

THE GEOGRAPHY OF SOLITUDE: THOMAS MERTON'S "ELIAS — VARIATIONS ON A THEME"

by **Patrick F. O'Connell**

In his long poem "Elias — Variations on a Theme,"¹ Thomas Merton selects one of the most perennially fascinating Biblical characters as a paradigm for his reflections on the theme of spiritual identity and vocation. Wonder-worker, fearless denouncer of the mighty, Elias (Elijah) owes his most enduring reputation to his heavenly ascent in the fiery chariot (4 Kings 2:11-13).² This freedom from death led to later speculation about his return as a precursor of the Messiah (cf. Malachi 3:23-24),³ a role which the

1. The version of "Elias" to be discussed here is 25% longer than the text first published in *Thought 21* (1956), pp. 245-250, and collected in *The Strange Islands* (New York: New Directions, 1957), pp. 36-42; reprinted in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 239-245. The longer version, sent by Merton to Sr. Therese Lentfoehr on 16 July 1955 (now in the Lentfoehr Collection at the Merton Center, Columbia University), is substantially identical to the published poem except for an additional typed page, the third of five, consisting of 48 lines of verse, coming after line 97. For an argument that this page was inadvertently omitted when the poem was printed, see my article, "Sunken Islands: Two and One-Fifth Unpublished Merton Poems," *Merton Seasonal* 12:2 (Spring 1987), pp. 4-9.

2. The names of the Biblical books, like that of the prophet himself, correspond to the Latin Vulgate, rather than the more familiar Authorized, or King James, Version, which follows the Hebrew (i.e., 4 Kings for 2 Kings; Elias for Elijah). At the time Merton wrote "Elias," only the first eight books of the Old Testament had been translated from the Hebrew in the new "Confraternity" version, which eventually became The New American Bible; the remainder, including the Books of Kings, were available to Catholics in English only in the Douay version, a sixteenth-century translation from the Vulgate. All Biblical passages will be quoted according to the version which would have been available to Merton in 1954.

3. Interest in Elijah as precursor continues throughout post-Biblical Jewish tradition. For a recent interpretation of this tradition, see Elie Wiesel, *Five Biblical Portraits* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 33-67.

early Christians would see symbolically fulfilled in the figure of John the Baptist (Matthew 17:9-13).⁴ While these aspects of the career of Elias play a part in his poem, Merton is principally interested in the portrait of Elias which emerges from a rather different tradition. Since the time of the early Christian ascetics, Elias had been looked upon as a model for the solitary. In St. Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, the most influential work of primitive monastic literature, the saint "used to tell himself that from the career of the great Elijah, as from a mirror, the ascetic must always acquire knowledge of his own life."⁵ It is of course not Elias the adversary of King Ahab to whom Antony primarily looks, but Elias who lived alone at the wadi Cherith (3 Kings 17:2-6), who journeyed through the desert fasting for forty days and nights until he reached Mount Horeb (Sinai), where he heard the Lord speaking in the voice of the gentle breeze (3 Kings 19:1-14).

This conception of Elias the solitary was particularly marked in the early Carmelite tradition, which looked to Elias as the order's "founder."⁶ In his essay on "The Primitive Carmelite Ideal," Merton takes note of this tradition and its significance:

The author of that moving ancient text on the spirit of Carmelite prayer and contemplation, the *Institution* of the first Fathers, interprets the retirement of Elias in typical medieval style. To hide in the torrent of Carith is to embrace the ascetical life, which leads to the perfection of charity by one's own efforts, aided by the grace of God. To drink of the torrent is to passively receive the secret light of contemplation from God and to be inwardly transformed by His wisdom The Carmelite, then, is the successor of the prophets as a witness to the desert vocation of Israel, that is of the Church: a reminder that we do not have on this earth a lasting city, and that we are pilgrims to the city of God.⁷

It is significant in view of this connection that the "Elias" poem was originally written for the nuns of the New York Carmelite Convent.⁸

4. In another stratum of early Christian tradition, found particularly in Luke's Gospel, Elias is seen as a type or predecessor of Jesus himself. See Paul Hinnebusch, *Jesus, the New Elijah* (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1979).

5. Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 37.

6. The motto of the Carmelites, "Zelo zelatus sum pro Domino Deo exercituum," is taken from Elijah's words in 1 Kings (3 Kings) 19:10; see *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, vol. 2, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1980), p. 499; cf. also in the same volume St. Teresa's references to "our Father Elijah" in *The Interior Castle*, VI: 7 (p. 401) and VII:4 (p. 448).

7. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy), 1960, pp. 225-226. Hereafter referred to in the text as *DQ*.

8. In the Preface to *The Strange Islands*, Merton writes, "Several of these poems were produced in response to a 'billet' from the New York Carmel. Carmelites have to draw by lot a subject for a Christmas song which they compose and sing at the crib on the Feast of Our Lord's Nativity. 'The Annunciation,' 'Stranger' and 'Elias' are such poems, though 'Elias' hardly turned out to be a carol or even a Christmas poem. It simply represents what the author had going through his head in the Christmas season of 1954."

But Elias is, of course, not simply an ascetic but a prophet, who proclaimed the Word of God boldly, a fact witnessed in the early Carmelite tradition itself, which combined the hermit vocation with a preaching apostolate, in conscious imitation of Elias (*DQ*, pp. 220-222, 226-227). This synthesis, in Merton's view, was not restricted to the Carmelites. In *No Man is an Island* (1955), a book of meditations written at approximately the same time as the poem, Merton concludes his chapter on vocation with a consideration of Francis of Assisi, whom he associates with Elias:

If there was any recognized vocation in his time that Francis might have associated with his own life, it was the vocation of hermit. . . . He frequently went off into the mountains to pray and live alone. But he never thought that he had a "vocation" to do nothing but that. He stayed alone as long as the Spirit held him in solitude, and then let himself be led back into the towns and villages by the same Spirit.

If he had thought about it, he might have recognized that his vocation was essentially "prophetic." He was like another Elias or Eliseus, taught by the Spirit in solitude, but brought back by God to the cities of men with a message to tell them.⁹

In this perception and in its language, we find the germ of Merton's poem. The figure of Elias, prophet and solitary, becomes the embodiment of the tensions and ambiguities, but also the rich possibilities, of the Christian life in general and of Merton's own in particular. As a meditation on the relationship between contemplation and action, which is also a wrestling with his own identity as monk and writer, "Elias" foreshadows Merton's emergence in the 1960s both as an eloquent spokesperson for peace, civil rights, ecumenism and the renewal of monasticism and Catholicism, and as the first Cistercian since the Middle Ages to live the life of a hermit. But it is also a well-crafted work of literature in its own right, one which richly repays a careful reading, and which can serve as a good starting point for an evaluation of Merton's accomplishment as a poet.¹⁰

9. *No Man is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955), p. 162. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NMI*. The association of Francis with Elijah is traditional in the Franciscan Order from the earliest days, though with more apocalyptic connotations; see, for example, St. Bonaventure's *Major Life of Francis*, Prologue 1; 4:4, in the Bonaventure volume of the *Classics of Western Spirituality Series*, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 180-181, 209.

10. "Elias" has not previously received extensive critical attention, but the poem has drawn favorable notice from Ross Labrie in *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1979), pp. 128-130; from George Woodcock in *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978), pp. 75-77; and more briefly, from Victor A. Kramer in *Thomas Merton*, Twayne's U. S. Authors Series (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1985), p. 81. Sr. Therese Lentfoehr provides helpful background information in *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1979), pp. 29-33, as does Michael Mott in his biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 303.

I

The first of the poem's six sections begins with what initially appears to be a straightforward description of a rather unremarkable, even uninviting, landscape:

Under the blunt pine
 In the winter sun
 The pathway dies
 And the wilds begin.
 Here the bird abides
 Where the ground is warm
 And sings alone. (ll. 1-7)

The dramatic import of the opening lines becomes evident only with the recognition that they are a reworking of the scriptural passage in which Elias, fleeing from the wrath of Queen Jezebel, takes refuge under a juniper tree and wishes only to die: "And he went forward one day's journey into the desert. And when he was there, and sat under a juniper tree, he requested for his soul that he might die, and said: It is enough for me, Lord. Take away my soul, for I am no better than my fathers" (3 Kings 19:4). Far from being an objective description, then, the opening sentence of the poem projects the feelings of near-despair and absolute loneliness of the prophet onto the stark landscape into which he has journeyed. The juniper tree of the Vulgate has become a "blunt pine," reflecting the figure's sense of frustration, of dimmed hopes: deprived of all sense of direction, of purpose, he finds himself at the limits of the familiar, the known, the safe. As the pathway comes to an end, his own inevitable death seems to be presaged: he gives himself up for lost.

The one ambiguous detail of the scene is the winter sun: is the emphasis on the adjective, so that the sun, providing light without warmth, is of a piece with the barren landscape, or is the very fact of its shining an image of hope amidst the deadness without and within? The completion of the scene in the lines which follow suggests that the latter interpretation is the correct one, for in fact the ground beneath the pine, contrary to any expectation, is warm, a detail mysteriously associated with the presence of a bird, who "abides" and "sings alone." Mirroring the prophet's solitude but not his despair, the bird breaks through the pattern of projection and so transfigures the entire landscape. Simply by being what it is, the bird incarnates an alternative to the isolation and confusion of Elias and invites a consideration of the world around him, and consequently of his own situation within that world, as it really is. Its role is comparable to that of

the bird described in the final chapter of *No Man is an Island*: "The rain ceases, and a bird's clear song suddenly announces the difference between Heaven and hell" (*NMI*, p. 254). This suggestion of an ultimate meaning for even so hopeless a situation is perhaps conveyed as much by the form of the verse as by its content. In striking contrast with the rather baroque diction of much of Merton's early poetry, this verse possesses unadorned simplicity, a certain rhetorical chasteness, conveying a sense of order and clarity, an underlying calm, which first counters and then coincides with the overt verbal meaning. The short lines of two or three stresses, each a complete phrase, are woven together by a complex series of sound patterns which reminds the reader that, like Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Merton's title suggests a musical analogy.

Each of the stressed syllables of the first two lines has the identical pattern of "n" following the vowel, which in three key words ("Under"; "blunt"; "sun") is the short "u," providing a sort of rhyme to link these lines together; all the others feature "in," whether long ("pine") or short ("In"; "winter"). The dominance of short "i" ("begin") and long "i" ("dies"; "wilds") continues through the next two lines to the key phrase of line 5, "bird abides," where the change from short to long vowel is the main distinction between subject and verb linked by consonance. The terminal "n," submerged in the following two lines ("ground"; "sings") emerges again in the concluding "alone." The functional significance of these patterns is made clear by a look at the words given emphatic position. The last word of the first sentence, "begin," is joined by slant rhyme to the first two lines, thus isolating "dies," with which it contrasts in meaning as well as sound. Yet the long "i" of "dies" is picked up by "abides," which suggests a paradoxical relationship between the two. The final "alone" shares both the initial unstressed short "a" with "abides" and the terminal "n" with "pine," "sun" and "begin," but its long "o" is unique. The effect of this orchestration, besides necessitating a slow and deliberate reading, is to reinforce the positive significance of the landscape suggested by the figure of the bird. This counterstatement becomes explicit, "audible," in the lines that follow, which are perhaps best taken as what the prophet hears in the bird's song:

Listen, Elias,
 To the southern wind
 Where the grass is brown,
 Live beneath this pine
 In wind and rain.
 Listen to the woods,
 Listen to the ground.

