

## Eight Freedom Songs: Merton's Sequence of Liberation

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Thomas Merton's "Eight Freedom Songs," written in the spring of 1964, have probably been more read about than actually read themselves. Moreover, the account in William Shannon's biography of Merton<sup>1</sup> as well as Merton's own extensive correspondence with Robert Williams, the young black tenor who had originally asked Merton to compose the songs,<sup>2</sup> focuses on the complicated, at times tragicomic, circumstances attending their composition, setting, and eventual performance (at a memorial service for Martin Luther King in August 1968)<sup>3</sup> rather than on the structure and themes of the poems themselves. The relative obscurity of the poems is due in part to the fact that they are not printed as a group in the *Collected Poems*, but are scattered among the alphabetically arranged "Uncollected Poems" in that volume.<sup>4</sup> But

1. William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 234-38.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 587-607.

3. Four of the songs, "Sundown," "All the Way Down," "The Lord is Good," and "Earthquake," were set to music by composer Alexander Peloquin and first performed at the 1968 Liturgical Conference in Washington, D.C., at which King had originally been scheduled to speak. See the headnote to Merton's letters to June Yungblut in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 635, and Merton's letters to Yungblut, pp. 645-48; see also Thérèse Lentfoehr's note to her article, "Social Concern in the Poetry of Thomas Merton," in Gerald Twomey, ed., *Thomas Merton: Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox* (New York: Paulist, 1978) 136.

4. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977); the Freedom Songs are found on pp. 669-70, 692-93, 701-3, 711-12, 714-15, 756-

even readers who make the effort to read the songs in their proper order may initially find themselves rather unimpressed. Like traditional black spirituals,<sup>5</sup> the Freedom Songs are adaptations of biblical texts (in this case taken either from the Psalms or the Prophets of the Old Testament) reworked to highlight their pertinence for contemporary experience, specifically the pursuit of racial justice and equality. The poems are definitely songlike in form, with a great deal of verbal repetition, including frequent refrains; like hymns and songs generally they may appear to be "thin" in comparison with other types of poetry, particularly when considered apart from their music. But to dismiss these poems too hastily as minor achievements, or as less significant in themselves than as an occasion for observing Merton's sensitivity and concern in a sometimes exasperating situation, would fail to do justice to a series of poems that, within the accepted limitations of their genre, can be considered both artistically successful and spiritually challenging. Read as a coherent sequence, the Freedom Songs trace a pattern of personal and social transformation in which the nonviolent struggle for civil and human rights serves as a paradigm for the fundamental Christian journey to full redemption, a liberation from both outer and inner oppression due to human sinfulness.

## I

The opening poem, "Sundown," begins the sequence by directing attention to the structural injustice in which even religious institutions are implicated and provides a good example of the apparent

57, 775-76, 779-80; a note on p. 668, at the beginning of the "Uncollected Poems" section, does provide a list of the eight poems in the proper order, though here and after the individual poems the date of composition is given as 1966, the year in which they were privately published by Williams as a fund-raising effort (see Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 235).

5. Merton himself makes this connection with regard to an appropriate musical setting in his first letter to Williams, on March 31, 1964 (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, 588). See also his comments on spirituals and "Freedom Songs" as "prophetic" in *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 72-74. The songs may also owe something to Merton's familiarity with Ernesto Cardenal's contemporary versions of the Psalms, which Merton had read as early as September 1961: see his letter of September 16 to Pablo Antonio Cuadra in *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 189.

simplicity and actual subtlety of Merton's technique in the poems. Based upon the denunciation of false prophets in chapter 3 of Micah, this poem is particularly dependent on the refrain with which it opens and closes and which recurs three other times between the successive stanzas:

O sundown, sundown  
Like blood on Sion! (ll. 1-2).

The basis of the comparison initially seems to be twofold, a reference both to the color of the sunset reflecting on the walls of Jerusalem and to ritual sacrifice, the blood shed on the altar of the Temple, located on Mount Sion; thus, at the outset and without any further context the relation between sundown and blood might appear to be based simply on empirical observation. But with each successive repetition the connotations of the simile will grow more ominous.

In the first stanza, the approach of night becomes an image of the failure of prophetic vision:

The sun goes down  
Upon the prophets;  
Night is falling  
And there is no answer (ll. 3-6).

The physical darkness into which the prophets are drawn implies a lack of spiritual enlightenment. Here Merton condenses verses 6-7 of the original biblical text: "Therefore you shall have night, not vision, darkness, not divination; the sun shall go down upon the prophets, and the day shall be dark for them. Then shall the seers be put to shame, and the diviners confounded; they shall cover their lips, all of them, because there is no answer from God."<sup>6</sup> In the poem, no reason for the prophets' failure is yet apparent, but after the negative interpretation given to the sundown in this stanza, the comparison to blood in the refrain that follows is less likely to be read now as based only on color or sacrificial practices; indeed, as the first stanza functioned as a commentary on the first line of the refrain, so the second stanza does the same for the second line:

6. The translation cited is that of the Confraternity version of the Old Testament, which would have been the approved Catholic text at the time Merton was writing; it is identical in all cited Old Testament passages to the text of the New American Bible; names of the prophetic books are given their more familiar spelling.

For men build Sion  
Out of blood;  
They build Jerusalem  
With wrong (ll. 9–12).<sup>7</sup>

Here a cause-effect relationship between the two parts of the refrain is implied: it is because there is "blood on Sion," because there was bloodshed and injustice in building the city, that the sun goes down upon the prophets, who are left in darkness with no word from the Lord. Religious figures and institutions are compromised by their collaboration with, or at least failure to denounce, the forces of oppression. This idea is reinforced in the following stanza, in which the Temple is directly mentioned and the imagery becomes more explicit:

They build the temple  
With dead men's bones;  
They build Jerusalem  
With wrong (ll. 15–18).<sup>8</sup>

The implication is that religion countenances not merely animal sacrifices but the sacrifice of human beings: the Temple is not a house of life but a charnel house, a shrine built on and dedicated to death; worship in such a place is not only meaningless but blasphemous. Thus the stanza sharpens the attack on a sterile religious formalism divorced from concern for justice.

The final stanza appears to be truncated, with the refrain incorporated as the last two lines of the quatrain:

Night has fallen  
Is there still no answer?  
O sundown, sundown  
Like blood on Sion! (ll. 21–24).

7. See Micah 3:10: ". . . who build up Sion with bloodshed, and Jerusalem with wickedness!"

8. The reference to bones is found in Micah 3:2-3: "You who tear their skin from them, and their flesh from their bones! They eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from them and break their bones. . . ." There may also be a reminiscence of the opening lines of Robert Lowell's poem, "Children of Light": "Our Fathers wrung their bread from stocks and stones / And fenced their gardens with the Redman's bones" from *Lord Weary's Castle*, a volume Merton praised highly when it first appeared in 1947 (see *The Sign of Jonas* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953] 81–82, and Robert Lowell, *Lord Weary's Castle and the Mills of the Kavanaghs* [Cleveland: World Publishing, 1961] 28).

The alteration of the pattern here is highly significant. The first two lines rephrase lines 5–6 as a question; the inclusion of the refrain suggests that for those with ears to hear there is an answer, has been an answer all along, though unrecognized by the false prophets and their followers: the refrain is the authentic prophecy. The final stanza implicitly reflects the contrast in the biblical source between the false prophets, who have no answer, and Micah, whose prophecy is a prediction of the downfall of the oppressors: "But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord, with authority and with might; to declare to Jacob his crimes and to Israel his sins. . . . Therefore, because of you, Sion shall be plowed like a field, and Jerusalem reduced to rubble, and the mount of the temple to a forest ridge" (Mic 3:8, 12). The refrain in its final appearance looks not only to the past but to the future: the blood of past injustice becomes a portent of the blood of future retribution; the end of daylight foreshadows the end of Sion, the downfall of the old order, the coming day of the Lord as a "*dies irae*," a time of darkness, defeat, judgment.

Thus by linking together two images present but not related in Micah, the sunset of verse 6 and the blood of verse 10, and gradually allowing the full implications of their relationship to unfold for the perceptive reader, Merton has created a powerful introduction for his sequence. The poem challenges the complacent assumptions of the social and political establishment that the foundations of its power remain secure. Though analogies remain implicit with the American situation, in which the "city on a hill" was built on the enslavement of human beings, those with ears to hear will recognize the contemporary application of the scriptural word, which is simultaneously a warning to the powerful and a promise to the poor and oppressed.

## II

The title of the second poem in the series, "Evening Prayer," suggests an immediate point of comparison with "Sundown," since both are set at the same time of day, but the coming of darkness here is an occasion for a reaffirmation of trust in God, even when faced with threats and dangers from precisely the sort of people who "build Jerusalem / With wrong" in the preceding poem. The speaker's fidelity under trial provides a counter-example to the spiritual emptiness

of the pseudoprophets and the hypocrisy of conventional worshipers. This poem depicts the struggles of the just person of the Psalms (Pss 140 and 141 are the sources cited)<sup>9</sup> while continuing to probe the causes, manifestations, and consequences of injustice.

