sign of Jonas*, pp. 324.

10. Victor A. Kramer, "Literary Patterns in *The Sign of Jonas*: Tension between Monk and Man of Letters," in *Toward an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton's Journey*, ed. Basil Pennington (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1988), p. 8.

11. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, p. 77.
12. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 51; in the original journal he uses the term "cauterizes me," *Entering the Silence*, p. 83.
13. *Entering the Silence*, p. 105; *Sign of Jonas*, p. 62.
14. *Entering the Silence*, p. 120.
15. *Entering the Silence*, p. 190.
16. *Sign of Jonas*, pp. 91-92.
17. *Entering the Silence*, p. 338.
18. *Sign of Jonas*, pp. 207-208.
19. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 269.
20. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 270.
21. *Entering the Silence*, p. 427.
22. *Entering the Silence*, p. 73.
23. *Entering the Silence*, p. 73; this passage is modified and moved to May 14, 1947 in *Sign of Jonas*, p. 47 48.
24. *Entering the Silence*, p. 122.
25. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 121.
26. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 129.
27. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 147.
28. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 191.
29. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 196.
30. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 215-216.
31. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 238.
32. *Entering the Silence*, p. 67.
33. *Entering the Silence*, p. 238; *Sign of Jonas*, p. 130.
34. *Sign of Jonas*, pp. 229-30.
35. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 224.
36. *Entering the Silence*, p. 409; modified without fire imagery in *Sign of Jonas*, pp. 276-77.
37. *Sign of Jonas*, pp. 288-89.
38. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 333.
39. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 334.
40. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 340.
41. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 346.
42. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 122.
43. *Sign of Jonas*, pp. 352-53.
44. *Sign of Jonas*, pp. 354, 358, 361.
45. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 361.
46. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 361-62.
47. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 345
48. The fire and water imagery in Merton's poems from the years he was writing the journal that became *The Sign of Jonas* carries the same range of significance as it does in his journal. In the title poem of *Figures*

for an *Apocalypse* (1947), the water imagery is subordinated to the purifying and transforming apocalyptic fire imagery, as we note in the opening lines: "Come down, come down Beloved / And make the brazen waters burn beneath Thy feet." The presence of the divine Beloved comes through his eyes, which are "furnaces" that melt the "fireproof rocks" into "diamonds and . . . emeralds," and which make the sea "waters shine like tin / In the alarming light." As the speaker calls the readers to tend their lamps, the cities of Tyre and Sidon "Fall down and drown in foaming seas," a fate similar to that of New York City, "full of sulphur." Meanwhile, "The men on the red horses wait with guns / Along the blue world's burning brim," and the prophet foretells that day: "But when the grey day dawned / What flame flared in the jaws of the avenging mills! / We heard the clash of hell within the gates of the embattled Factory / And thousands died in the teeth of those sarcastic fires." After the apocalyptic destruction of New York, the speaker notes the "quiet fires! . . . after the black night / When flames out of the clouds burned down your cariated teeth." The long meditative poem ends with apocalyptic imagery of the beast who will "brand" survivors so that they are "evermore . . . burned with her disgusting names," and fire shoots from the feet of "impatient horses" and off "those blazing swords." Only in the heavenly city does the destructive fire become in Christ "the new creation's sun." (See Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* [New York: New Directions, 1977], pp. 135-148.)

In a shorter poem in the same collection, "Two States of Prayer," Merton combines the purgative and transformative power of fire in the contemplative life into a rather awkward stanza:

Our prayer is like the thousands in the far, forgotten stadiums,
 Building its exultation like a tower of fire,
 Until the marvelous woods spring to their feet
 And raid the skies with their red-headed shout:
 This is the way our hearts take flame
 And burn us down, on pyres of prayer, with too much glory."
 (*Collected Poems*, p. 150).

After extensive use of water imagery in "On the Anniversary of My Baptism" and the two following poems, Merton returns to use fire imagery, this time the prophetic fire he associates with John the Baptist, whom he asks to "kindle in this wilderness / The tracks of those wonderful fires: / Clean us and lead us in the new night . . . / And take us to the secret tents, / The sacred, unimaginable tabernacles / Burning upon the hills of our desire!" (*Collected Poems*, p. 172).

In *The Tears of the Blind Lions*, seventeen poems published in 1949, Merton mixes water and fire imagery throughout the volume. He speaks of Duns Scotus's work on the Trinity as a book that "burns me like a branding iron" (*Collected Poems*, p. 199). He describes his response to John the Baptist as "Cooled in the flame of God's dark fire / Washed in His gladness like a vesture of new flame, / We burn like eagles" (*Collected Poems*, p. 202). In responding to the legend of St. Clement, Merton sees "Words of God blaze like a disaster / In the windows of their prophetic cathedral" but feels their effects on himself: "Your waters shatter the land at my feet with seas forever young" (*Collected Poems*, pp. 203-204). On the August feast of St. Clare, he calls to the thunderclouds to "Let five white branches scourge the land with fire" so that "thoughts come bathing back to mind with a new life" (*Collected Poems*, p. 206). During a November on the stormy feast of St. Malachy, he watches as "copper flames fall, tongues of fire fall / The leaves in hundreds fall upon his passing / While night sends down her dreadnought darkness / Upon this spurious Pentecost" (*Collected Poems*, p. 211). In "The Captives—A Psalm," Merton cries out for his most urgent request from his journals and poetry: "May my bones burn and ravens eat my flesh / If I forget thee, contemplation!" (*Collected Poems*, p. 212). He ends this collection with an apocalyptic poem entitled "Senescente Mundo," in which he describes the final days in traditional fire imagery, but then turns to his recent ordination for some of his rare priestly images, before returning to the water imagery with which he names his journal of this period: "Yet in the middle of this murderous season / Great Christ, my fingers touch Thy wheat / And hold Thee hidden in the compass of Thy paper sun . . . / I hear a Sovereign talking in my arteries / Reversing, with His Promises, all things / That now go on with fire and thunder . . . / Here in my hands I hold that secret Easter . . . / Crying like Jonas in the belly of our whale" (*Collected Poems*, p. 222).

49. For brief overviews of the imagery of fire in the Bible, see John McKenzie's *Dictionary of the Bible*, Xavier Leon-Dufour's *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, or Eerdmans *Dictionary of the Bible*. These sources list various types of fire in the Hebrew Scriptures: holocaust, purification, divine power (or wrath and jealousy), tribulation and testing, theophanies, judgment, and eschatological transformation. In the New Testament, they find these same Hebrew images but also some new associations of fire with the glory of God, baptism, Pentecost, Christ's desires, etc.

50. *Sign of Jonas*, pp. 20-21.

51. *Sign of Jonas*, p. 352.