(ll., 8-14)

The natural world itself, in its stripped-down, basic simplicity, its patient willingness to be what it is, is an antidote to hopelessness: its rhythms speak not of defeat and despair but of restoration and renewal. The summons to "Live beneath this pine/ In wind and rain" appears to be spoken first to the withered grass by the south wind itself, which forecasts the coming of spring, and only overheard by Elias. But the command to listen indicates that this call to life is addressed to him as well. The woods and ground, beneficiaries of wind and rain, convey the same message, which functions as the angel's command to rise and eat did in the scriptural account (3 Kings 19: 5, 7). This implied parallel between natural and heavenly messengers suggests a sacramental vision of creation in which the natural world, without ceasing to be itself, symbolizes a deeper level of reality: the wind's call to life is thus an image of the life-giving power of the divine Pneuma, the gentle breeze in which Elias hears the voice of the Lord.

This transition from natural to supernatural dimensions is confirmed in the verse paragraph which follows, where the scene has shifted to the theophany on Horeb. While continuity with what preceded is maintained by the repetition of the imperative and the extension of the basic sound patterns ("above," "sun," "one," "fern," "word," "bird," "abides," "bends," "blade," etc.), both the sense of stillness and the message itself are transposed into an explicitly spiritual context, yet without intrusion upon or disruption of the natural setting:

O listen, Elias
 (Where the bird abides
 And sings alone),
 The sun grows pale
 Where passes One
 Who bends no blade, no fern.
 Listen to His word. (ll. 15-21)

The parenthetical inclusion of the bird here is a reminder that it too has a sacramental dimension. Uniting stillness ("abides") with solitude ("alone") and praise ("sings"), the bird is a perfect image of contemplation, that condition of awareness which is able to perceive the divine Presence inaccessible to the outward senses. Like the "One bird" in "Stranger," the final poem of the collection in which "Elias" appears, it "sits still / Watching the work of God."¹¹ At the same time, as its song flows into "His Word," the bird suggests the Spirit of God itself, hovering over the creation at the beginning of Genesis as here the bird "abides" above the warm ground;

11. "Stranger," ll. 12-13; *The Strange Islands*, p. 101; *Collected Poems*, p. 290.

this very action, moreover, recalls Jesus' repeated use of the same term in the Last Supper discourse of John's Gospel to describe the unity between Himself and His disciples which not even death could destroy (John 15: 4-7, 9-10).

It is precisely this message of re-creation and fidelity which is articulated in the divine word spoken to Elias:

*"Where the fields end
Thou shalt be my friend.
Where the bird is gone
Thou shalt be my son."
(ll. 22-25)*

Here the meaning of the prophet's experience is revealed to be that it is precisely when one appears to be most lost, farthest from one's goal, that God's affirming presence is at hand.¹² The dead-end, the loss of direction and meaning, can now be accepted as the occasion for the end of self-will, a necessary surrender of one's own desires and plans, of one's own very self, to follow the direction of Another. It is a dying which leads not to extinction but to life, to a new identity as friend and son of God, the two most intimate titles given the disciple in the New Testament. The first particularly recalls Jesus' words at the Last Supper, which are linked to the final examples of the verb "abide":

As the Father has loved me, I also have loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love, as I also have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love. . . . This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love than this no one has, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do the things I command you. No longer do I call you servants, because the servant does not know what his master does. But I have called you friends, because all things that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and have appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain [RSV: abide] (John 15: 9-10, 12-16).

The second couplet, joining the image of the bird to the title of son, recalls not only the Synoptic baptismal scene, in which Christ's Sonship is revealed as the dove descends upon him (Mark 1:11), but the corresponding scene in John's Gospel, where the Baptist gives witness to Jesus:

12. For a later expression of this characteristic theme see section 84 of the long poem *Cables to the Ace* (1967): ". . . But for each of us there is a point of nowhere in the middle of movement, a point of nothingness in the midst of being: the incomparable point, not to be discovered by insight. If you seek it you do not find it. If you stop seeking, it is there. But you must not turn to it. Once you become aware of yourself as seeker, you are lost. But if you are content to be lost you will be found without knowing it, precisely because you are lost, for you are, at last, nowhere" (*Collected Poems*, p. 452).

I beheld the Spirit descending as a dove from heaven, and it abode upon him. And I did not know him. But he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He upon whom thou wilt see the Spirit descending, and abiding upon him, he it is who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God (John 1:32-34).

Here the divine Sonship is explicitly associated with the dove-Spirit who "abides" with the Son. Thus the divine revelation to Elias summarizes, clarifies and concludes all that has preceded it. The journey into solitude leads not to despair but to a purified awareness of the truth about oneself in relation to created reality and God. He who loses his life finds it.

Yet the simplicity of these words of divine acceptance does not completely exclude a latent tension, signalled perhaps by the imperfect rhyme of "gone" and "son." For in fact the message to Elias in 3 Kings 19 is one of engagement, involvement, prophetic witness, a note also found in the Last Supper discourse, which speaks not only of Christ's impending death but of the disciples' future sufferings, and in the baptism scene, which is of course the beginning of Christ's public ministry. From this perspective, even the message itself is not without ambiguities: it is after all phrased in the future tense; how can the bird who "is gone" also be the bird who "abides"; even the fields could be said to "end" where settled areas begin, as well as at the entrance to the wilderness. The question arises: what is to be done now? How does one respond to the divine call? The value of solitude has been recognized, but the relation of solitude to witness, of contemplation to action, must still be faced.

The second aspect of Elias' vocation now receives explicit consideration, as the term "prophet" appears for the first time:

How the pine burns
 In the furious sun
 When the prophets come
 To Jerusalem.
 (Listen, Elias,
 For the fiery wing)¹³
 To Jerusalem
 Where the knife is drawn.
 (Do her children run
 To the covering wing?)
 Look, look, My son,
 At the smashed wood
 At the bloody stone. (ll. 26-38)

While these verses stress both the danger and the active engagement of

13. In *Collected Poems*, this line is misprinted "To the covering wing?" as, properly, in l. 35.

the prophetic vocation, they do not refer directly to the career of Elias, who worked not in Jerusalem but in the northern kingdom, Israel. They are, rather, based on the gospel passage in which Jesus identifies himself with both the mission and the fate of the prophet, and laments that Jerusalem will not listen to his message:

I must go my way today and tomorrow and the next day, for it cannot be that a prophet perish outside Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou who killest the prophets, and stonest those who are sent to thee! how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen gathers her young under her wings, but thou wouldst not! (Luke 13:33-34).

Thus the prophetic role is represented not only by the figure of Elias but by that of Christ himself: to follow in the footsteps of Jesus is to journey back to Jerusalem. Likewise the reference to "the fiery wing" of the Pentecostal Spirit, which empowered the disciples to proclaim the Word boldly, and "the covering wing" of divine protection (cf. Psalms 90:4), suggest that "where the bird is gone" is into the midst of active involvement in the affairs of the world.

Yet it will soon become evident that this route is neither taken nor recommended at this point. Why? Obvious motives for remaining in solitude present themselves: fear -- the desire to save oneself from "the knife," or frustration -- the sense of helplessness to avert impending catastrophe (the children do not, after all, "run / To the covering wing" even at the word of Jesus). Both of these, of course, played a part in the original flight of Elias into the wilderness, but they have already been confronted and there is no indication that they are now in control.

A careful reading of the opening lines of this section indicates, rather, that it is not the motives for withdrawing but for returning which are being called into question. Once more the focus is on the landscape, again envisioned not according to objective description but subjective projection. The burning pine, and particularly the "furious sun," images of apocalyptic wrath and cosmic judgment, suggest a different scenario for the prophets coming to Jerusalem: they recall the incident at the very outset of Jesus' journey to the Holy City, when two of his disciples are rebuked for misconstruing the prophetic role:

Now it came to pass, when the days had come for him to be taken up, that he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem, and sent messengers before him. And they went and entered a Samaritan town to make ready for him, and they did not receive him, because his face was set for Jerusalem. But when his disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, wilt thou that we bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them, saying, "You do not know of what manner of spirit you

are; for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them" (Luke 9:51-56).

The disciples' question echoes the passage in which Elias twice called down fire from heaven to consume his opponents, sent out from Samaria (4 Kings 1:9-12); some textual authorities even add "as Elias did" at the conclusion of the disciples' question.¹⁴ Jesus emphatically dissociates himself from such an attitude: his response stresses the need for discernment of spirits, a recognition that "the fiery wing" is also "the covering wing."¹⁵ Thus the final lines of this section, in which Elias is again addressed by God as "My son," are a summons to see the city of men through the eyes of Jesus, the Son, with compassion and a willingness to take upon oneself its suffering. The "smashed wood" and "bloody stone" can refer equally to the destruction of the city ("not . . . one stone upon another," Luke 19:44) or the martyrdom of the prophet (Luke 13:34), and in fact the two are not intended to be distinguished. The ironic lesson of this section is a warning against a pseudo-righteousness by which prophetic engagement would actually create a false dichotomy between the prophet and the world which does not heed his message. In the face of this temptation, the divine counsel is not to reject the prophetic role absolutely, but to wait, and to grow.

Thus the concluding section of this first "variation" again affirms the need for solitude, but does so in a way which leaves open the question of its relation to active involvement:

Where the fields end
And the stars begin
Listen, Elias,
To the winter rain.
For the seed sleeps
By the sleeping stone.
But the seed has life
While the stone has none. (ll. 39-46)

Here all is silence, stillness, patience. At the threshold of mystery, on the boundary between settled and wild, daylight and darkness, Elias is again enjoined to listen, to learn. Although the concerns of the previous verse paragraph may seem absent here, they remain no less central for being "beneath the surface" rather than explicit. In the distinction between seed and stone, one apparently inert, totally passive, unresponsive to anything

14. See the note on Luke 9:54 in the Jerusalem Bible.

15. This verse, found in the Vulgate and in the translation Merton would have known, is considered of doubtful authenticity in more recent translations.

beyond itself, the other seemingly the same yet responding, imperceptibly yet ineluctably, to the life-bearing force of the winter rain, the dynamism of true solitude is revealed: it is not evasion but engagement, even though hidden from sight. It seeks not to escape from but to experience profoundly the dying which awaits the prophet, for in solitude identity is found in conforming the self to the pattern of Jesus' words and life: "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it brings forth much fruit" (John 12:24-25).

If the relationship of prophecy to solitude has not been definitely settled, it has been clarified. In the sleeping seed, image of transformation, of process, of growth, is hidden the recognition that what one does must spring from one who is, authentic action from authentic identity, which is not a matter of self-definition or self-fulfillment but of divine gift:

*"Where the fields end
Thou shalt be My friend.
Where the bird is gone
Thou shalt be My son." (ll. 47-50)*

The image of the seed, like the future tense of the divine call, now repeated to end the first part of the poem, suggests a promise, a sign of hope to be fulfilled, even if the form it will take is not yet clear.