The opening verse-paragraph presents a model of authentic worship and suggests what the rest of the poem will explore in detail, the cost of being a sign of contradiction to a faithless society:

Lord, receive my prayer  
Sweet as incense smoke  
Rising from my heart  
Full of care  
I lift up my hands  
In evening sacrifice  
Lord receive my prayer (ll. 1-7).

The most immediately noteworthy aspect of these lines is probably their symmetry: not only does the final line repeat the first but the image of incense smoke (l. 2), associated with sacrificial offerings, corresponds to the explicit mention of sacrifice in line 6; and "Rising from my heart" (l. 3) closely parallels "I lift up my hands" (l. 5). Not only does this balanced pattern suggest that the speaker is characterized by a calm and ordered perspective but it draws attention to the central line, "Full of care," which seems all the more anomalous in this context. At least three related questions arise from reflection on the form and content of this remarkable passage: What is the cause of the speaker's care? How can he remain so evidently at peace yet be "full of care"? How can his prayer be described as "sweet" though arising from a care-filled heart? (It is worth noting that neither the care nor the sweetness is found in the scriptural source, Psalm 140:1-2).<sup>10</sup> Answers to these questions will become evident as the prayer continues, even as the act of praying will have on the speaker a transforming effect, which becomes its own unanticipated yet fully satisfying answer, incorporating and transcending the others.

9. The Vulgate numbering of the Psalms is retained in conformity with Merton's usage.

10. "O Lord, to you I call, hasten to me: hearken to my voice when I call upon you. Let my prayer come like incense before you; the lifting up of my hands, like the evening sacrifice."

The lines that follow make clear the reasons for the speaker's care, in the context of the basic image of the journey that will continue throughout the sequence:

When I meet the man  
On my way  
When he starts to curse  
And threatens me,  
Lord, guard my lips  
I will not reply  
Guide my steps in the night  
As I go my way (ll. 8-15).

This verse-paragraph consists of two balanced halves, the first part focused on the danger the speaker faces, the second a prayer for a proper response. His adversary, "the man," a term generic enough to have broad application but having a special resonance for those in the civil-rights movement, both curses and threatens, and the two petitions the speaker makes address these two forms of hostility. It is significant that he prays first not for protection but for faithfulness, the strength not to reply in kind to the enemy's curses; his words recall the attitude of the Suffering Servant, who remained silent under abuse, a stance embodied perfectly by Christ before his tormentors.<sup>11</sup> Even the second petition, a plea for guidance through the darkness,<sup>12</sup> indicates the speaker's determination to remain steadfast on "my way" rather than taking the way of "the man," returning curse for curse and threat for threat. It is really a prayer for nonviolence, for remaining at peace even when provoked, and it suggests that his prayer is sweet to the Lord because it is an offering not just of words but of self.

11. See Isaiah 53:7; Matthew 26:63, 27:12 and parallels; John 19:9; the silence motif in Psalm 140 itself is oriented more toward not becoming one with evil-doers: "O Lord, set a watch before my mouth, a guard at the door of my lips. Let not my heart incline to the evil of engaging in deeds of wickedness with men who are evildoers" (140:3-4).

12. Here too the figure of the Isaian Servant seems to be the source. See Isaiah 50:10: "Who among you fears the Lord, heeds his servant's voice, and walks in darkness without any light, trusting in the name of the Lord and relying on his God?" Psalm 24:8-9 also seems to be a source here: "Good and upright is the Lord; thus he shows sinners the way. He guides the humble to justice, he teaches the humble his way"; the opening words may also have influenced the reference to the "other Lord / Who is not so wise and good" in the following verse-paragraph.

The third verse-paragraph attributes the very different attitude of his enemy to his devotion to another god:

Maybe he belongs  
To some other Lord  
Who is not so wise and good  
Maybe that is why those bones  
Lie scattered on his road (ll. 16-20).

The contrast between "his road" and "my way" is central here: because he is in the power of "some other Lord," of a god of death, not of life (though he may well claim that he follows the "real" Lord), his way is covered with bones. It is not made clear whether the bones are those of his victims or whether they belong to those who have chosen this path and found death along it themselves.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately both interpretations would apply, as those who take the path of violence for whatever reason are on the road to destruction.

While the poem thus far has presented the traditional pattern of the "Two Ways,"<sup>14</sup> the three lines that follow briefly focus on those who think they can remain on the sidelines, taking neither road:

When I look to right and left  
No one cares to know  
Who I am, where I go (ll. 21-23).<sup>15</sup>

The use of the word "cares" here is a particularly effective indicator of the speaker's isolation: no one cares to know him because to care about him would be to make a costly commitment, to take his cares, his burdens, upon oneself; easier to remain an "innocent bystander," who does not want to get involved. But to choose safety over compas-

13. The interpretation of Psalm 140:7, the source of the reference to the bones, is a notorious crux; the Confraternity version reads, "[T]heir bones are strewn by the edge of the nether world," referring to unjust judges, but the Vulgate makes the bones those of the oppressed victims: "dissipata sunt ossa nostra secus infernum."

14. The first psalm is the best-known presentation of this contrast; Merton discusses the Two Ways in connection with the *Didache*, a classic source, on the second side of "Life and Prayer: Journey in Christ," *The Merton Tapes 2* (Chappaqua, New York: Electronic Paperbacks, 1972).

15. The source here is Psalm 141:5: "I look to the right to see, but there is no one who pays me heed. I have lost all means of escape; there is no one who cares for my life."

sion is literally to miss the opportunity of a lifetime, because by paying no attention to "where I go" the bystanders fail to recognize that his is the true path, the way to life, and so they are themselves left without direction. By situating this short section on the uncommitted at the center of the poem, Merton presents an implicit challenge to those who think they do not need to take sides in the contemporary freedom struggle and suggests that their response is crucial for their own salvation.

The consequence of this failure of human solidarity is the speaker's realization that he can rely on the Lord alone, since the Lord alone cares:

Hear my prayer  
I will trust in you  
If they set their traps  
On my way  
If they aim their guns at me  
You will guide my steps  
I will pass them by  
In the dark  
They will never see (ll. 24-32).

The focus now centers on the speaker's security. Here again the form conveys a sense of balance as the pair of threats is matched by a corresponding set of protections: in response to the danger of traps, "You will guide my steps" (note the link of the slant rhyme here); an ambush with guns (a contemporary addition to the scriptural source, of course)<sup>16</sup> will be eluded by "pass[ing] them by / In the dark." (The interweaving is even more balanced as the two lines of the first "if" clause have a one-line main clause, while the single line of the second "if" clause has a two- [or three-] line main clause.) The final line here can be read to refer not only to their failure to see the speaker and so to harm him, but to a failure of vision in a wider sense (signaled by the word "never"): they remain "In the dark" (a phrase that may be read either with the preceding or the following line, with different connotations), unable to recognize and respond to the truth just as surely as the prophets of "Sundown" were unable to hear the divine

16. The reference to traps is found both in Psalm 140:8 ("Keep me from the trap they have set for me, and from the snares of evildoers") and in Psalm 141:4 ("In the way along which I walk they have hid a trap for me").

Word. (Note also that this section which began with the word "Hear," addressed to the Lord, ends with the word "see," which they will never be able to do.)

The blindness of his persecutors contrasts with the speaker's ability to see the Lord, see the truth, even in the midst of the darkness:

Lord to you I raise  
Wide and bright  
Faith-filled eyes  
In the night  
You are my protection  
Bring me home (ll. 33-38).

These lines are filled with a sense of serenity conveyed by the simple rhymes of the first four lines and the movement from petition to direct statement in the fifth. The reference to raising the eyes to God here seems to draw not only on Psalm 140:8 ("For toward you, O God, my Lord, my eyes are turned"), but on the even closer parallels in the Songs of Ascents, the pilgrimage hymns of those on the way to Jerusalem: "I lift up my eyes toward the mountains; whence shall help come to me? My help is from the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (Ps 120:1-2); "To you I lift up my eyes who are enthroned in heaven . . . so are our eyes on the Lord, till he have pity on us" (Ps 122:1-2). Like those psalms, the song here now envisions a goal, an arrival "home," where the Lord is.<sup>17</sup> Though the speaker has not yet arrived there, he is confident that he will, so that this word brings the movement of the poem, if not of the journey, to a close.

The final four lines repeat the opening four lines, again emphasizing the sense of order and balance,<sup>18</sup> with one crucial difference:

And receive my prayer  
Sweet as incense smoke  
Rising from my heart  
Free of care (ll. 39-41).

17. There is, however, a similar passage in Psalm 141:6: "I say, 'You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.'"

18. The balance may extend to the previous verse-paragraph as well, as the reference to raising eyes in the night would relate chiasmatically to the lifting up of hands in evening sacrifice in the final lines of the opening segment of the poem.

By casting his cares upon the Lord, who alone "cares to know / Who I am, where I go," he has been relieved of them. Yet what has remained the same is perhaps as remarkable as what has changed: both states, both stages, have provided a sweet offering to God. It is not the presence or absence of care that makes the prayer sweet or bitter but how the care is dealt with, the attitude one takes toward one's trials. The speaker's fidelity under persecution is just as sweet, as acceptable to God, as the deepened confidence in God's prior faithfulness, a confidence that grows out of that fidelity and that leads the speaker to feel "Free of care," though the objective conditions to be faced may have changed little. The song is thus an encouragement to the freedom movement not to allow bitterness at opposition and persecution to corrode the purity of its commitment, and a promise that to bear the burden of one's cares as an offering to God is paradoxically to be freed of them.