II

The second variation becomes the occasion for the speaker, obviously someone similar to Thomas Merton, to consider some of the implications of this meditation on the Biblical Elias for his own vocation. The setting has shifted to the present, and the initial mood seems to be one of disappointment that the speaker's experience fails to correspond to the scriptural model:

There were supposed to be
Not birds but spirits of flame
Around the old wagon.
("Bring me my chariot")
There were supposed
To be fiery devices,
Grand machines, all flame,
With supernatural wings
Beyond the full creek.
("Bring me my chariot of fire")
All flame, beyond the rotten tree!
(ll. 51-61)

Prosaic and commonplace, the wagon and its birds seem to be pathetically inadequate substitutes for the fiery chariot of the Bible. This complex image combines at least three different referents, each of which contributes to the impression of failed expectations. The most immediate is, of course, the chariot in which Elias was swept up into heaven (4 Kings 2:11): a traditional symbol of mystical elevation as well as the culmination of Elias' prophetic career, the image unites the two dimensions of contemplation and action, but without giving the speaker access to either. He resembles neither Elias himself, ascending to the vision of the Most High, nor Eliseus (Elisha), who sees the chariot and so receives a double portion of his master's prophetic spirit (4 Kings 2:9-10). In its attendant imagery, however, the "fiery devices" and "supernatural wings," the chariot resembles that in the inaugural vision of Ezechiel (Ezechiel 1:4-28), which later reappears (Ezechiel 10:4-23) to carry the Divine Presence from the doomed Jerusalem Temple. Again mystical vision is combined with the summons to prophetic witness, here at the beginning rather than at the end of the prophet's career. Thirdly, the parenthetical quotation, which will continue to appear, antiphon-like (though frequently incomplete), throughout this section, is taken from William Blake's famous lyric, often called "Jerusalem," which prefaces his Prophetic Book *Milton*. Blake uses the fiery chariot of Elias to symbolize his conception of the poet as prophet, the harbinger of a new order:

Bring me my Bow of burning gold:
 Bring me my Arrows of desire:
 Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
 Bring me my Chariot of fire.

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
 Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand
 Till we have built Jerusalem
 In England's green and pleasant Land.¹⁶

By integrating the literary allusion into the poem, Merton is implicitly extending his examination of the tension between engagement and withdrawal, between prophetic speech and contemplative silence, to include the act of writing.¹⁷ The image of the chariot thus becomes the locus of

16. William Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 181. These are the first two stanzas of the four-stanza poem. Also pertinent is the quotation from the Book of Numbers which follows immediately after the lyric and before the first book of the poem proper: "Would to God that all the Lord's people were Prophets" (Numbers 11:29). Merton's interest in Blake dates back to his 1939 Columbia Master's thesis, "Nature and Art in William Blake," reprinted as Appendix I in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 387-453.

17. This connection of poetry with prophecy is made by Merton in his essay, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," first published in *Commonweal*, 24 October 1958, and reprinted in *Literary Essays*: "The Christian poet is therefore the successor to David and the Prophets, he contemplates what was announced by the poets of the Old Testament: he should be, as they were, a mystic, full of divine fire."

Merton's confrontation with his own vocation, or vocations, as monk and author.

These opening lines, however, seem to indicate a failure on all fronts -- a failure to encounter the extraordinary, the overpowering numinous Presence that overwhelms and transforms the initiate, a failure of the present to meet the criteria dictated by past models of mystical, prophetic, even poetic, vision. The sense of disappointment verges on the petulant as the section begins: "supposed to be" ordinarily means "intended to be," but there is no indication on what grounds such a supposition is based. In fact the phrase can also have the more negative sense of "expected on slight or erroneous evidence," which seems closer to the case here: that is, the reader is likely to give the phrase a different interpretation than that intended by the speaker. In fact when the phrase is repeated four lines later, the arrangement is significantly altered: the removal of the infinitive to the following line has the effect of leaving the verb "supposed" to stand alone, where its connotations of unrealistic, illusory expectations are more evident to the reader, if not to the speaker. Actually the rather grandiose elaborations of the supposed vision in this second description, particularly the mechanistic connotations of "devices" and "grand machines," serve to enhance by contrast the attractiveness of the old wagon's simplicity. Likewise the birds surrounding it, which recall the bird of the opening variation, suggest that there is a genuine and profound experience of God to be found here if only the speaker has the vision to see it.

What follows reveals that he does indeed come to recognize the value of the present. The insight comes first in a negative way, with his awareness that the appeal of the chariot image may not be completely disinterested:

Flame? This old wagon
 With the wet, smashed wheels
 Is better. ("My chariot")
 This derelict is better.
 ("Of fire.") It abides
 (Swifter) in the brown ferns
 And burns nothing. (ll. 62-68)

He should be one who, like the prophet Isaias, has seen the living God and has lamented the fact that he was a man of impure lips, until God Himself sent Seraph, with a live coal from the altar of the heavenly temple, to burn his lips with prophetic inspiration. In the true Christian poet -- in Dante, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis, Jacopone da Todi, Hopkins, Paul Claudel -- we find it hard to distinguish between the inspiration of the prophet and mystic and the purely poetic enthusiasm of great artistic genius" (p. 344). This passage does not appear in the original version of the essay, "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," first published in *Commonweal* (4 July 1947) and reprinted in *Figures for an Apocalypse* (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1947).

The speaker picks up the image of fire, used no less than five times in the previous ten lines, the last time juxtaposed with the "rotten tree." Here the seductive temptation of a desire for sudden apocalyptic purification encountered earlier in the images of the burning pine and "furious sun" (ll. 26-27), is associated with the flames. Again the scene of Elias calling down fire to consume his enemies (4 Kings 1:9-14) is suggested. Likewise the chariot itself, improperly understood, can represent a craving for speed, a desire for instantaneous solutions, immediate bliss: it can also connote a sense of separation from earthly realities, of rising above them, whether it be the prophet leaving the earth or Yahweh abandoning the Temple. Thus the speaker's relinquishing of the chariot for the old wagon, which cannot move and "burns nothing," represents a renunciation of any spurious attitude of separation from or superiority toward the world around him.¹⁸

The reminiscences of the first section are striking here: like the bird, the wagon "abides," and its location in the "brown ferns" recalls the earlier theophany "where the grass is brown" and "Where passes One / Who bends no blade, no fern" (ll. 10, 19-20). At the same time, the "smashed wheels" of the wagon, recalling the "smashed wood" of Jerusalem (l. 37), suggest that true contemplation involves facing the same reality as that found anywhere. The violence, the dying, is to be found close to home, in the ordinary events which paradoxically are also the stuff of contemplative vision: a derelict in the eyes of the world, the wagon represents a true stability ("abides") which is also filled with inner dynamism ("Swifter").

As the first variation ended not with "the furious sun" but with "the winter rain," so here it is not fire but water, not "All flame" but "wet, smashed wheels," not instantaneous transformation but a nearly overlooked rhythm of renewal, which symbolizes the authentic life of the spirit. This contrast becomes more obvious in the lines which follow, as the Blakean imperative, suitably emended, is incorporated into the speaker's own words.

Bring me ("Of fire")
 Better still the old trailer ("My chariot")
 With the dead stove in it, and the rain
 Comes down the pipe and covers the floor.
 Bring me my chariot of rain. Bring me

18. In terms of Merton's own writing, "Elias" seems to represent a rejection, or strong modification, of the attitude toward the world of such earlier poems as the title piece in *Figures for an Apocalypse*, which includes among its eight parts sections entitled "(Advice to my Friends Robert Lax and Edward Rice, to get away while they still can)" (III), and "In the Ruins of New York" (VI). See *Figures for an Apocalypse*, pp. 13-28; *Collected Poems*, pp. 135-148.

My old chariot of broken-down rain.
 Bring, bring my old fire, my old storm,
 My old trailer; faster and faster it stands still,
 Faster and faster it stays where it has always been,
 Behind the felled oaks, faster, burning nothing. (ll. 68-77)

These lines find Merton at his most humorous, even playful, parodying the vatic tone of Blake to describe the trailer with the dead stove (no fire here!) whose pipe leaks rainwater all over the floor. It is precisely the uselessness, the purposeless gratuity, the totally functionless quality of the trailer in the rain, unable even to move by its own power, abandoned by some long-forgotten owner, which provides the speaker's almost giddy sense of release here, marked by the ever more subversive changes rung on Blake's sentence.¹⁹ The speaker realizes that like the trailer, he has nothing to do but to be, but that genuinely to be encompasses everything -- fire, storm, trailer. This sense of simply be-ing is expressed in the play on the word "faster," here meaning not "with greater speed," but exactly the opposite, "more firmly emplaced, more steadfast." The trailer stands fast, it "stands still," a still point in a world of motion without direction.

Yet this sacred space is not conceived as being unrelated to the larger world beyond. The trailer is described as

Broken and perfect, facing south,
 Facing the sound of distant guns,
 Facing the wall of distance where blue hills
 Hide in the fading rain. (ll. 78-81)

The opening paradox here finds the trailer a sort of paradigm of human life, which also discovers its perfection not in denying its brokenness but in acknowledging it, an image of redemption and perhaps even of the cross itself. As such it is a sign of contradiction to a world in which weakness cannot be revealed, the world of the distant guns, presumably those described at greater length in "The Guns of Fort Knox" earlier in the same collection.²⁰ Yet the relationship to the larger world, though admitted and in some sense faced, is still, like the distant blue hills, not clearly seen: the agency of the rain is left ambiguous -- is it "fading" itself, gradually disappearing to reveal the wider landscape, or is its activity one of "fading," of veiling that landscape? The relation of the contemplative awareness to active engagement thus remains unsettled, and unsettling.

19. This section foreshadows in a number of ways Merton's important later essay, "Rain and the Rhinoceros," in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 9-23; he describes there a night spent in the cabin which will become his hermitage, during a rainstorm whose "gratuity" and "meaninglessness" (p. 9) nevertheless intimate "a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of silence, of rumor" (p. 10).

20. *The Strange Islands*, pp. 21-22; *Collected Poems*, pp. 228-229. The final paragraph of "Rain" reads: "Yet even here the earth shakes. Over at Fort Knox the Rhinoceros is having fun" (*Raids*, p. 23).

But what is not in question is what can only be called the incarnational ground of contemplation, that God reveals Himself through and in the least likely things, the derelict, the broken, the abandoned:

Where the woods are cut down the punished
Trailer stands alone and becomes
(Against all the better intentions of the owners)
The House of God
The Gate of Heaven.
("My chariot of fire") (ll. 82-87)

Fitting representative of the ravaged landscape itself, the trailer is nonetheless given the two titles used by Jacob to describe his place of encounter with the God of his Fathers: "Truly the Lord is in this place and I did not know it. . . . How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis: 28:16-17). Like Jacob at Bethel (lit. "house of God"), the speaker did not at first recognize the presence of the Lord, but now finds in the seemingly insignificant trailer both the House of God, the divine presence immanent in this world, corresponding to the Temple of Ezechiel's vision, and the "Gate of Heaven," the opening to the transcendent realm corresponding to Elias' own ascent to the skies. The final declaration that the trailer is indeed the authentic "chariot of fire" implies as well an acceptance of the prophetic call to communicate the vision, but as in the first variation there is as yet no explicit consideration of how this summons is to be obeyed.

The conclusion of this second variation, then, has been to bring speaker and reader to an existential awareness of the nature of genuine contemplative experience, a divine epiphany which does not distance the mystic from the world but roots him in it more firmly. Such an incarnational or sacramental focus, which discovers in the created world the medium of God's communication, has definite consequences for a proper understanding of prophecy, of sharing that communication with others, but as yet the dynamics of the interaction between vision and proclamation remain to be worked out.