### III

Merton is quite aware, of course, that discouragement, even apparent despair, is unavoidable in any genuine struggle for justice, or even for authentic personhood: to come face to face with evil is to risk being overwhelmed by it, above all perhaps when one becomes aware that the same capacity for evil can be found in oneself. But to avoid the encounter is to cling to an illusion about the world and about oneself, to prefer superficial optimism to radical hope. The third poem of the sequence, "All the Way Down," loosely based on the psalm sung by the prophet Jonah in the belly of the great fish, is another variation on the theme of confronting the darkness (though the word itself is not used). Here the "dark night" experience is psychological and spiritual, as the speaker is plunged into the depths of desolation, apparently forsaken by the God to whom he had prayed with such confidence in the previous song. But the paradigm of Jonah—and of Jesus, to whom Jonah is traditionally likened (as Merton himself had done in *The Sign of Jonas* a decade earlier)<sup>19</sup>—reveals that descent is the

19. Lawrence S. Cunningham's discussion of the epilogue to *The Sign of Jonas* in "Thomas Merton: Firewatcher," *The Merton Seasonal* 15:2 (Spring 1990) 6-11, is very helpful in exploring the Jonah-Jesus typology.

necessary prelude to ascent, that the end of the journey is not destruction but restoration. Death to the false self makes possible a rebirth to authentic identity as one with the risen Lord: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:19-20). This fundamental paschal pattern structures the poem, as all inadequate sources of support are stripped away in order that the speaker's life and actions may be firmly grounded on the only sure foundation.

The opening stanza consists of four pairs of lines, each set including the word "down," each intensifying what had preceded it:

I went down  
 Into the cavern  
 All the way down  
 To the bottom of the sea.  
 I went down lower  
 Than Jonas and the whale  
 No one ever got so far down  
 as me (ll. 1-8).

The pattern of ever-deepening descent, of sinking further and further into the depths, suggests intense feelings of abandonment, a sense of separation from God, traditionally imaged as being "above." The words echo those of Jonah: "[Y]ou cast me into the deep, into the heart of the sea" (2:4); "Down I went to the roots of the mountains" (2:7). Yet the tone is quite matter-of-fact and dispassionate, not a cry of present anguish "out of the depths"; the use of the past tense makes clear this is a retrospective description of an experience that has not ended in disaster. The reader might even suppose that the events related here preceded the trials presented in the previous song, and that this poem is included at this point in the sequence as a kind of explanation of the extraordinary peace of spirit depicted there. In any case, each of the details in the stanza can be seen as already containing the potential for a counter-movement, an ascent: the cavern suggests the cave-tomb of the crucified Jesus; the image of drowning in the sea the baptismal passage through death to new life; the reference to Jonas an allusion not only to the catastrophe that struck the prophet but to his eventual reemergence with a more adequate and committed understanding of his calling. Even the final two lines are most properly attributed to Christ, who alone touched the absolute depths, the nadir

of human experience, in his kenosis, his total self-emptying: though they express subjectively the speaker's sense of his dereliction, they are objectively true only insofar as he is participating in the redemptive process of the paschal mystery.

This focus on the descent to death which also intimates a resurrection continues in the second stanza, which like the first consists in eight lines loosely linked by rhyme in the fourth and eighth lines, though here there are only two images used for comparison:

I went down lower  
 Than any diamond mine  
 Deeper than the lowest hole  
 In Kimberly  
 All the way down  
 I thought I was the devil  
 He was no deeper down  
 Than me (ll. 9-16).

Both halves of the stanza include the word "deeper," not found in the opening stanza, which carries different connotations than "lower" or "lowest"—a sense of getting in contact with the most fundamental realities. This notion is confirmed in each part of the stanza. The reference to the South African mine ties in with the theme of racial oppression, since the black miners in Kimberly were forced to work under terrible conditions down in "the lowest hole"; but the fact that this is a diamond mine also suggests that if one goes down deep enough, there is something precious to be recovered, and that the intense pressure by which coal is transformed into diamond might represent an analogous transformation in oneself.<sup>20</sup> The identification with the devil

20. See the reference to the "point vierge" as being "like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven" toward the conclusion of the famous "Fourth and Walnut" passage in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966; Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image, 1968) 158; Merton may be recalling an analogous use of the image in Hopkins' poem, "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection," ll. 21-24: "In a flash, at a trumpet crash, / I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and / This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond, / Is immortal diamond." [W. H. Gardner, ed., *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963) 66]. See Merton's reference to this poem, including an abbreviated quotation of these lines, in *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 91-92. See also *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 38:

in the second part of the stanza concretizes the sense of being abandoned by, and perhaps of abandoning, God; it may also signal the internalization of negative stereotypes with which the oppressor stigmatizes the oppressed, a demonizing of those who are different. But if the speaker thinks he is the devil "all the way down,"<sup>21</sup> the self-discovery made at the deepest point of his descent is that he is not. Like Dante's, this journey into hell is a recognition and rejection of sin, in oneself and in the world, in order that the true self created in the divine image may come forth from the world of the dead, "the lowest hole" of the tomb, to incarnate and radiate goodness.

Such an outcome is confirmed by the stanza that follows, in which death leads to resurrection:

And when they thought  
That I was gone forever  
That I was all the way  
In hell  
I got right back into my body  
And came back out  
And rang my bell (ll. 17-23).

Here the point of view changes, to what "they thought"—presumably the same anonymous "they" who appeared in the role of oppressors in the two preceding poems. The implication is that they are glad to

<sup>21</sup>This true inner self must be drawn up like a jewel from the bottom of the sea, rescued from confusion, from indistinction, from immersion in the common, the nondescript, the trivial, the sordid, the evanescent." The conclusion of Merton's prose-poem "The Early Legend" mentions volcanic islands rising out of the sea and "the men who come up out of those fires with diamonds in their hands" (*Raids on the Unspeakable* [New York: New Directions, 1966] 137-38).

21. In what is evidently the only published critical discussion of any of the Freedom Songs ("Merton's Bells: A Clarion Call to Wholeness," *The Merton Seasonal* 18:1 [Winter 1993]), Robert G. Waldron provides a Jungian reading of this poem and interprets the devil as the shadow self that must be encountered and integrated in the process of individuation (p. 26); though a generally insightful reading, the article never mentions that the poem is part of a group of Freedom Songs and interprets it exclusively in a biographical context, as "a retrospective view of [Merton's] individuation" (p. 25), with no recognition of its relation to the other poems in the sequence, or to the civil-rights struggle. Substantially the same material is included as chapter 8 of Waldron's book *Thomas Merton in Search of His Soul: A Jungian Perspective* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1994) 127-34.

see the speaker permanently out of the way, and that it was their judgment, not God's, that had sentenced him to hell. The reversal of expectations is all the more powerful in conjunction with the complacent satisfactions of these enemies. Again the experience of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah provides an apt parallel: "Oppressed and condemned, he was taken away, and who would have thought any more of his destiny?" (53:8); but contrary to the presumption of all, "See, my servant shall prosper, he shall be raised high and greatly exalted" (52:13). Thus the turning point of the poem comes in line 21, an unsophisticated yet effective description of the experience of resurrection. The juxtaposition of "back into" and "back out" suggests the two dimensions of a renewed life: a restored sense of personal integrity and identity and a rededication to encountering the world beyond the self. Like Jonah, the speaker sees his return to life not only as a personal gift but as a summons to mission. The bell he rings is not a tolling of death but a victory peal, a call to others to listen to his story.<sup>22</sup> He does not hide away but is prepared to proclaim what has happened, to announce the good news he has experienced of new life triumphant over the forces of death.

If the first half of the poem established the pattern of the journey, the second half (which also consists of two parallel stanzas, now of seven rather than eight lines, followed by virtually the same "refrain" stanza) communicates the meaning of the experience and the change it has brought about in the speaker:

No matter how  
They try to harm me now  
No matter where  
They lay me in the grave  
No matter what injustices they do  
I've seen the root  
Of all that believe.

22. Bell imagery is pervasive throughout the canon of Merton's poetry. Somewhat helpful in this regard is Sheila M. Hempstead, "Bells in Thomas Merton's Early Poetry, 1940-1946," *The Merton Annual* 2 (1989) 257-87, though some of her readings might be considered less than fully persuasive. Merton's most important prose discussion of bells, as both temporal markers and as eschatological summons, is in *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1958) 67 ff.



I've seen the room  
 Where life and death are made  
 And I have known  
 The secret forge of war  
 I even saw the womb  
 That all things come from  
 For I got down so far!

But when they thought  
 That I was gone forever  
 That I was all the way  
 In hell  
 I got right back into my body  
 And came back out  
 And rang my bell (ll. 24-44).