III

Nevertheless, the third variation seems to consist precisely in proclamation. For the first time in the poem, the speaker emerges as subject, as "I," and speaks in a tone which is assured and confident, even assertive:

The seed, as I have said,
Hides in the frozen sod.
Stones, shaped by rivers they will
Never care about or feel,
Cover the cultivated soil.

The seed, by nature, waits to grow and bear
Fruit. Therefore it is not alone
As stones, or inanimate things are:
That is to say, alone by nature,
Or alone forever. (ll. 88-97)

Here the comparison of seed and stone, previously found toward the end of Part I (ll. 43-46), is sharpened into opposition. The distinction between "the seed" and "stones" (note the particularity of the one and indefiniteness of the other) is that between potential for activity, for growth, for fruitfulness, and pure passivity, which actually impedes cultivation and growth by being in the way.²¹

This contrast continues through the rest of the section:

The seed is not incapable of society
But knows solitude has purpose. Stones
Resist purpose. There they lie
Waiting for the military hand,
Wanting the brain that hates growth,
Wanting the medical eye
That aims to kill with blade or gun
Or with the nearest weapon, namely: stone.

The seed, then, contains society
Within its own loneliness.
The stone has a sterile power
To destroy cities, when hurled upon a prophet. (ll. 98-109)²²

Here the focus has shifted from the individual to the social dimension. While the seed "contains society" by its openness to life (and will in time produce many more seeds from itself), stones represent a disruptive, destructive element, the "sterile power" of hatred and war. Thus the section as a whole articulates a kind of negative, inverted synthesis of contemplation and action. The stones are taken by the speaker to signify both meaningless, insensate solitude and violent, divisive activity, also ultimately meaningless. Here the connection between contemplative silence and

21. It would be interesting to know if Richard Wilbur had read these lines. His poem "Two Voices in a Meadow," first published in *The New Yorker* of 17 August 1957, shortly after *The Strange Islands*, provides a perfect rejoinder to the speaker's argument here in the complementary qualities of the milkweed seed and the stone, the "two voices" of the poem.

22. These lines are not included in the published text of the poem.

prophetic involvement seems to be impressively exhibited both by the act and the content of the speaker's proclamation.

However, the neat dichotomy between seed and stone does not quite ring true; as will become clear later in this analysis, the author does not intend that it should, but even on a first reading, certain elements might leave the reader uneasy. To begin with, the diction is unsatisfying. A certain prolixity intrudes itself in remarks ("as I have said," l. 88; "that is to say," l. 96; "namely," l. 105) which refer to the act of speaking itself, as though the speaker needs to draw attention to his activity. Moreover, the descriptions of the seed are generally more prosaic, perfunctory, even awkward than those concerning the stones. Even in the first verse paragraph, where this might not seem to be the case, the pattern of consonance ("seed," "said," "sod," as well as the reversed "hides") seems more a parody than a continuation of the intricate sound structure of the first variation (particularly in its dependence on the superfluous "as I have said"), and suffers by comparison with the patterns in the lines devoted to the stones ("river," "never," "cover," and the slant rhymes "will," "feel," "soil"). The overall impression created rhetorically is not of a voice in control of the material. Rather than a balanced contrast between seed and stone, the negative example makes more of an impression on the reader as it apparently has on the speaker.

Yet this negative synthesis is itself marked by flawed logic. Whereas the stones are initially described as totally inert, "inanimate," incapable of caring or feeling, in the second half of the variation they are invested with volition, desire: they want to be taken up and used by the forces of destruction. The implication is that there is a natural dynamic in the stone which finds its fulfillment in violence and disorder, an inversion of the seed's potency for growth. Not only is this second description incompatible with the first, it comes dangerously close to a kind of manichean dualism in its attitude toward creation, and calls into question the vision of sacramentality reached at the conclusion of the previous variation. What is at work here is an attitude of projection comparable to that found in the descriptions of the "blunt pine" and the "furious sun" of the first variation, though here the speaker is trying to distance himself from, rather than identify with, the object described. It is actually human intention, rather than some intrinsic quality in the stone itself, which makes it into a weapon.

The inadequacy of the argument is in fact suggested in the description itself. The participle "wanting" (ll. 102, 103), taken to mean "desiring" from its parallel to "waiting for" (l. 101), can also mean "lacking" -- in which case the lines would state that the stones do not possess either brains or

eyes, do not hate growth or aim to kill. The ambiguity pits the overt meaning attributing purpose to the stone against a submerged meaning denying the possibility of any such intention. This ambiguity is compounded by the strange phrase "the medical eye/ That aims to kill. . ." The obvious association of a "medical eye" is with healing, not with killing, but the phrase, perhaps suggestive of "we murder to dissect," or even of the perversion of medical science in the Nazi death camps, is a reminder that what is morally neutral or even beneficial can be misused, an implication which subtly undermines the case against the stones.

Thus the comparison between seed and stone, while superficially convincing, is actually quite misleading: it reveals less about the realities described than about the confused state of mind of the speaker, who has attempted to teach what he has not sufficiently learned. Beneath the matter-of-fact presentation of the first, or "contemplative," part of the comparison can be discerned a sense of relief that the seed is not like the stones, a not quite expressed terror of being "alone by nature/ Or alone forever." But as the speaker must painfully come to realize, this simple separation of reality into living and dead, active and passive, while useful to a point, becomes if absolutized a profoundly dangerous distortion which drives a wedge between being and doing. Are inanimate things really alone by nature, alone forever, or are they not an integral part of a larger whole in which aloneness and interconnectedness are reconciled? By choosing the first alternative, an analytic, dissecting approach, the speaker opts for a dualistic view of reality rather than the holistic perspective of the second. It is a worldview of distinctions rather than conjunctions, which evaluates a thing not in its own identity and in its interrelations with the rest of reality, but by means of judgmental comparisons. Specifically, the contrast here seems to represent a subtle preference for doing over being, since the seed, though presently waiting, is still oriented toward activity. Underlying this evaluation is a fundamental mistrust of reality, an existential dread that to be still, simply to be, is to risk vanishing into that abyss where being is indistinguishable from nothingness: it is to be "alone by nature/ Or alone forever."²³ Because his trust is not deep enough, his embrace of be-ing not radical enough, the speaker thereby misperceives and misrepresents reality. His contemplative silence is defective, and consequently any

23. Merton later expressed this insight in "Rain and the Rhinoceros" thusly: "The contemplative life. . . must not be construed as an escape from time and matter, from social responsibility and from the life of sense, but rather, as an advance into solitude and the desert, a confrontation with poverty and the void, a renunciation of the empirical self, in the presence of death, and nothingness, in order to overcome the ignorance and error that spring from the fear of 'being nothing'" (*Raids on the Unspeakable*, pp. 17-18).

“prophetic” word of his will be distorted as well.

Thus results the flawed argument of the second, “active” half of the variation. Here too the concluding lines are especially problematic: “The stone has a sterile power/ To destroy cities, when hurled upon a prophet.” The last phrase seems enigmatic, incongruous: the sentence would make perfect sense without it, a sense compatible with the earlier depiction of the stone as instrument of violence. As it now reads, the fate of the cities and that of the prophet are somehow linked, but how? Is the verse meant to identify the two, to express that solidarity between messenger and audience which was missing in the first treatment of this theme in Part I? Are the two acts simply contemporaneous, or is there a causal connection? If the speaker is alluding to the only explicit Scriptural reference to stoning prophets, the connection is not one of parallelism but of opposition, since it is the city which stones its prophets and so is left without vision, a condition which has its own destruction as the eventual consequence: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou who killest the prophets, and stonest those who are sent to thee!” (Luke 13:34). Thus the apocalyptic mentality which the speaker seemed to have renounced in the second variation has subtly reinsinuated itself here. Implicitly identifying himself with the prophet, the speaker manages to suggest his own righteousness -- as target of the stones, the prophet can have none of the negative qualities associated with them. This seems to be an instance of projection in the clinical sense, a simultaneous denial and expression of the speaker's inner violence. While the equilibrium found at the conclusion of the previous variation seems to continue through the third section, the tensions and lack of coherence beneath the surface of the speaker's balanced but specious arguments portend an explosive disintegration of this tentative effort to assume the mantle of prophet. This is precisely what takes place in the fourth variation.

IV

This section²⁴ opens with a description of a storm reminiscent in its violence (and perhaps in its element of wish fulfillment as well) of Lear's speech on the heath:²⁵

24. This section is missing in the published text, though ll. 116-119, 129-132, 135-140 are quoted by Lentfoehr in *Words and Silence* (pp. 31-32) as part of what she misleadingly refers to as a “first draft” of the poem (p. 29).

25. *King Lear*, III, ii, 1-9.

Last night when the busting winds
Buffeted the planets and the sun
The sea came down. The world was bullied and drowned.
Cities and churches fell. Such force
The clouds of winter have when they come out and speak.
(ll. 110-114)

The cataclysmic scope of the tempest, along with the specification that it took place "last night," suggests the speaker is dealing, literally, with a nightmare. The vision of apocalypse rejected but not totally exorcised by the waking mind now bursts forth with all the fury of the Biblical flood, bringing cosmic upheaval and the world's destruction. This is the voice of the stormclouds, confirming prophecies of doom.

But the dream is far from over. The speaker himself appears, as commentator and participant:

Well, this is my argument, of evening and of night,
Of finding myself hurled, here, in the high wood
Without a stone or a light
A corner under a cliff, or any cover
When the whole world is run over. (ll. 115-119)

Initially "this is my argument" could be taken to mean that he regards these events as supportive evidence, confirmation of his own point of view, but it immediately becomes evident that his position, rhetorically and literally, is blown sky-high. He is not exempted from the storm's fury, but is subjected to the same buffeting as the rest of creation. The irony of the situation is signalled by his choice of vocabulary: it is not now the stone which is hurled upon the prophet, but the would-be prophet himself who is "hurled" by the winds, and who searches in vain for "any cover," even "a stone," the very object he had previously criticized for covering the fields. His "argument" now seems to refer more appropriately to the debate going on within the speaker between a tendency to be self-righteous and judgmental and an attitude of compassion for and identification with the world's ills.

The adequacy of the first stance is called further into question by the results of the storm:

Dynamite and traffic and huge
Wars are born in a forest valley
Ruining the timber and the gorge. (ll. 120-122)

The wish for a cataclysm to purify the world and enable it to begin afresh proves delusory: the storm does not end the cycle of human iniquity, but seems to spawn it anew, violence begetting violence. The inclusion of the apparently incongruous "traffic" here is particularly instructive: not only

does it relate, as microcosm to macrocosm, to the image of the world being "run over" in the previous line, but it suggests, paradoxically (in the logic of dreams), the continuation of business as usual, and even lends the aura of normalcy to the dynamite and huge wars.