The first of these stanzas, built upon three parallel clauses ("No matter how . . . where . . . what . . ."), makes clear that the speaker is now beyond any evil "they," his persecutors, can inflict. Their efforts to destroy him have had the opposite effect: they can attempt to harm him but cannot succeed in any meaningful sense; even if they kill him, his experience has freed him from all terror of death; they can continue to do injustice but they have lost power, control over him. He has been liberated from fear because he has come into contact with the ground of all reality: nothing they can do to him can alter that vision. Ironically, by trying to destroy him, by stripping him of all ordinary defenses, they have forced him to confront the question of what he really believes in: his suffering has brought him insight. It has also provided a point of contact with other people: getting in touch with the center of his own faith has brought him to "the root / Of all that believe," so that his experience and witness are now recognized to be applicable to others as well.

The fifth stanza is linked to the previous one by another parallel construction: "I've seen the root . . ." becomes "I've seen the room. . . ." (Note also the rhyme in the fourth and seventh line of each stanza, a pattern shared with the refrain stanza as well.) Here the experience the speaker underwent is presented as revelatory of primal causes, both positive and negative: he has plumbed the depths of both destructive ("forge of war") and creative ("womb / That all things come from") impulses, and now knows these aspects of reality personally, existentially. In these two stanzas, then, the descent has

shown itself to impart the gift of discernment, the ability to distinguish the life-giving from the death-dealing. The speaker has gone, he now realizes, not low but deep, not away from the goal but down to the source.

The effect of the repetition of the refrain stanza to conclude the poem is now not a reversal of expectations but an awareness that he has returned to bring precisely the message he has just spoken; he has become a sort of Dantesque pilgrim, back from the nether world to reveal what he has seen for his listeners' sake. Like "Sundown," this poem has a prophetic character: if the message of the former was denunciation, that the destroyers will be caught up in their own destruction, here it is annunciation: those whom the destroyers try to destroy will ultimately be victorious. The power underlying this renewal is preeminently paschal: it belongs first of all to Christ, and through Christ to "all that believe," but a privileged place, the poem suggests, is given to those who suffer persecution for justice' sake, for it is through their suffering that they are united to the one who cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34), and who promised, "This day you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

#### IV

In the fourth song, "I Have Called You," it is the voice of the Lord that is heard rather than that of the speaker. The words of consolation to the exiles from the first verse of Isaiah 43, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine," are the basis for the two opening stanzas, which establish a tone of sparseness and simplicity that contrasts sharply with the complexity of the human voice in the previous poems:

Do not be afraid  
 O my people  
 Do not be afraid  
 Says the Lord:

I have called you  
 By your name  
 I am your Redeemer  
 You belong to me (ll. 1-8).

The stanzas are related as statement and explanation: the intimate relationship the Redeemer<sup>23</sup> has with those he has called and chosen is the reason for not being afraid. The assurance given here addresses the concerns expressed in previous poems, particularly "Evening Prayer." The detail of being called by name<sup>24</sup> contrasts with the lines of that poem, "no one cares to know / Who I am" (ll. 22-23), and the key line "You belong to me," which will be repeated exactly or approximately three more times in the poem, recalls the earlier lines, "Maybe he belongs / To some other Lord" (ll. 16-17); the promise of safety and restoration responds to the expression of trust in the earlier poem. But there is also a significant difference here: the song is addressed to "my people," not just to a single individual. The perspective begins to widen in this poem to situate the speaker in the context of "all that believe" ("All the Way Down" l. 30); this awareness that he is part of a pilgrim people, a community of faith, will become more prominent in the second half of the sequence.

What follows serves as a kind of commentary on these opening stanzas. The word "call" as used in line 5 focuses on the idea of calling as identifying, calling by name; but the poem's title, which does not include the prepositional phrase, suggests a second meaning: to summon, to call forth. This redemptive sense of the word, which complements the more creative meaning indicated by naming, is already intimated by the title the Lord uses to identify himself and becomes increasingly important as the poem develops. The third stanza already implies the idea of the people moving forward in response to this divine call:

When you cross the river  
I am there  
I am with you  
When your street's on fire  
Do not be afraid  
O my people  
You belong to me (ll. 9-15).<sup>25</sup>

23. The noun form occurs later in chapter 43: "Thus says the Lord, your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: . . ." (v. 13).

24. The exact words "by your name," rather than "by name," are found in Isaiah 45:3, 4, but are spoken there in reference to Cyrus, not to Israel.

25. See Isaiah 43:2: "When you pass through the water, I will be with you; in the rivers you shall not drown. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned; the flames shall not consume you."

These lines are marked by an exquisite balance in which the form actually conveys the meaning. The first four lines form a chiasmic pattern ("When . . . I am . . . I am . . . When . . ."), which implies that the divine presence, expressed by variants of the divine name understood in an existential, relational sense,<sup>26</sup> is to be found hidden within the crises symbolized by water and fire,<sup>27</sup> just as the two inner lines are framed by the outer lines. The three final lines, which condense the opening stanzas by repeating lines 1-2 and 8, have a converse structure, in which "my people" (l. 14) are surrounded by assurance of protection in lines 13 and 15.

The impression of formal balance continues in the following stanza, which consists in two structurally similar halves:

Bring my sons from afar  
Says the Savior  
Bring them from that dark country  
Bring them glad and free  
Says the Lord  
They belong to me (ll. 16-21).<sup>28</sup>

Here the redemptive call out of oppression emerges as central, though the proclamation is not addressed directly to "my people" but becomes a general command for all to assist in their liberation. The pattern established by the first half of the stanza, "Bring . . . Says . . . Bring . . .," in which the first and third lines are paralleled, each amplifying one element of the other ("my sons" [l. 16] for "them" [l. 18]; "that dark country" [l. 18] for "afar" [l. 16]), seems to be echoed in the second half, except that the last line does not appear to fit: "Bring

26. In *The Problem of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), published the same year as these poems were written, John Courtney Murray popularized this relational interpretation of the divine name as "I will be with you" (p. 9) or "I shall be there" (p. 10), but this interpretation is already implicit in Isaiah 41:10: "Fear not, I am with you; be not dismayed; I am your God." Merton comments on this relational understanding of God in *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 266-67.

27. Though this line might recall scenes of urban ghettos in flame, the poem actually was written more than a year before the first major riot of the sixties, in Watts.

28. See Isaiah 43:6-7: "Bring back my sons from afar, and my daughters from the ends of the earth: everyone who is named as mine, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

. . . Says . . . They. . . ." But the pattern already set suggests that the first and third lines here should also show some sort of connection. They do, but it is a relationship not of parallelism but of paradox: the final line of the stanza repeats the refrain of lines 8 and 15 but in a new context, juxtaposed with the word "free"; "belong" now recalls connotations of enslavement, of the very oppression from which the people are to be rescued, but the implication here is that they are to be free, can be truly free, only because they belong to the Lord. Because they belong to God, they cannot and must not belong to anyone else, for to belong to the Lord is not an enslavement but a liberation, an empowerment to be the people they were created and called to be ("my people").<sup>29</sup>

The following stanza continues the divine proclamation, echoing and amplifying what has already been spoken but with a more intricate pattern: the six lines form two interlocking chiasmic sections, each of four lines:

Bring my sons and daughters  
From that far country  
From their house of bondage  
Set them free  
Bring them back in glory  
Home to me (ll. 22-29).

The first four lines work a set of variations on the same material from the previous stanza, expanding the reference to "my sons" to "my sons and daughters"; combining "afar" and "from that dark country" into "From that far country"; and adding a new parallel phrase, "From their house of bondage," borrowed from the traditional translation of Exodus 20:2. The two imperatives, "Bring" and "Set," form the outer frame, enclosing the two parallel prepositional phrases. The last four lines, taken together, also create a chiasmic pattern, with the paired imperatives "Set" and "Bring" now forming the inner lines; here, however, the outer "frame" lines work by contrast: "house of bondage" is replaced by "home" (another point of contact with "Evening Prayer," which concludes its penultimate stanza with the petition "Bring me home" [l. 38]); and the movement "from . . .

29. See *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 110: "Paradoxically it is the acceptance of God that makes you free and delivers you from human tyranny, for when you serve Him you are no longer permitted to alienate your spirit in human servitude."

bondage" is completed by "to me." Thus the call as a summoning and the call as a naming are ultimately an identical invitation to divine intimacy, expressed once again directly in the final quatrain, which recapitulates the opening stanzas:

Do not be afraid  
O my people  
I have called you by your name  
You belong to me (ll. 28-31).

While this final stanza adds no new lines or even new words, the arrangement is new: the direct juxtaposition of "O my people" and "I have called you by your name" suggests that "your name" is in fact "my people," that their deepest identity is inseparably bound up with that of their Lord, and that therefore they indeed have no reason for fear. This assurance, expressed in shifting patterns of symmetry comparable to the graceful steps of a formal dance, serves as an appropriate conclusion to the first half of the cycle of Freedom Songs.

## V

The poem that begins the second half of the sequence, "Be My Defender," modeled on Psalm 4, might initially seem to be a regression from the serene beauty of "I Have Called You." Unlike the previous poem (and the three that will follow), it does not take a communal perspective: the speaker once again appears as solitary and persecuted. In many ways the poem seems to replicate the situation described in "Evening Prayer." But a careful reading reveals a definite progression on the speaker's part, which actually continues to develop during the course of the poem itself.