The nature and consequence of the storm force the speaker to come to terms with the basic issue underlying this phantasmagoria, the assumptions and expectations he has of God:

In the strength of these storms
 Was God found? Was his decree
 Heavy in the vast tree without lights?
 Was it not His curse man-handled and rolled
 Black cedars with both fists? O, No
 I think it was not God. (ll. 123-128)

The speaker's answer to his own questions represents a definite relinquishing of an image of God as cosmic avenger, setting things right by the sheer exercise of power. But the struggle to reach this conclusion is perceptible in the progression of the questions themselves. The first could legitimately be given either a positive or negative response, depending on the mode of presence considered (i.e., a "no" answer should not be construed to mean that there is a natural force independent of God). The second is both more abstract ("His decree") and more abstruse: the "vast tree without lights" might suggest the world-tree of myth, a Christmas tree *manque*, even the pine of Part I (blunted by the heaviness of the divine decree?), but it remains mysterious, and one could be excused for being unsure of the right answer. Only with the highly anthropomorphic imagery of the last question, in which the cedars²⁶ are "man-handled" (a particularly telling verb) not by "His decree" but by "His curse," is the matter clarified sufficiently to elicit a response, though even here the phrasing ("Was it not. . .") which normally calls for a positive answer, suggests the tenacity of the apocalyptic mentality even as it is rejected.

Of course the speaker's experience here parallels that of Elias on Mt. Horeb, where God was not present in the wind, or the earthquake, or the fire (3 Kings 19:11-12). The conclusion of the dream likewise has affinities with the divine epiphany in the still, small voice, the gentle breeze:

26. The suggestion that "Elias" is a sort of palinode in relation to some of Merton's earlier poetry is supported by the mention of "black cedars, bowing in the sleet" (l. 6) in the poem "Winter Afternoon" (from *Figures for an Apocalypse*), which concludes (ll. 18-22; *Figures*, pp. 80-81; *Collected Poems*, pp. 185-186):

And oh! From some far rock some echo of your iron, December,
 Halts our slow steps, and calls us to the armored parapet
 Searching the flying skyline for some glare of prophecy
 We thought we heard John-Baptist or Elias, there, on the dark hill
 Or else the angel with the trumpet of the Judgement.

Only the wind bullied my sore ears
 Only the winter's trumpet boxed my sides and back
 Tumbled me with no bones broken
 Redfaced into the city of the just, half-frozen
 Until I sat, never forgetting
 The small voice, outside, on which the stars stand focused,
 Poised as on a clear center, with no thought of storms,
 Always balanced and never turned over, not upside
 Down but always balanced and still, untoppling on
 The One, Other voice differing from all storms and calms
 The Other, silent Voice,
 The perfectly True. (ll. 129-140)

There seems to be a sense in which the storm does, after all, function as an instrument of the divine will, though not in an apocalyptic fashion, since "Only the winter's trumpet" is heard, not that announcing the final Judgment. For the speaker is now carried from "the high wood" to "the city of the just," an eschatological image but not an apocalyptic one, since it is a final reality which is already present, in mystery, within time.²⁷ This change of scene signals an ironic reversal of expectations, as he comes to the city not to speak but to listen, not to act but to sit still, not as a righteous man to the unjust and confused but as an unjust and confused man to the righteous -- he is appropriately "redfaced," not only from the cold wind's buffeting but from shame and embarrassment at his pretensions to wisdom and his presumption to disseminate it.

It is into this setting, then, that the Horeb theophany of Elias, the encounter with the "small voice," the "clear center," is transposed. This experience is no less cosmic than the storm -- it is specified that the voice is "outside," not just a private, interior revelation but an awareness of universal order and harmony like Dante's final vision of "the Love that moves the sun and other stars" or the creation hymns of the Psalms, Job, and Second Isaiah.²⁸ This voice is not the opposite of the storm, but rather is beyond the distinction between storm and calm, act and stillness. It is the "One, Other voice," totally different from any other yet the One without which no other would exist; it is the "silent Voice" which transcends the neat dichotomies

27. The theme of the two cities is central to Merton's verse play, "The Tower of Babel," which immediately follows "Elias" in *The Strange Islands* (pp. 43-78; *Collected Poems*, pp. 247-273). The second epigraph, from Augustine's *City of God*, xiv, 28, contrasts the two kinds of love, *cupiditas* and *caritas*, which have built the two kinds of city, corresponding to the two halves of the play, PART I -- THE LEGEND OF THE TOWER, and PART II -- THE CITY OF GOD. It should be noted that the figure of the prophet plays an important role in Part II by encouraging the exiles from Babylon to wait in hope for the City of God, but does not appear at all in the first half of the play, in which the tower rises and falls.

28. Dante, *Paradiso*, XXXIII, 145, and see Psalms 33:6, 147:4; Job 9:9, 38:7, 31-32; Isaiah 40:26. The first scene of Part II of "The Tower of Babel," entitled "Zodiac," uses the pattern of the constellations as a symbol of divine order (*The Strange Islands*, pp. 63-66; *Collected Poems*, pp. 261-263).

of human concepts, the "perfectly True" which both creates and reveals the ultimate meaningfulness of what is, from the stars to the human spirit. The series of participial phrases which make up the last six lines, most immediately taken as parallel with "focused" and therefore as describing the stars,²⁹ could also be in parallel with "forgetting" and thus refer to "I."³⁰ This is the goal, to be centered on the "perfectly True," to be "always balanced," in harmony with the Creator and the rest of creation, as the stars are. The process is reflected even in the structure of the verse, one long sentence which reaches its equilibrium, its balance, only in the final three lines, as the enjambments of "upside/ Down" and "untoppling on/ The One. . ." are succeeded by the end-stopped, ever more concise descriptions of the Voice, which are themselves finally absorbed into the silence.

This profound stillness with which the fourth variation concludes suggests the cathartic function of the dream. If the speaker's problems are not resolved, they have at least come to the surface where they can be confronted and dealt with.³¹ The storm, a manifestation not of divine wrath but of the speaker's own unacknowledged inner turmoil, suggests his own complicity in all that he opposed, his restless unwillingness to be still, his desire for sudden, violent, definitive eradication of the world's ills. Shaken by its force, he is freed by the storm's passing to become aware of God's presence in the order and clarity of the night sky, and to recognize that the same call to be what he has been created to be is addressed to him. This is the secret nexus of contemplation and action, the resolution of his dilemma. What now remains is the necessary but painful task of integrating this insight into his waking life.

V

Just how difficult a task this will be becomes evident in the fifth variation, in which the speaker is subjected to devastating criticism, which in turn prompts even more ruthless self-criticism. While the speaker seems aware only of how flawed his perceptions and motivations have been,

29. Here there is a direct reversal of the final stanza of "In the Ruins of New York" (Part VI of "Figures for an Apocalypse"), which begins "And we are full of fear, and muter than the upside-down stars/ That limp in the lame waters" (*Figures*, p. 25; *Collected Poems*, p. 146).

30. Lentfoehr (pp. 31-32) states that these lines modify "voice" (l. 133), which seems grammatically impossible, since "voice" (l. 138) is object for the last participle, "untoppling on."

31. The revelatory role of dreams is also central to another poem from the same collection, entitled "Nocturne" (*The Strange Islands*, p. 23; *Collected Poems*, p. 230).

in fact this experience of spiritual destitution represents not a regression but a deeper purification, a more radical death to self, which is the unavoidable prelude to any authentic enlightenment.

The section begins with the unexpected arrival of rain:

Here where in the summertime no waters
Covered the shale, and where October
Filled the creek with leaves and ruins
Now voluble streams, sent on their perfect
Mission, announce the fate of December.
Where do so many waters come from on an empty hill?
Rain we had despaired of, rain
Which is sent from somewhere else, descended
To fix an exhausted mountain. (ll. 141-149)³²

This is the counterpart in the waking world of the dream-storm, but with an effect as profoundly different as the Biblical scene it evokes, not the storm on Horeb but the story of Elias on Mt. Carmel in 3 Kings 18, when the long drought is brought to an end after Elias' contest with the prophets of Baal. But unlike Elias, the speaker is not ready for the rain, not waiting with the patient expectation of a person of faith. His limited perspective, which saw only the "empty hill" and did not extend beyond what he could see, to "somewhere else," was inadequate to the situation.

Ironically, it is the waters themselves, "sent on their perfect/Mission" (transmitting the "perfectly True" voice of the previous variation) which function prophetically here: they "announce the fate of December," which is of course to die and to be reborn as the new year. They also have a word for the speaker:

Listen to the waters, if possible,
And discern the words "False prophet"
False prophet! So much better is the water's message,
So much more confident than our own. "It is quite sure
You are a false prophet, so 'Go back'
(You have not had the patience of a rock or tree)
Go back into the cities. They want to receive you
Because you are not sent to them. You are a false prophet."
(ll. 150-157)³³

The sound of the waters, channel of affirmation earlier in the poem, becomes the voice of condemnation, as the speaker in his lack of faith and

32. Lines 141-145 are the last of those omitted from the printed text of the poem.

33. In both the typescript and the printed text, the quotation marks are placed before "So" (l. 152), which could not have been spoken by the water since it contrasts "the water's message" to "our own." This sentence must be the speaker's own words (cf. "we had despaired," l. 147). I have therefore emended by placing the quotation marks at the beginning of the next sentence, in which the speaker is addressed in the second person.

hope is identified not with Elias but with the false prophets of Baal (note the change to first person plural in ll. 147, 153). As the pagan prophets gashed themselves and called out in ecstatic frenzy in an effort to force their god's hand on Mt. Carmel, the speaker "had despaired" of the rain because it did not arrive according to his timetable -- he lacked "the patience of a rock or tree" (of stone and seed, now united in witness against him). Unlike the rain, which "is sent" and has a "message," the speaker is "not sent" and has, we later learn (l. 177), "no message." His identity as false prophet refers first perhaps to his "oracle" in the third variation (not "thus saith the Lord" but "as I have said"), but more immediately to his unexpressed but obvious desire to speak, to act, to assume a prophetic role, which would be favorably received not because he proclaims the truth but because he articulates his listeners' own attitudes, just as the false prophets of the Lord in 3 Kings 22 tell King Ahab what he wants to hear -- predictions of success, assurances of visible results. Thus the repeated command to "go back," an ironic echo of the words to Elias on Horeb, "Go, and return on thy way" (3 Kings 19:15), is not a summons to prophesy but a caustic directive to rejoin those whose alienation resembles his own.

The speaker would be so acceptable, and so useless, for people in the cities because both his life and theirs are marked by the same divided consciousness, the same effort to affirm that one is alive by compulsive activity rather than a willingness to accept life as gift:³⁴

Go back where everyone, in heavy hours,
Is of a different mind, and each is his own burden,
And each mind is its own division
With sickness for diversion and war for
Business reasons. Go where the divided
Cannot stand to be too well. For then they would be held
Responsible for their own misery. (ll. 158-164)

This description of fragmentation and depersonalization is both strikingly modern and thoroughly Scriptural: "each is his own burden" suggests the isolation and individualism which refuses Paul's admonition to "bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2); the mind which is "its own division" recalls the Scriptural theme of *dipsychia*, or double-mindedness, as in the description of a "a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8); the divided who "cannot stand to be too well" recall the words of Jesus that "a house divided against itself cannot stand" (Matthew 12:25),

34. This same point is made in "The Tower of Babel," when Raphael says of the tower-builders, "Activity is their substitute for faith. Instead of believing in themselves, they seek to convince themselves, by their activity, that they exist" (*The Strange Islands*, p. 50; *Collected Poems*, p. 251).

with perhaps a play on their own mistrust of being ("well" can be read both adjectivally, referring back to "sickness" two lines earlier, and adverbially, with "to be" taken in an absolute sense).³⁵ It is a world of inert passivity masked by frenetic and purposeless motion, a world where doing has no relation to being because the demands of freedom, the need to take responsibility for one's actions, have been avoided and renounced.³⁶ The interior division and alienation give rise to the macrocosmic counterpart of war, the rationale for which is busyness as well as business. Recognition of the dignity of the person, which depends not on what one does but on who one is, has disappeared with the loss of contemplative awareness, and requires the restoration of that awareness for its own return. This is the world to which the speaker is encouraged to "go back."