The opening stanza might at first appear rather shapeless and marked by redundancy, but actually it is as carefully patterned as the central stanzas of the previous poem:

Lord, when there is no escape, be my Defender  
When they crowd around me, Lord  
Be my Defender,  
Steal me out of here,  
Have mercy Lord, show your power  
Steal me out of here,  
Be my Defender (ll. 1-7).

The stanza can be divided into two segments, lines 1–2 and 3–7, which share a common pattern. The opening lines express a feeling of enclosure, the trapped sense of being surrounded by one's enemies;<sup>30</sup> but the form (corresponding to the pattern *abcba*) already serves to counteract this impression: "Lord, when . . . be my Defender / When . . . Lord." At the very center of the crowd, between the two "when" clauses, is the Lord, the Defender, who is also found at beginning and end, thus "surrounding the surrounders." The same pattern, even more evident in the arrangement of the lines, structures the second part of the stanza, though the elements are rearranged: the plea "Be my Defender" now becomes the outer frame, repeated as lines 3 and 7, exchanging places with "Lord," which is now the center of the central line, flanked by a double plea for help: the Lord continues to be at the center and circumference of the scene. The repeated prayer for escape in lines 4 and 6 addresses directly the situation presented in the "when" clauses, which occupy the corresponding position in the first two lines: the verb "steal"<sup>31</sup> is particularly apt, with its connotations not only of surreptitious escape but of being treated by one's enemies as a possession, recalling the reference to bondage in the previous poem and the enslavement/liberation polarity in general.

But the surprising development is that the speaker's prayer is answered in a way quite different from the terms of his petition: he receives not the means of escape but the grace to remain, and in two successive stanzas he boldly confronts the foes who surround him. Whereas in "Evening Prayer" (ll. 11–17) the speaker had simply refused to respond in kind to curses and threats, he is now able to challenge his opponents' evil deeds directly. The first of these stanzas turns the two questions of Psalm 4:3, ("Men of rank, how long will you be dull of heart? Why do you love what is vain and seek after falsehood?") into four parallel "why" questions:

Man  
Crowding all around

30. This image apparently comes not from the psalm itself but from the notes of the Confraternity version for this psalm: "The psalmist, surrounded by enemies, implores God's help. . . ."

31. The image here seems closer to the Vulgate "dilatasti" than to the Confraternity translation, "you who relieve me"; cf. also the Authorized Version's "thou hast enlarged me," and the Revised Standard Version's "Thou has given me room."

Why are you  
So cold, so proud  
Why is your tongue so mean  
Why is your hand  
So quick to harm  
Why are you like  
A rattlesnake  
So quick to strike? (ll. 8–17).

The stanza divides into two sub-units, lines 8–12 and 13–17, each consisting of two questions and unified by various sound devices. The first is linked together by the rhyme of "crowd-" and "proud" (along with the assonance of "around") and the consonance of "crowd-" and "cold" as well as of "Man" and "mean," which frames the entire section; the second part includes the alliteration of "hand" and "harm," and particularly the slant rhyme of "quick"/"like"/"-snake"/"quick"/"strike," in dimeter lines which likewise reflect the emphasis on quickness. The two parts are themselves connected by the inner parallel of "Why is your tongue . . ." and "Why is your hand" and the common form of the outer questions, "Why are you. . . ." The generic address to "Man," though logically inconsistent with the plural implications of "crowding all around," recalls the reference to "the Man" in "Evening Prayer" (l. 8) and also suggests the loss of personal identity when one becomes merged into a crowd. Speaking the truth forthrightly, without rancor or fear, the speaker urges his opponent to recognize and take responsibility for his actions rather than submerging himself in a faceless mass.

This willingness to engage the enemy in dialogue continues in stanza 3, which moves from challenge and denunciation to a call to conversion, an appeal to the Man's better self:

Man  
Crowding all around  
You have children in your home  
You have looked for happiness  
You have asked the Lord  
For better days  
Kneel and tremble in the night  
Ask my Lord to change your heart  
Fear my Lord and learn the ways  
Of patience, love and sacrifice (ll. 18–27).

Again the stanza contains two parts, the first (ll. 18–23) an appeal to a common humanity, a reminder of universally shared dreams of “happiness” and “better days” for oneself and one’s children.<sup>32</sup> Such dreams, the speaker claims, can be realized only through the change of heart he prescribes in the concluding section of the stanza, a regular tetrameter quatrain of two couplets linked by slant rhyme. Asking for “better days” must yield to asking (“in the night”) for a transformed heart, as the first is a consequence of the second: better days require better “ways”; happiness depends on the practice of “patience, love and sacrifice.” Here the audience is no longer simply an enemy but a fellow human being in need of counsel. He is urged to seek help from “my Lord,” a reminder that the oppressor in “Evening Prayer” belonged to “some other Lord” (l. 17), but also an indication that the virtues being recommended are precisely those the speaker himself is putting into practice in the very act of speaking. Taken together, the two stanzas provide a model of nonviolent response to oppression, a stance analogous to Martin Luther King’s two-part strategy of denouncing injustice and appealing to the very ideals his opponents claim to profess.

The result, as evidenced by the following stanza, is a limited success at best. Whether any individual “Man” heeds the speaker’s invitation is not known, but “they” as a group continue in their arrogance, though the direct threat to the speaker seems to have diminished:

Lord, when they all go by, riding high  
Looking down on me, be my Defender  
Be my Defender, Lord  
And my secret heart will know  
A sweeter joy, Lord, a sweeter joy  
For I’ll walk alone  
With only you  
I’ll lie down to sleep in peace, in hope  
For though I cannot trust in Man  
I trust in you (ll. 28–37).<sup>33</sup>

32. See Psalm 4:5-6: “Tremble, and sin not; reflect, upon your beds, in silence. Offer just sacrifices, and trust in the Lord. Many say, ‘Oh, that we might see better times!’ . . .”

33. See Psalm 4:8-9: “You put gladness into my heart, more than when grain and wine abound. As soon as I lie down, I fall peacefully asleep, for you alone,

The pattern evident here seems to parallel Merton’s analysis of the results of the nonviolent civil-rights movement: though external circumstances have been altered, hearts have not: the listeners have failed to take advantage of the “kairos,” the time of decision.<sup>34</sup> Instead of finding the happiness they “looked for” in the previous stanza, they are now “looking down on me.” Rather than humbling themselves before “my Lord,” they are “riding high.” But the stanza portrays not only their failure but the speaker’s fidelity in living a transformed life. While they have looked in vain for happiness because their hearts remain unchanged, he “will know / A sweeter joy” in his “secret heart,” for true joy is not a consequence of external power or public notoriety but a hidden treasure, unnoticed and disregarded by the world. While they “all go by / Riding high,” he will “walk alone / With only you”: because he travels along “the ways / Of patience, love and sacrifice,” he is able to “lie down to sleep in peace, in hope,” whereas they declined even to “Kneel and tremble in the night.” While they refused to “Fear my Lord,” he trusts in his Lord and so fears no Man. He is a sign of contradiction, modeling an alternative way of living that is not dependent upon or shaken by the fact that “they” refuse to reciprocate. Thus the final verse-paragraph recapitulates his commitment not to rely on the methods of the world or align himself with the mighty but to depend on God alone:

Lord, when they all go by  
Riding high  
Looking down on me  
Be my Defender,  
Lord, be my Defender (ll. 38–42).

## VI

The sixth poem, “The Lord is Good,” based on Psalm 72,<sup>35</sup> opens with an affirmation of faith in God’s provident care that could

O Lord, bring security to my dwelling.” The phrases “in peace, in hope,” are apparently taken from the Vulgate: “*In pace in idipsum dormiam, et resquiescam; quoniam tu, Domine, singulariter in spe constituisti me*” (Ps 4:9-10).

34. See in particular the essay “Religion and Race in the United States,” in *Faith and Violence*, 130–44; see also *Seeds of Destruction*, 65–66, 76–77, 83–84.

35. The headnote to this poem in the *Collected Poems* erroneously reads “(Psalm 71).”

be read as a direct response to the protection received in the previous poem:

O the Lord is good  
To the steady man  
He is good  
To the man of peace (ll. 1-4).<sup>36</sup>

The rest of the poem, however, struggles to reconcile these statements with the speaker's knowledge of the ways of the world. Each of the two parallel declarations will be put to the test: the Lord may be good to "the steady man," but the speaker is in danger of becoming unsteady, of stumbling (cf. ll. 5, 19, 38), and so of being disqualified from receiving the Lord's goodness; the cause of his stumbling is that the Lord's goodness to the "man of peace" is brought into question by the evident prosperity of the "men of war" described in the rest of the poem. The issue here is less experiential than philosophical, not a matter of personal danger as in previous poems but of intellectual doubt. This confrontation between his profession of faith and the empirical evidence he has gathered seems to suggest either that his affirmations are not in fact true or that, whether true or not, they no longer apply to him, since he is no longer "steady."

Neither of these conclusions will prove to be valid: though he stumbles the speaker will not be so unsteady as to fall, and though contrary evidence appears plausible, God's goodness is not ultimately in doubt. In fact the speaker is relating a struggle that has already been resolved, as the use of the past tense through the rest of the poem indicates. But this eventual resolution must be reached not by avoiding the fact of the apparent triumph of the wicked but by confronting it directly, as he does in the second verse-paragraph:

But I stumbled, I stumbled in my mind  
Over those men  
I did not understand  
Rich and fat  
With big cigars and cars  
They seem to have no trouble,

36. See Psalm 72:1: "How good God is to the upright; the Lord, to those who are clean of heart!"; "the man of peace" is borrowed from Psalm 36:37; "the steady man" is Merton's own contribution.

Know no pain  
I do not understand those men of war  
Strong and proud  
Rich and fat  
The more they have  
The more they hate  
And hate rolls down their skin  
Like drops of sweat (ll. 5-18).<sup>37</sup>

This stanza has two sub-units, equal in length, each posing a somewhat different problem for the speaker's understanding. The first focuses on the prosperity of the nightmarish figures depicted here, who seem to be exempt from the normal difficulties of the human condition; but what is simply a puzzling anomaly in the first section becomes a threat in the second, where these men are revealed to be "men of war," so filled with hate that it seems to seep out their pores. Such an attitude is even more incomprehensible to the speaker, since one might expect the have-nots to hate the rich, but not vice versa. Thus the speaker wrestles with two related issues: why the rich have what they have, and why they act as they do even though they have what they have.

The next verse-paragraph considers not just the intellectual conundrum posed by this situation but its adverse consequences for others:

I stumbled, I stumbled in my mind  
Over those men of war  
Full of power  
Rich and fat  
The more they have, the more they hate  
And they jeered  
At my people  
Showed their power  
Rolled their pile of fat  
And my people

37. See Psalm 72:2-7: "But, as for me, I almost lost my balance; my feet all but slipped, because I was envious of the arrogant when I saw them prosper though they were wicked. For they are in no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek; they are free from the burdens of mortals, and are not afflicted like the rest of men. So pride adorns them as a necklace; as a robe violence enwraps them. Out of their crassness comes iniquity; their fancies overflow their hearts."

Listened to their threat  
 My people were afraid  
 Of those men of war  
 When hate rolled down their skin  
 Like drops of sweat (ll. 19-33).<sup>38</sup>

The first five lines basically repeat material from the previous stanza, with one ominous addition: these men are "Full of power," so that their hatred becomes dangerous. The next unit, of six lines (framed by the chiasmic "they jeered / At my people" and "my people / listened . . ."), shows the enemy in action, with an emphasis on gross, even grotesque, materiality, in which power is equated with physical bulk, and physical bulk perhaps implicitly with wealth ("Rolled their pile of fat" suggests riffling through a fat roll, or pile, of bills as well). Significantly, their actions are described as directed toward "my people": the speaker now assumes the broader communal perspective first envisioned in "I Have Called You," which will be retained throughout the rest of the sequence. The jeers and threats directed toward them parallel the curses and threats the speaker himself experienced in "Evening Prayer" (ll. 10-11). His struggles are now identified with theirs, but what he had resolved on the personal plane, the issue of unjust persecution and unmerited suffering, now reemerges in this broader context. The final four lines, summing up the people's reaction to their danger, recall, and call into question, perhaps the pivotal lines of the entire sequence, the Lord's own words in "I Have Called You": "Do not be afraid / O my people."

The final verse-paragraph brings the matter to a crisis point before it is resolved by a revelation from the Lord. The first four lines of this section sharply contrast with the confident statements of the opening quatrain:

My heart was sore  
 Seeing their success  
 "Does God care?  
 Has He forgotten us?" (ll. 34-37).

The "sore" heart here has lost the "sweeter joy" of the "secret heart" in the previous poem, while the questions seem to cast doubt on the

38. See Psalm 72:8: "They scoff and speak evil; outrage from on high they threaten."

rest of the final stanza of "I Have Called You" ("I have called you by your name / You belong to me"); the use of the word "care" recalls the lines from "Evening Prayer," "No one cares to know / Who I am, where I go" (ll. 22-23), which were not applied to the Lord then, but apparently could be now (though with reference to "us" rather than to the singular "I").

But in fact the implied answers to these questions are not the correct ones: God has not forgotten his people or ceased to care for them. The speaker makes this clear in the poem's final lines, which take the form of a prayer that both acknowledges his own weakness and presents the divine response to the issues raised:

Lord I nearly fell  
 Stumbling in my mind  
 About those men of war  
 It was hard to see  
 Till you showed me  
 How like a dream  
 Those phantoms pass away (ll. 38-44).<sup>39</sup>

The answer provided here might not immediately seem especially cogent or satisfying: the men of war, with their obtrusive fleshly presence looming over their victims, scarcely look like "phantoms." But the solution to the speaker's dilemma lies precisely in the ironic appropriateness of this word. By investing all their resources in the world of the senses, by adopting a completely quantified perception of reality, such people have denied their own humanity. Even their distorted appearance, the exaggeration, the caricature that marks their description, is a graphic illustration of their futile efforts to create their own identity out of material possessions, resulting in an imposing, even threatening facade that can disguise only temporarily the emptiness within. Such people have deceived themselves into believing that the transitory is permanent, that the contingent is absolute, that wealth and pleasure and power are exempt from the passage of time and the process of dissolution. They enmesh, in all their massive carnality, what Merton himself calls in *New Seeds of Contemplation* "the smoke self that

39. See Psalm 72:16-17, 20: "Though I tried to understand this it seemed to me too difficult, till I entered the sanctuary of God and considered their final destiny. . . . As though they were the dream of one who had awakened, O Lord, so will you, when you arise, set at nought these phantoms."

must inevitably vanish."<sup>40</sup> From this perspective, life is an unceasing contest for possessions, status, power, part of a futile attempt to fill an infinite "space," the human capacity for the divine, with finite objects, of which there can never be enough. According to Merton, such people

imagine that they can only find themselves by asserting their own desires and ambitions and appetites in a struggle with the rest of the world. They try to become real by imposing themselves on other people, by appropriating for themselves some share of the limited supply of created goods and thus emphasizing the difference between themselves and the other men who have less than they, or nothing at all.<sup>41</sup>

It is no surprise, then, that "The more they have, the more they hate"; theirs is a logic of competition, of each against all: "I have what you have not. I am what you are not. I have taken what you have failed to take and I have seized what you could never get. Therefore you suffer and I am happy, you are despised and I am praised, you die and I live; you are nothing and I am something, and I am all the more something because you are nothing."<sup>42</sup> Because they have equated who they are with what they have, and because what they have cannot and will not last, they themselves are ultimately doomed to disappear. Again, Merton provides his own best commentary:

I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. . . . But there is no substance under the things with which I am clothed. I am hollow, and my structure of pleasures and ambitions has no foundation. I am objectified in them. But they are all destined by their very contingency to be destroyed. And when they are gone there will be nothing left of me but my own nakedness and emptiness and hollowness, to tell me that I am my own mistake.<sup>43</sup>

For such persons, there is no more apt description than the word "phantoms," for "The man who lives in division is living in death.

40. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 38.

41. *Ibid.*, 47.

42. *Ibid.*, 48.

43. *Ibid.*, 35.

He cannot find himself because he is lost; he has ceased to be a reality. The person he believes himself to be is a bad dream."<sup>44</sup>

In finally recognizing the delusory nature of such "success," the speaker is rescued from the danger into which he "nearly fell," a willingness to accept the standards of judgment of the powerful, the criteria of value of the rich, to look at the world and the self as they do. It is from this temptation that he is delivered when he is finally able "to see," to discern the difference between truth and illusion, appearance and substance. Thus the poem concludes with the Lord's goodness vindicated, and the speaker's identity as "the steady man . . . the man of peace" reaffirmed and strengthened.

## VII

The seventh poem, "There is a Way," envisions the goal of the journey, which has been the major organizing image throughout the sequence. The pilgrims' destination is the new Jerusalem, the eschatological reign of "the Lord of peace": the threats and dangers have indeed vanished like "phantoms," and the way to the holy city lies open. Each of the three stanzas of the poem reworks one verse from the scriptural source, Isaiah 35:8-10, part of a hymn of joy and thanksgiving at Israel's return from exile.

The first stanza is mainly negative in approach, though not in tone, focusing on those who will be excluded from the "holy way":

There is a way to glory  
Clear and straight  
But not for men of blood  
They shall not stray  
Upon my road  
Nor the unclean  
Whose hands have taken life:  
They shall not find this holy way  
To Jerusalem  
Where the Lord of peace  
Rules in glory (ll. 1-11).<sup>45</sup>

44. *Ibid.*, 48.

45. See Isaiah 35:8: "A highway will be there, called the holy way; no one unclean may pass over it, nor fools go astray on it."



Connections with earlier songs in the sequence are evident here and will become even more prominent as the poem continues. The reference to "glory" in the first and last lines recalls the Lord's command in "I Have Called You," line 26: "Bring them back in glory," while "my road" echoes "my way" from "Evening Prayer" (ll. 9, 15, 27, contrasted with "his road" in l. 20); the "Lord of peace" is the same Lord who "is good / To the man of peace" in the sixth poem.

Mention of Jerusalem brings the sequence full circle in this seventh poem: the city polluted with blood and threatened with destruction in "Sundown" has been transformed into the city of shalom, into which no "unclean" persons, no "men of blood" (recalling the "men of war" from the previous poem) may enter. Though the way to Jerusalem is "clear and straight,"<sup>46</sup> therefore easy to travel on and presumably easy to locate, evildoers can neither "stray"<sup>47</sup> onto it nor will they be able to "find" it: neither by accident nor by effort can the wicked come upon this road. This assertion presents something of a puzzle: as the way is so readily accessible, why would anyone miss it?