Despite his physical separation, the speaker acknowledges his own complicity in the world just described. His confession exemplifies a change from condemnation of others to self-condemnation, a surrender of all claims to self-righteousness:

And I have been a man without silence,
 A man without patience, with too many
 Questions. I have blamed God
 Thinking to blame only men
 And defend Him Who does not need to be defended.
 I have blamed ("defended") Him for Whom the wise stones
 (Stones I lately condemned)
 Waited in the patient
 Creek that is now wet and clean of all ruins. (ll. 165-173)

Here the failure of prophecy is clearly a consequence of a failure of contemplation. His lack of silence means that words become not vehicles of God's Word, but a means of avoiding solitude; they function as a substitute for silence, rather than an epiphany of silence.³⁷ This lack of interior stillness is mirrored by outward impatience, dissatisfaction with the way the world is going, which leads in time to questioning and to more words, attempts to answer the questions in one's own way. The word "blame" here is the key to distinguishing the speaker's words from authentic prophecy.

35. This theme is, of course, central to "The Tower of Babel," in which the appearance of unified effort masks the divisiveness which will cause the tower to fall. See especially *The Strange Islands*, pp. 50-51; *Collected Poems*, pp. 251-252.

36. Again, "The Tower of Babel" provides an appropriate gloss: Raphael says, "Their ambition is only the occasion for a failure they certainly seek. But they require that this failure come upon them, as it were, out of the stars. They want to blame their ruin on fate, and still have the secret satisfaction of ruining themselves" (*The Strange Islands*, p. 50; *Collected Poems*, p. 251).

37. The second scene of Part I of "The Tower of Babel," entitled "The Trial," focuses on the use and misuse of language. The captain accuses words of being "in league with sense, / Order and even silence" (*The Strange Islands*, p. 56; *Collected Poems*, p. 255), and as the scene ends, silence is crucified as Falsehood is acclaimed as Lord of Babylon (*The Strange Islands*, p. 62; *Collected Poems*, p. 260).

The prophet is called to strip away illusions and show a situation as it actually is -- to speak the truth -- so as to make conversion possible. To assign blame for a situation is a defensive reaction, an attempt to satisfy one's own desire for a psychologically acceptable explanation of what is wrong, usually in such a way as to protect oneself from any culpability. It is more interested in analyzing a set of circumstances than in changing them: in fact it indicates a fundamental doubt in the possibility of change. It is the refuge of a static, deterministic perspective which divides people into "seeds" and "stones," the quick and the dead. It is the voice of hopelessness, and so finally, as the speaker now realizes, a denial of the power of God Himself, who becomes the ultimate object of blame. Like the people themselves, the speaker has refused to consider them truly "responsible," capable of responding to their situation. However similar to the prophetic stance it may superficially appear, his attitude is directly counter to it: it is the voice of despair.

To this attitude the "wise stones" become the countersign, the emblem of absolute availability,³⁸ being so grounded in God, in reality, that they are continually open to *kairos*, to the right time of redemption and transformation: they were waiting not for "the military hand" (l. 101) but for the divine act of cleansing and restoration. They suggest in particular the desecrated altar rebuilt by Elias on Carmel at the proper time:

Elias said to all the people: Come ye unto me. And the people coming near unto him, he repaired the altar of the Lord, that was broken down. And he took twelve stones according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying: Israel shall be thy name. And he built with the stones an altar to the name of the Lord.

(3 Kings 18:30-32)

Here the repair of the altar, whose stones correspond to the tribes of Israel, clearly represents the possibility of the restoration of Israel's identity as the People of God, who are invited by Elias to "come unto me." But in the speaker's message of blame there is no "come unto me," as there was no rebuilt altar in his condemnation of the stones. But with the rain, sign of renewed life, comes the recognition of his self-righteousness and the confession of his sin. As always in the Biblical view, this admission of failure, the willingness to be "held/ Responsible," is the indispensable prerequisite

38. The symbolism of stones as building blocks recurs throughout *The Strange Islands*: see the words of the Prophet on the City of God in "The Tower of Babel: "But you, my brothers, and I are stones in the wall of this city"; also "Early Mass," l. 20: "These mended stones shall build Jerusalem"; and the entire poem "In Silence," which begins, "Be still/ Listen to the stones of the wall/ Be silent, they try/ To speak your// Name. Listen/ To the living walls" (*The Strange Islands*, pp. 66, 89, 87; *Collected Poems*, pp. 263, 282, 281).

to further spiritual growth.³⁹

Nevertheless, this variation ends with what seems to be an admission of defeat and the abandonment of any claims of a prophetic dimension to his vocation:

So now, if I were to return
To my own city (yes my own city), I would be
Neither accepted nor rejected.
For I have no message,
I would be lost together with the others. (ll. 174-178)

Recognizing his spiritual kinship with those he had desired to preach to (in "my own city"), the speaker seems to renounce all activity: he has no message, nothing to bring to "the others," because he suffers from the same spiritual sickness as they. So the choice seems to be simply to abandon them to their own lostness so as to save himself from the same fate. But it must be stressed once again that this is not a choice of contemplation over action, but a renunciation of action due to a failure of contemplation; he is not choosing one or the other but confessing his lack of both. The connection between action and contemplation is actually being affirmed here: genuine prophecy is seen to be impossible unless rooted in contemplative union with God.

It may appear that this variation, together with the last, represents a regression, a failure to retain and deepen the sense of the divine presence experienced earlier. But the journey within the self represented by the dream, and the self-condemnation which follows, do not invalidate or cancel out the revelatory moment: rather, they plant it deeper in the soul. The process of letting-go which has occurred on the more superficial levels of the personality has to penetrate to the very core of a person's being. This process is painful precisely because it reveals how deeply the roots of pride, fear and self-love extend, and what a death is required to extirpate them. They have become so much "me" that to destroy them seems to mean being destroyed oneself. It is this more radical surrender which the speaker is now driven to make; yet by the paradoxical logic of spiritual growth, the renunciation of his own projects, his own will, his own image of himself, will prove to be the crucial step in discovering the authentic and lasting fulfillment of an identity at once contemplative and prophetic.

39. In *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1958), "written in 1953 and 1954" (p. 11) though not published for four years, Merton discusses this topic: "A false conscience is a false god, a god which says nothing because it is dumb and which does nothing because it has no power. It is a mask through which we utter oracles to ourselves, telling ourselves false prophecies, giving ourselves whatever answer we want to hear. . . . Hence the beginning of wisdom is the confession of sin. This confession gains for us the mercy of God. It makes the light of His truth shine in our conscience, without which we cannot avoid sin" (pp. 77-78).

VI

It is precisely the frustration of efforts to reach the city at the conclusion of the fifth variation which serves to realign the speaker with Elias, who likewise sought after his victory on Carmel to return to the city only to find himself forced by Jezebel's threats to flee into the wilderness, where "he requested for his soul that he might die, and said: It is enough for me, Lord. Take away my soul, for I am no better than my fathers. And he cast himself down, and slept in the shadow of the juniper tree" (3 Kings 19:4-5). This is, of course, the situation in which we find Elias at the beginning of the poem, compelled to renounce his own plans, his own itinerary, in order to become available to the divine presence and will. Thus it is only at this point that the speaker is truly ready to make the experience of Elias his own. It is quite appropriate, then, that the final section quite literally begins as a variation of the first:

Under the blunt pine
 I who am not sent
 Remain. The pathway dies,
 The journey has begun.
 Here the bird abides
 And sings on top of the forgotten
 Storm. The ground is warm.
 He sings no particular message.
 His hymn has one pattern, no more planned,
 No less perfectly planned
 And no more arbitrary
 Than the pattern in the seed, the salt,
 The snow, the cell, the drop of rain. (ll. 179-191)

The most obvious change here is that "I," the speaker, is now present beneath the pine; but equally significant is the fact that this will be the last time that a subjective reference occurs in the poem: the speaker appears only to disappear, to "be lost" in a much more profound, and salvific, sense than the rootless alienation which would await him in the city. Remaining in stillness, beneath the pine, he is nevertheless said to begin a journey, one in which further paradoxes are resolved: the loss of self and the discovery of true identity, freedom and the divine plan, silence and speech, contemplation and action.

As in the opening variation, the focus shifts to the mysterious bird, which once again serves as a revelatory sign. The negative connotations of "I who am not sent/ Remain," a carry-over from the previous section, are countered by the parallel with the bird, which still "abides," and is further said to sing "on top of the forgotten/ Storm," a suggestion not only that

the upheavals of the past are over, but that the bird, like the stars in the fourth variation, was able to transcend the storm because of its own inner calm. But more crucial is the statement that "he sings no particular message." Here indeed is the beginning of the resolution to the problem with which the speaker has wrestled throughout the poem. For the bird has no "message" in the sense that its song is not something extrinsic, "added on" to its essential nature as bird, not something produced to influence or impress the outside world; it is simply the outward expression of its own deepest identity: there is no division, no distinction, between what it is and what it does. The vision here is comparable to that found in Hopkins' sonnet "As kingfishers catch fire":

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves -- goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.⁴⁰

By being itself, by living out its own freedom, the bird is the incarnation of its hymn of praise, and the hymn the self-expression, in the most profound sense, of the singer. The pattern of its song is not imposed from without but is a manifestation, an epiphany, of the bird's God-given identity, comparable, despite its classification as "activity," with the structure found in "the seed, the salt, / The snow, the cell, the drop of rain."

Thus the song of the bird not only reveals the bird's own identity, but draws the listener into the mystery of creation as a whole; suddenly the song is part of a chorus of voices, in which spontaneity and order are united, specificity and universality are one:

(Snow says: I have my own pattern;
Rain says: no arbitrary plan!

40. *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie, 4th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 90. Hopkins was the catalyst for Merton's conversion and was to be the subject of his doctoral dissertation: see *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), pp. 215, 255. Echoes of this sonnet can be found in "Canticle for the Blessed Virgin" from *Figures for an Apocalypse*: "Then will obedience bring forth new Incarnations/ Shining to God with the features of His Christ" (ll. 75-76, *Figures*, p. 46; *Collected Poems*, p. 163) reworks Hopkins' "Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features of men's faces" (ll. 12-14), as does "Hagia Sophia": "He speaks to us gently in ten thousand things, in which His light is one fulness and one Wisdom" (*Collected Poems*, p. 366, noted by Lentfoehr, p. 49); the line "All her goings graces" in "The Ladies of Tlatilco" section of *The Geography of Lograire* (*Collected Poems*, p. 485) is an ironic allusion to Hopkins' "the just man justifies; / Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces" (ll. 9-10). The movement from external objects to "the just man" in the sonnet is paralleled in "Elias" by the shift from natural objects to "the free man" (ll. 199 ff.). Both Hopkins and Merton were strongly influenced by the thirteenth-century Franciscan Duns Scotus, especially his ideas on the sacramentality of the natural world and *haecceitas*, individual identity. For the importance of Scotus to Hopkins, see John Pick, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Priest and Poet* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), pp. 32-37, 156-159; in *A Reader's Guide to Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), Norman H. MacKenzie says of "As kingfishers catch fire": "This sonnet contains the most striking poetic illustrations of Hopkins' Scotist theory of the inscapes to be found among natural and man-made things" (p. 148). Merton studied Scotus at Columbia with Daniel Walsh and St. Bonaventure's with Fr. Philotheus Boehner, and the long sections on Scotus in the original manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (omitted from the published text) indicated "that Merton was under the spell of Duns Scotus" (Mott, p. 231).