The second stanza provides an answer to this implicit question:

Love is this way to glory  
 Truth and Mercy  
 No beast of prey  
 Shall be there  
 No angry wolf or bear  
 By my highway  
 Murder shall not stain  
 That way with blood  
 But forgiveness everywhere  
 Shall teach my people how  
 To go to glory (ll. 12-22).<sup>48</sup>

The play on "way" as both path and method explains why the wicked are unable to walk here: if Love, Truth, and Mercy are the only "way to glory," those who have rejected these virtues have prevented themselves from taking this road; neither can they hinder others from tak-

ing it. The way here contrasts with the road covered with bones in "Evening Prayer" (ll. 19-20): the people journey in total security. But there is also an implicit warning in the further statement that forgiveness (set over against anger and murder) teaches the way to glory. The central role of forgiveness means that those who do walk the road are able to do so not by their own merits but because they themselves have been forgiven; any gnostic or manichean division of humanity into mutually exclusive groups of good and evil is precluded here, and the possibility of conversion, of finding the road through repentance and pardon, is disclosed: by confessing the truth about oneself, one is enabled to receive the divine mercy. But the focus on forgiveness is also a caution against self-righteousness, against setting up standards more stringent than those of God. People may exclude themselves from the holy way, but may not be excluded by others. To attempt to do so would be to act as a "beast of prey" oneself. There must be an openness to reconciliation, even with former enemies, former oppressors. If only those who have been forgiven learn how to go to glory along the way of Truth, only those who forgive, those who act as God acts, learn how to go to glory along the way of Mercy.

This focus on the redeemed community, signaled by the re-appearance of the term "my people" in the second stanza,<sup>49</sup> continues in the final stanza as the "holy people" approach the holy city:

Songs of love and joy  
 Echo everywhere  
 And the holy people  
 Travels there  
 Glad and free  
 Forgiving and forgiven  
 Riding on to Sion  
 Where the Lord of Peace  
 Their Defender, their Redeemer  
 Rules in glory (ll. 23-32).

49. The speaker in the poem is evidently not the Lord, who is referred to in the third person, yet the perspective of the speaker is so identified with that of God at this point in the sequence that the tone is very like that of "I Have Called You." Even the references to "my road" (l. 5) and "my highway" (l. 17) do not carry any individualistic connotations; the voice here is genuinely prophetic, "speaking for" God.

46. See the Vulgate for Isaiah 35:8: "Haec erit vobis directa via."

47. The Vulgate reads, "stulti non errent per eam."

48. See Isaiah 35:9: "No lion will be there, nor beast of prey go up to be met upon it. It is for those with a journey to make, and on it the redeemed will walk."

The opening lines are particularly resonant here: the echoing songs suggest that those bringing love and joy with them are met with love and joy by those within the city (see the Confraternity reading of this verse [35:10] of Isaiah, where the travelers, "crowned with everlasting joy . . . meet with joy and gladness"); "Echo everywhere" itself echoes "Forgiveness everywhere" four lines earlier, indicating that love and joy are coextensive with and indeed a consequence of forgiveness. But the mention of echoing songs in this seventh poem might also recall the series of Freedom Songs themselves. This final stanza is filled with echoes, beginning with the joy itself, renewing and extending the "sweeter joy" experienced in "Be My Defender" (l. 32); "Glad and free" (l. 27) is a direct quotation from "I Have Called You" (l. 19) and is a reminder that the work of liberation from captivity commanded there has now been accomplished.<sup>50</sup> The double title, "Their Defender, their Redeemer" (l. 31), identifies the "Lord of peace" with "your Redeemer" from "I Have Called You" (l. 7) and "my Defender" from "Be My Defender" (ll. 1 and *passim*). The image of the people of God "Riding on to Sion" (l. 29) contrasts with that of the proud who "go by / Riding high" in "Be My Defender" (ll. 28, 38-39) and recalls the king who entered Jerusalem "on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass. He shall banish the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem; the warrior's bow shall be banished, and he shall proclaim peace to the nations" (Zech 9:9-10; cf. Matt 21:4, John 12:14).

This is surely "the Lord of peace" who "Rules in glory" over a people of peace, now described as "Forgiving and forgiven." This key line can be read in two ways: it could refer to the same group, as both active and receptive, both giving and receiving forgiveness (though the more logical order would seem to be "forgiven and forgiving," since divine forgiveness makes possible human forgiveness, this arrangement recalls the petition from the Lord's prayer, which stresses the reciprocal point that a refusal to forgive blocks God's forgiveness); but it also suggests two groups joined together in reconciliation, those who freely forgive and those who are freed by forgiveness, oppressed and oppressors united in joy and freedom—at this point, of course, the two interpretations coalesce, since the two groups have become one. Thus the vista along the way to Jerusalem opens

out to include, at least potentially, those who have been sinners, "men of blood." They too can be redeemed, rescued from enslavement to their own self-will, and the message of the sequence as a whole is that such a transformation may be due in large part to the faithful witness of those who have suffered and struggled against oppression. This is of course part of the essential dynamic of nonviolence: "The only real liberation is that which *liberates both the oppressor and the oppressed* at the same time from the same tyrannical automatism of the violent process which contains in itself the curse of irreversibility."<sup>51</sup> It is in particular the vision of the "beloved community" animating the non-violent freedom movement, which maintains that "the Negro . . . is really fighting not only for his own freedom, but also, in some strange way, for the freedom of whites."<sup>52</sup> The belief that "unearned suffering is redemptive" offers the possibility for healing even to the oppressor: "Dr. Martin Luther King . . . has based his non-violence on his belief that love can unite men, even enemies, in truth. That is to say that he has clearly spelled out the struggle for freedom not as a struggle for the Negro alone, but also for the white man. From the start, the non-violent element in the Negro struggle is oriented toward 'healing' the sin of racism and toward unity in reconciliation."<sup>53</sup> It is such a vision of the reign of God that concludes the seventh Freedom Song, a vision of shalom that summons and welcomes all willing to heed the good news of liberation and reconciliation.

## VIII

"There is a Way" would have served as an effective conclusion to the cycle of Freedom Songs for a number of reasons: as the seventh poem, it fulfills the scriptural pattern of completion; it incorporates and weaves together images from much of the rest of the sequence; it provides a symmetry with the opening poem by its focus on Sion/Jerusalem; it brings the central journey-motif of the sequence to full realization by leading the pilgrims into the holy city.

51. Thomas Merton, *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1965) 14.

52. *Seeds of Destruction*, 40.

53. *Ibid.*, 43.

50. The last line of verse 9 in the Vulgate reads, "et ambulabant qui liberati fuerint."

But there is an ancient Christian tradition of the "eighth day,"<sup>54</sup> the beginning of the new creation, which is associated with the resurrection of Christ on the day following the Sabbath. It is this conception that evidently prompts the inclusion of the final poem, "Earthquake." This is the only one of the songs that does not have its title taken from the text of the poem itself, and though its headnote cites Isaiah 52 as the source, no earthquake is mentioned in that chapter.<sup>55</sup> The implicit background, rather, seems to be the resurrection scene in Matthew, marked by an earthquake (Matt 28:2) and followed by a commissioning of the apostles to preach the Good News, which is likewise a central aspect of the poem, in which the initial revelation of the new creation is followed by a much longer section commanding the people to become "messengers of peace."

The poem begins with a section of ten lines divided into two verse-paragraphs, establishing a formal pattern that will continue throughout:

Go tell the earth to shake  
 And tell the thunder  
 To wake the sky  
 And tear the clouds apart  
 Tell my people to come out  
 And wonder  
 Where the old world is gone  
 For a new world is born  
 And all my people  
 Shall be one (ll. 1-10).

As in "I Have Called You," which completed the first half of the sequence, so here also the Lord is the speaker, and directs his prophet

54. See "The Epistle of Barnabas," chapter 15: "He is saying there: 'It is not these sabbaths of the present age that I find acceptable, but the one of my own appointment: the one that, after I have set all things at rest, is to usher in the Eighth Day, the commencement of a new world.' (And we too rejoice in celebrating the eighth day; because that was when Jesus rose from the dead, and showed Himself again, and ascended into heaven.)" *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (Baltimore: Penguin, 1968) 315; see also Merton's own reference to Sunday as "the eighth day in a seven-day week" in *Sign of Jonas*, 299.