River says: I go my own way.
 Bird says: I am the same.
 The pine tree says also:
 Not compulsion plants me in my place,
 No, not compulsion! (ll. 192-198)

Here each of these natural objects testifies to its own *logos*, that principle of harmony implanted within each as its deepest identity; together they provide a revelation of cosmic freedom, realized by each in its own particular way but pointing to a common ground of absolute Freedom which coincides with absolute Order in the divine Logos, the creative Word which called them into being.

In his ability to "hear" these voices and to resonate with their disclosures, the speaker shows himself to be possessed of a kind of contemplative awareness, what Merton, borrowing from the Greek Fathers, elsewhere calls "*theoria physica*, or 'natural contemplation,' which arrives at God through the inner spiritual reality (the *logos*) of the created thing."⁴¹ Here the theme of the sacramentality of the created world receives its most explicit affirmation.⁴² But he recognizes further that these creatures, in which the divine wisdom shines forth, provide a kind of paradigm of integration. Simply by being themselves, truly and completely, they are at once contemplative and prophetic, living hymns of praise to the Creator and witnesses to the divine will for all creation -- including the human, as he has now come to realize:

The free man is not alone as busy men are
 But as birds are. The free man sings
 Alone as universes do. Built
 Upon his own inscrutable pattern
 Clear, unmistakable, not invented by himself alone
 Or for himself, but for the universe also. (ll. 199-204)

In these lines the central dilemma of the entire poem, the tension between being and doing, contemplation and prophecy, is not so much solved as it is

41. "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," *Literary Essays*, p. 347; this passage is not found in the 1947 version of the essay (see above, note 17). Merton discusses this same concept in "The Inner Experience," the radical revision and expansion of his 1948 essay, *What is Contemplation?* Merton left instructions that this work, dating from 1959, was not to be published as a book, evidently because he did not consider it to be in final form, but it appeared, slightly abridged, in *Cistercian Studies*, 18-19 (1983-1984). For his discussion of *theoria physike*, see *Cistercian Studies*, 18:4 (1983): pp. 297-298.

42. In "Poetry and Contemplation" (another passage added to the original), Merton writes: "But the true poet is always akin to the mystic because of the 'prophetic' intuition by which he sees the spiritual reality, the inner meaning of the object he contemplates, which makes that concrete reality not only a thing worthy of admiration in itself, but also and above all makes it a sign of God. All good Christian poets are then contemplatives in the sense that they see God everywhere in His creation and in His mysteries, and behold the created world as filled with signs and symbols of God. To the true Christian poet, the whole world and all the incidents of life tend to be sacraments -- signs of God, signs of His love working in the world" (*Literary Essays*, p. 345).

exposed as a pseudo-problem, resulting from a misunderstanding of both the nature of authentic solitude and that of genuine prophetic speech.⁴³ To be truly alone ("as birds are") has nothing to do with isolation or alienation -- these are traits rather of those whose frantic activity makes community impossible. The real opposition is not between solitude and communion or between contemplation and action, but between "busy men" who strive to invest their lives with meaning through their business, and "the free man" who is free precisely because he is aware that his meaning is already present as gift, one that integrates him into a larger whole. The free man is "alone" because he identifies with all that is, in a solitude which is not exclusive but inclusive, an experience not of separation but of participation; thus he "sings/ Alone as universes do."⁴⁴ Here the dualistic perspective which marked the third variation has given way to a holistic one, which suggests a healing of both interior and external divisions.

But the very structure of the lines serves to stress not only that the "free man sings/ Alone" but that the "free man *sings*." Like the bird, the human person has the capacity, in Hopkins' phrase, to "deal out that being indoors each one dwells." Authentic self-expression (which includes, but is not limited to, artistic expression) is a constitutive dimension of human selfhood. The dichotomy between being and doing does not exist for one who is truly free. Thus in the deliberately fragmentary sentence which follows, the participle "Built" modifies equally well the free man and his song, since the second is the outward articulation of the first, the expressed *logos* of true identity.⁴⁵ Yet the song, like his very being, is "not invented by himself alone"; it is given in the act of creation by the divine Logos, the Word of God, yet paradoxically this makes it not less but more his own: the task of human freedom is to actualize, to incarnate, the true self eternally

43. In "The Inner Experience," Merton writes, "One of the strange laws of the contemplative life is that in it you do not sit down and solve problems: you bear with them until they somehow solve themselves. Or until life itself solves them for you. Usually the solution consists in a discovery that they exist only insofar as they were inseparably connected with your own illusory exterior self." This passage, from the second page of the manuscript, is not included in the version printed in *Cistercian Studies*, but is quoted by William H. Shannon in *Thomas Merton's Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981), p. 114.

44. See the conclusion of "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude," in *Disputed Questions*, p. 207: "But the deep 'I' of the spirit, of solitude and of love, cannot be 'had,' possessed, developed, perfected. It can only be, and act according to deep inner laws which are not of man's contriving, but which come from God. They are the Laws of the Spirit, who, like the wind, blows where He wills. This inner 'I,' who is always alone, is always universal: for in this inmost 'I' my own solitude meets the solitude of every other man and the solitude of God. Hence it is beyond division, beyond limitation, beyond selfish affirmation. It is only this inmost and solitary 'I' that truly loves with the love and spirit of Christ. This 'I' is Christ Himself, living in us: and we, in Him, living in the Father." For a discussion of the evolution of this essay, much of which (though not this passage) dates back to 1955, see Richard A. Cashen, *Solitude in the Thought of Thomas Merton* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981), pp. 29-31.

45. The distinction between immanent and expressed *logos* goes back to the Stoics, and was used by the early Fathers to explain the relation between Father and Son in the Trinity; see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 18-19, 95-101.

known and loved by God. In the mystery of divine-human synergy, the song is completely God's and completely his. The more freely one acts, the more one conforms to "his own inscrutable pattern" of identity, and by so doing points toward the Source and Ground of that identity. Merton's essay "In Silentio," written at about the same time as the poem, provides the best commentary on these lines:

Then, in the deep silence, wisdom begins to sing her unending, sunlit inexpressible song: the private song she sings to the solitary soul. It is his own song and hers -- the unique, irreplaceable song that each soul sings for himself with the unknown Spirit, as he sits on the doorstep of his own being, the place where his existence opens out into the abyss of God. It is the song that each of us must sing, the song God has composed Himself, that He may sing it within us. It is the song which, if we do not listen to it, will never be sung. And if we do not join with God in singing this song, we will never be fully real: for it is the song of our own life welling up like a stream out of the very heart of God.⁴⁶

But the song represents not only the synthesis of being and doing, and of the divine and the human. Because personal identity is grounded in communion with the whole of reality, its outward expression resonates with the needs and hopes of others: the free man lives, and sings, not for himself alone but "for the universe also." Since this concern for the wider world is not something extrinsic, but constitutive of the free man's identity, there is a quality which can be called prophetic built into his song. But it is now clear that the true prophet is not one who is preoccupied with results, who calculates the consequences of his words, but simply one who lives out his pattern, who sings the song given him by God, and leaves the effects in God's hands. He does not depend upon his "message" to affirm, still less to create, his identity; rather the words are the expression of that which is created and affirmed by Another:

Nor does he make it his business to be recognized
Or care to have himself found out
As if some special subterfuge were needed
To get himself known for who he is. (ll. 205-208)

Again the essay "In Silentio" provides an apt gloss:

To understand that one has nothing special to say is suddenly to become free with a liberty which makes speech and silence equally easy. What one says will be something that has probably been said before. One need not trouble about being heard: the thing that is being said has been heard

⁴⁶ This text was published as an introduction to a collection of photographs with accompanying quotations in *Silence in Heaven: A Book of the Monastic Life* (New York: Studio Publications, 1956); the quoted passage is from p. 24; a somewhat shortened and revised version of the essay is found in *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965), pp. 204-215.

before. One ceases to depend on being heard, or thought of. And then suddenly, one realizes that he has spoken, in the past, as if speech and communication gave him a real existence. Speech has only served us as a protection against the secret terror of not existing!

Once the illusion is clear, a man is delivered from the necessity to speak in his own defence, and therefore speaks only for his brother's comfort.⁴⁷

Thus solitude excludes not speech, but the misuse of words to provide a spurious reassurance of one's own significance, or correctness, or very existence. To be free is to be liberated from this dependence on the opinions, even the recognition, of others, and so to be empowered to speak on their behalf. Such are the roots of any genuine prophecy.

This meditation on the nature of the free man's song is followed by a consideration of the free man's journey, with its obvious pertinence to the speaker's situation at the beginning of the final variation:

The free man does not float
On the tides of his own expedition
Nor is he sent on ventures as busy men are,
Bound to an inexorable result:
But like the birds or lilies
He seeks first the Kingdom, without care. (ll. 209-214)

Here two models of human achievement are rejected as incompatible with genuine freedom, that of autonomous individualism which glories in its own independence, and that of external conformism which requires for success the attainment of some predetermined result. The futility of either project is evident from the contradictions intrinsic to each: the image of floating on the tides suggests the degree of dependence involved in the most independent of expeditions, while the riskiness of the busy men's "ventures" indicates how precarious and uncertain the achievement of "an inexorable result" actually is. In comparison with the second we are better able to see in what sense the speaker is "not sent," while he cannot like the first simply invent his own path and choose his own destination. The alternative to both is to seek the Kingdom of God. Here the "sacramental" teaching of the natural world becomes explicitly related to the message of the Gospel. As birds and lilies (and "the seed, the salt, / The snow, the cell, the drop of rain. . ."), simply by being themselves, help to realize the reign of God, so the journey to true selfhood and to the Kingdom are one and the same. This means that the journey is not primarily an external one, for the kingdom is present insofar as a person is conformed to the will of God, the image of Christ:

47. *Silence in Heaven*, p. 27; this passage is not found in the version published in *Seasons of Celebration*.

Nor need the free man remember
 Any street or city, or keep campaigns
 In his head, or countries for that matter
 Or any other economy. (ll. 215-218)

There can be no map which charts a course to the Kingdom, no campaigns (political or military) which can seize it, no economy (both in the etymological sense of "household rules," limited or particular instructions, and in the more common sense of wealth as a goal or source of satisfaction) which provides the key to apprehending it. The Kingdom is the beyond within, and can be reached only by losing the superficial self in order to be found in God.