55. The opening words of Isaiah 52 in the Vulgate, "Consurge, consurge," along with the beginning of verse 2, "Excute de pulvere, consurge," might possibly have suggested the idea of an earthquake, but only by loose association; they are addressed not to the earth but to Sion/Jerusalem, the focus of the entire chapter.

to transmit the divine word: first to the cosmos is given a word of transformation that is also a word of revelation, symbolized by the tearing apart of the clouds to disclose the heavens; then to the people a word of revelation that is also a word of transformation, as the new world is declared to be a place of perfect unity among people. The command to "come out" signals a recognition to be developed throughout the rest of the poem, that the ingathering of the holy people into Sion must be complemented by an outgoing mission "to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). While the journey in one sense has reached its goal, the kingdom of God, the holy city where "the Lord of peace / Rules in glory," this final song is a strong reminder that those who have experienced salvation, who have seen the vision of a new heaven and a new earth, are obliged to be signs and heralds of the new order. As Merton would later put it in his most significant essay on nonviolence, "Blessed Are the Meek":

The disciple of Christ, he who has heard the good news, the announcement of the Lord's coming and of His victory, and is aware of the definitive establishment of the Kingdom, proves his faith by the gift of his whole self to the Lord in order that *all* may enter the Kingdom. . . . The great historical event, the coming of the Kingdom, is made clear and is "realized" in proportion as Christians themselves live the life of the Kingdom in the circumstances of their own place and time.<sup>56</sup>

It is this emphasis on the dynamic character of discipleship that becomes the major focus of the rest of the poem, which is based on the deeply evangelical words of Isaiah 52:7 (quoted by St. Paul in Rom 10:15): "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings, announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation . . ." This passage is reworked into a refrain stanza in which the single messenger of Isaiah has become an entire people on the march:

So tell the earth to shake  
 With marching feet  
 Of messengers of peace  
 Proclaim my law of love  
 To every nation  
 Every race (ll. 11-16).

56. *Faith and Violence*, 16.

These lines parallel in both form and content the poem's opening verse-paragraph: the earth which shook in the throes of cosmic rebirth now is shaken by the feet of the apostolic witnesses, aptly described as "marching feet," a reminder that it was the civil-rights march that characterized the nonviolent freedom movement perhaps more than any other activity, that became a sign of solidarity as well as a sign of contradiction, and that expressed the message of peace and the law of love to "Every race." Not the heavy tramp of military boots but a nonviolent army bearing the message of peace is powerful enough to shake the earth itself.

The "glad tidings, . . . good news, . . . salvation" of the scriptural source are summed up in the phrase "my law of love," a term particularly rich in association for Merton, especially in conjunction with the description of the people as "messengers of peace." It reflects Gandhi's declaration: "If love is not the law of our being the whole of my argument falls to pieces."<sup>57</sup> It affirms the capacity for transformation inherent in the very constitution of the human spirit, as Merton himself writes in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*: "The Law of Love is the deepest law of our nature, not something extraneous to our nature. Our nature itself inclines us to love, and to love freely. The deepest and most fundamental exigency of the divine law in our hearts is that we should reach our fulfillment by loving."<sup>58</sup> Such love is not simply an obligation but an empowerment: "the most fundamental demand of the Law of Love is that we should love *freely*."<sup>59</sup> It is ultimately a participation in the divine transfiguration of the world: "The Law of Love is the law that commands us to add new values to the world given us by God, through the creative power that He has placed in us—the power of joy in response, in gratitude, and in the giving of self."<sup>60</sup> Thus the "law of love" expresses not only the message of nonviolence but the central proclamation of the gospel, the "glad tidings" of "salvation" to be brought to "all nations . . . even unto the consummation of the world" (Matt 28:19, 20).

57. *Seeds of Destruction*, 234; in the Introduction to *Gandhi on Non-Violence*, the statement is quoted as "If love or non-violence be not the law of our being, the whole of my argument falls to pieces" (11; see also p. 25 for the same quotation).

58. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 121.

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.*, 123.

This refrain occurs four times in the poem, in each case followed by some variation of the message of peace to be announced, always concluding with the declaration "My people shall be one," continuing the pattern begun in lines 7–10. While that stanza simply contrasted "the old world" and "a new world" (ll. 7, 8), these stanzas will become progressively more specific as to the nature of the change. The first of these, also a quatrain, is presented as an explanation of why the marching and preaching of the refrain are now taking place:

For the old wrongs are over  
The old days are gone  
A new world is rising  
Where my people shall be one (ll. 17–20).

The heavily stressed lines, alternating feminine and rhymed masculine line endings, create a simple but strong contrast between "old wrongs" and "old days" and the eschatological era in which the new creation itself is "rising," participating in the paschal translation from death to life. The nature of the "old wrongs" is not specified here, but will be in the next post-refrain stanza, expanded to six lines (linked by rhyme in the third and sixth lines):

And say  
The old wrongs are over  
The old ways are done  
There shall be no more hate  
And no more war  
My people shall be one (ll. 27–32).

It is evident here that these stanzas following the refrain are to be understood as the content of the proclamation the messengers make. The "old wrongs" and "old ways" are now identified as hate and war, the antitheses of the "law of love" and reign of peace mentioned in the refrain. The pairing of hate and war also recalls the "men of war" whose "hate rolled down their skin / Like drops of sweat" in "The Lord is Good" (ll. 32–33). This reminiscence is even stronger in the next of these stanzas, which moves from an impersonal to a personal construction:

For the old world is ended  
The old sky is torn  
Apart. A new day is born

They hate no more  
 They do not go to war  
 My people shall be one (ll. 39-44).

Here the anonymous "they," so prominent and threatening in earlier songs, are said to have given up hatred and war—whether willingly or unwillingly is not known, though there is at least an implicit hope that even "they" may finally be incorporated into "My people." While this stanza matches the preceding one (and the refrains) with its six lines, here linked by rhymed couplets in the interior lines (the first of which is created by the particularly effective enjambment of "torn / Apart" describing the "old sky"), the final lines of the poem, and thus of the sequence, return to the quatrain form, with a concluding rhymed couplet:

There shall be no more hate  
 And no more oppression  
 The old wrongs are done  
 My people shall be one (ll. 51-54).

The mention here of "oppression" along with "hate" as final examples of "old wrongs" is particularly appropriate in concluding a series of poems celebrating the struggle against racial oppression, as it looks forward in faith to a day when all such injustice will be permanently overcome.

This final poem is the longest in the sequence, only because it is the most repetitive. But the repetition has a functional purpose, even more evident, perhaps, when set to music. The recurrence of the refrain, followed in each case by some variations of the message to be announced, represents the successive waves of evangelization, progressively extending to encompass "every nation / Every race." It should be noted that while the non-refrain stanzas specify in some detail and some variety the elements of the old order that are to disappear, the single characteristic of the new age, repeated insistently and invariably, is unity, the fruit of peace and love. The alternating pattern formed by the last lines of successive verse-paragraphs, moving back and forth between ". . . every nation / Every race" and "My people shall be one," fosters attentiveness both to the universality of the message and to the unity it creates. The pattern reflects the twofold dynamism of the gospel, mission and communion, continually reaching out

beyond the circle of the community so that the boundaries of that circle will eventually exclude no one. But it also sustains a balance between diversity and unity, suggesting the need for a mutually affirming complementarity if many nations and races are to form one people of God. This is for Merton a central lesson of the freedom movement and an integral element of authentic catholicity: "a genuinely Catholic attitude in matters of race is one which concretely accepts and fully recognizes the fact that different races and cultures are *correlative*. They *mutually complete one another*."<sup>61</sup> It is this vision of wholeness, of integrity, in which divisions are healed, offenses are forgiven, alienation is overcome, that brings the poem and the cycle of songs to a close. In witnessing to peace and proclaiming unity, the messengers are walking in the footsteps of Christ: "For he himself is our peace, he it is who has made both one. . . . He announced the good tidings of peace to you who were afar off, and of peace to those who were near; because through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father" (Eph 2:17-18). They are preaching a union that transcends distinctions of race, class, status, gender: "There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor freeman; there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). They are prophesying the fulfillment of the high priestly prayer of Jesus: "that all may be one even as thou, Father, in me, and I in thee; that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (John 17:22-23). This, Merton suggests, is the deepest truth revealed by the courage and commitment of the freedom movement and a fitting conclusion to the sequence of Freedom Songs. "My people shall be one" is both a word of consolation to those who have suffered and struggled to defend the common dignity and affirm the common destiny of all persons, and a word of challenge and command to others to go and do likewise.

Merton himself was somewhat ambivalent about the worth of the Freedom Songs. In May 1964, while still working on them, he wrote to his Aunt Kit in New Zealand, "I wanted to do something in this line but I am not sure if this particular project was wise, as I do not

61. *Seeds of Destruction*, 61.

know if the 'songs' are turning out to be very wonderful."<sup>62</sup> On July 1, shortly after finishing them, he refers to them in a letter to W. H. Ferry as "some rather poor Freedom Songs I was asked to write."<sup>63</sup> But by November 1964 he is writing to Rabbi Zalman Schachter, "I was deeply moved at your reaction to the Freedom Songs. I like very much writing that kind of thing and maybe will do much more. Who knows? Meanwhile, back in the hole, with our faces in the dust [a reference to "All the Way Down"?]. . . ."<sup>64</sup> By April 9, 1968, he can write of them to June Yungblut: "The music for them is powerful and they are quite effective."<sup>65</sup> While by inference he gives much of the credit for the songs' effectiveness to their music, it is to be hoped that this examination of the texts of the poems provides evidence of their effectiveness not only as testimony to Merton's own passionate dedication to the cause of civil rights for African Americans, but also as a coherent, well-crafted series of poems in their own right.

62. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 62.

63. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 218.

64. *Ibid.*, 541.

65. *Ibid.*, 645.