At this point the final recapitulation begins, and Elias, now inclusive of the speaker, re-emerges as the paradigm of the "free man":

Under the blunt pine
 Elias becomes his own geography
 (Supposing geography to be necessary at all),
 Elias becomes his own wild bird, with God in the center,
 His own wide field which nobody owns,
 His own pattern, surrounding the Spirit
 By which he is himself surrounded:
 For the free man's road has neither beginning nor end. (ll. 219-226)

In these climactic lines, which critic George Woodcock considers to be "among the best poetry -- and the most moving -- that Merton ever wrote,"⁴⁸ all distinctions between internal and external, between seeker and goal, subject and object, even in a sense between the human and the divine are transcended in a luminous encounter with Reality beyond limitation. While a direct infusion of Oriental wisdom is perhaps unlikely in a poem dating from 1954, a comparison of Elias under the pine with the Buddha under the bo-tree is nevertheless suggestive, for what is described, or rather intimated, here, is surely an experience of enlightenment, in which utter emptiness and destitution suddenly reveals itself as total fullness.⁴⁹

The experience is first of all that of personal unification. Not only is the journey of Elias an interior one, it is a journey taken by being still, for his goal is nothing other than to be who he is. Elias is his own goal, his own way, his own geography.⁵⁰ There is nowhere he need go, no time he need wait,

48. Woodcock, p. 76.

49. In his discussion of "Elias," which he erroneously assigns to 1949, Woodcock writes, "Merton may already have begun his fruitful meeting of minds with Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, for what he says might well have been written by a Taoist poet" (p. 76).

50. The image of geography is important for Merton's poetry from the epigraph to *Early Poems* (1940-1942) (published in 1971): "Geography comes to an end,/ Compass has lost all earthly north/

for the realization of authentic identity is constrained by no spatial or temporal limitations.⁵¹ But this act of being is in no way exclusive. There is no longer an observer to be distinguished from what is observed, for the self-conscious subject, the empirical self who "has" experiences, has disappeared. Elias simply is, and thereby, with an immediacy ungraspable by reflection, is united to, identified with, all else that is. His "geography" is both nowhere and everywhere: it encompasses all reality, all being, because the transcendent self, the true self, is not found through a process of differentiation but by an existential awareness of unity.⁵² Its own being opens out onto and participates in all being in that "deep contemplative awareness of reality" described near the conclusion of "The Inner Experience":

The contemplative is . . . one who, being perfectly unified in himself, and recollected in the center of his own humility, enters into contact with reality by an immediacy that forgets the division between subject and object. In a certain sense, by losing himself, and by forgetting himself as an object of reflection, he finds himself and all other reality together.⁵³

Yet this embrace of being in general is not to be construed merely as an annihilation of uniqueness and specificity. Since each creature has its own inimitable way of expressing the act of being, what is most universal is also, by a mysterious coincidence of opposites, most particular. Thus Elias identifies not only with the landscape in general but with specific elements of that landscape, the "wild bird" and the "wide field," symbols throughout the poem, respectively, of the congruence of inner identity and outward expression and of unity as complementarity (i.e., seed and stone). Linked not only by the assonance/consonance of their adjectives but by

Horizons have no meaning/ Nor roads an explanation" (*Collected Poems*, p. 2; these are the first four lines of the final poem of the collection, "Sacred Heart 2," p. 24), to the posthumously published long poem, *The Geography of Lograire* (1969). Particularly interesting for comparison with "Elias" is "Song: Contemplation," from *Figures for an Apocalypse*: ll. 30-32 read, "For suddenly we have forgotten your geography,/ Old nature, and your map of prey,/ And know no more the low world scourged with travelling," and the poem concludes with the arrival of the Spirit, not, as in "Elias," to surround and be surrounded, but to seize the poet in His talons (l. 41) and separate him spatially from "the drag of earth" (l. 43) so that he might "Trample the white, appalling stratosphere" (l. 47; *Figures*, p. 41; *Collected Poems*, pp. 158-159).

51. See *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 96: "The lightning flashes from east to west, illuminating the whole horizon and striking where it pleases and at the same instant the infinite liberty of God flashes in the depths of that man's soul, and he is illumined. At that moment he sees that though he seems to be in the middle of his journey, he has already arrived at the end. For the life of grace on earth is the beginning of the life of glory. Although he is a traveller in time, he has opened his eyes, for a moment, in eternity." See also Merton's statement, "In prayer we discover what we already have. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize that you are already there"; quoted by David Steindl-Rast in "Man of Prayer," in *Thomas Merton, Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974), p. 90.

52. See "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude": "His solitude . . . does not set him apart from them in contrast and self-affirmation. It affirms nothing. It is at the same time empty and universal. He is one, not by virtue of separation but by virtue of inner spiritual unity. And this inner unity is at the same time the inner unity of all" (*Disputed Questions*, p. 196).

53. *Cistercian Studies*, 19:4 (1984), pp. 343-344.

the chiasmic pattern of their modifiers ("wild" correlates with "nobody owns"; "wide" and "at the center" are both spatial), the paired images recall above all their earlier appearance together in the refrain of the opening variation:

*"Where the fields end
Thou shalt be My friend.
Where the bird is gone
Thou shalt be My son." (ll. 22-25; 47-50)*

In these concluding lines, the questions raised by that quatrain, which are of course questions of "geography," at last receive their answer. Where the fields end, where the bird is gone, is nowhere, the pointless center which opens out on the fathomless abyss of divine love. Elias becomes his own wild bird because he too is centered on God, his own wide field (in which is hidden the treasure of the Kingdom) because to him is given the absolute freedom of absolute dependence on God: this is the essence of the divine friendship, the divine sonship promised earlier. Because the center of the self is not the self but God, to discover one's true center is to pass beyond the self without leaving the self: "If I penetrate to the depths of my own existence and my own present reality, the indefinable 'am' that is myself in its deepest roots, then through this deep center I pass into the infinite 'I Am' which is the very Name of the Almighty."⁵⁴

This then is the "pattern" of mutual indwelling, mutual abiding, which is the most comprehensive expression of Elias' identity and vocation. To be "surrounding the Spirit/ By which he is himself surrounded" suggests first of all the ultimate reason why the journey inward to self and outward to the world is one and the same: being and doing, contemplation and action, lead both from and to "the Spirit [which] fills the world, is all-embracing" (Wisdom 1:7). But it also suggests that the "geography" which Elias "becomes" is finally nothing less than the infinite fullness of the divine Trinity in which he finds himself, which he finds within himself. It is the geography, the pattern, of the great prayer in the Epistle to the Ephesians:

that he may grant you from his glorious riches to be strengthened with power through his Spirit unto the progress of the inner man; and to have Christ dwelling through faith in your hearts; so that, being rooted and grounded in love, you may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know Christ's love which surpasses knowledge, in order that you may be filled unto all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:16-19)⁵⁵

54. *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 70.

55. Merton quotes and comments on this passage as presenting "a full and profound picture of the idea of contemplation that fills the New Testament everywhere" in "The Inner Experience," *Cistercian Studies*, 18:3 (1983), p. 207.

Thus "the free man's road" is God Himself, a beginning without beginning and an endless end, his present ground, his eternal center. This road leads backward to Paradise and forward to the Kingdom, without leaving that spot where "The pathway dies/ And the wilds begin" (ll. 3-4), because finally there is nowhere to go, and no one who is going. The free man, the true self, is one who has disappeared into God, the Alpha and the Omega, the All in All.

In his essay on Merton's Christological thought, George A. Kilcourse writes, "Failure to come to grips critically with Merton's poetic talent scandalously eclipses the essential Merton," and cites Romano Guardini's observation to the effect that "artistic imagination precedes theological reflection by a decade, even a generation."⁵⁶ Certainly "Elias" bears out both these observations, in a number of ways. First of all, it marks Merton's return to poetry after composing little or no verse since the late 1940s (his most recent collection, *The Tears of the Blind Lions*, had been published in 1949), and is itself an affirmation of the validity of his art: in the song of the solitary bird Merton presents an image of the contemplative as poet.⁵⁷ Secondly, the main focus in the poem, as in Merton's own life, is the search for a deeper and more complete solitude, for that center of quietness where the encounter with self and God might take place. As one of the earliest and finest examples of what George Woodcock calls "poetry of the desert" (as distinguished from "poetry of the choir"),⁵⁸ "Elias" bears witness to the increasing thirst for solitude which would lead Merton a decade later into his hermitage. At the same time, the poem reflects the turn toward the world which is so prominent a dimension in Merton's later writings: the judgmental attitude toward secular society which particularly characterized some of the earlier poetry is exorcized during the course of the poem, to be replaced by a vivid sense of the common human condition of brokenness, which evokes not haughty condemnation but personal repentance and universal compassion. Finally, neither solitude nor openness to the world impedes authentic social criticism; rather, they enhance

56. George Kilcourse, "Pieces of the Mosaic, Earth: Thomas Merton and the Christ," in Timothy Mulhearn, ed., *Getting It All Together: The Heritage of Thomas Merton* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984), pp. 102, 103; a generally better edited version of this essay, in *The Message of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981), pp. 129-153, does not include the first sentence quoted. Kilcourse concludes his essay, interestingly, by quoting ll. 183-191, 199-204, of "Elias."

57. The shift in attitude toward poetry during this period can be seen by comparing the 1947 version of "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," which concludes that the poet might be required to make a "ruthless and complete sacrifice of his art" (*Figures*, p. 110) for the sake of his contemplative vocation, with the much more positive conclusion of "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," published in 1958 (see above, note 17).

58. Woodcock, p. 58.

it. For Merton as for his Elias, there is no contradiction between the contemplative and the prophetic, both of which resonate with human hopes and fears, and both of which are grounded in the discovery of true identity.

While all these elements can be found in Merton's various prose writings of the period, their synthesis in the poem could itself be described as somewhat "prophetic," a prefiguration of the stance of "marginal man" which Merton adopts in the 1960s as the essence of his monastic vocation. "The monastic life has a certain prophetic character about it," Merton will later say, because the true contemplative "is a living witness to the freedom of the sons of God and to the essential difference between that freedom and the spirit of the world," yet this does not set him against the world but rather "is something which the monk owes to the world."⁵⁹ What the poem is uniquely able to provide is a look at the *process* of integration, the struggle to discover the underlying unity of the seemingly diverse identities of poet and solitary, prophetic critic and representative human being.

But the significance of "Elias" is not confined to the insights it provides about its author. It must finally be evaluated on its own terms, as a poem. In his subtle and effective use of the Biblical Elias as paradigm for the prophet/contemplative dilemma, in his firm control of the shifting tone and mood, in the complex development of his theme, particularly in the full six-part version of the poem, in the cyclic pattern of the structure, which exemplifies in its own way Eliot's dictum that "the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time,"⁶⁰ Merton has fashioned a satisfying and successful work of art which richly repays a careful reading. It may well be that, as a poet, Merton wrote too much and revised too little, as Eliot already commented in the late 1940s,⁶¹ and that "he needed a Pound to cut him to size,"⁶² as his friend Daniel Berrigan remarked in reviewing the thousand-plus pages of *The Collected Poems*. But the unevenness and sheer bulk of Merton's output in verse should not lead, as it generally has, to a neglect of his genuine accomplishment in this field. "Elias -- Variations on a Theme" represents an excellent starting point for integrating Merton's poetry into his overall achievement as writer and spiritual guide, and for assessing his contribution to twentieth-century American poetry.

59. *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 8-9.

60. T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952), p. 145.

61. See Mott, p. 242.

62. Daniel Berrigan, "The Seventy Times Seventy Seven Storey Mountain," *Cross Currents*, 27:4 (Winter, 1977-1978), p. 393.