

## Thomas Merton's Wake-Up Calls: Aubades and Monastic Dawn Poems from *A Man in the Divided Sea*

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Thomas Merton's second published volume of poetry is aptly titled. *A Man in the Divided Sea*<sup>1</sup> refers of course to the exodus, the escape of the Israelites from Egypt through the parted waters of the Red Sea; it also reflects Merton's sense of the meaning of his own spiritual journey—the soon to be well-known story of his conversion to Catholicism and entrance into the Cistercian Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani<sup>2</sup>—as a passage from enslavement to freedom. But the title also reflects the contents of the book quite accurately in another way. Unlike his first book of verse, *Thirty Poems* (1944), only six of which were written after he had joined the Trappists,<sup>3</sup> the 56 new poems<sup>4</sup> in *A Man in the Divided Sea* can be grouped into two virtually equal divisions, the first half written before entering the monastery, the second half written in the early years of his monastic life. The collection thus provides an unparalleled opportunity to witness Merton's transition from lay to religious life, to become aware of both continuities and changes in his outlook and his interests, at least as these

1. Thomas Merton, *A Man in the Divided Sea* (New York: New Directions, 1946); all quotations unless otherwise noted will be taken from this volume.

2. Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1948), would be published two years after *A Man in the Divided Sea*.

3. For a chronology of the early poetry, see Ross Labrie, 'The Ordering of Thomas Merton's Early Poems', *Resources for American Literary Study* 8 (1979), pp. 115-17, which draws on a 1951 letter written by Merton's secretary, providing the year of composition for almost all the poems in Merton's first three collections.

4. The complete text of *Thirty Poems* is also reprinted as an appendix in *A Man in the Divided Sea*, pp. 111-55.

are reflected in his verse. Because there is so little written material available from his earliest years at Gethsemani, not only as compared to the prolific output that was to follow but even to the fairly abundant records of his last two years of secular life,<sup>5</sup> the insights provided by *A Man in the Divided Sea* are particularly valuable.

Rather than trying to describe and compare the contents of the volume as a whole, this discussion will focus on six poems sharing a common motif: the arrival of dawn. This liminal moment, the boundary and meeting point of night and day, darkness and light, was particularly fascinating for Merton, and drew him to explore repeatedly its significance in verse. Three such poems, all with the same generic title, are grouped closely together toward the end of the first half of the book: 'Aubade—Harlem' is followed by 'Aubade—The Annunciation', and then, with a single intervening poem, by 'Aubade—The City'. Three poems in the second half of volume, though not given this traditional French title for 'dawn poem',<sup>6</sup> are also reflections on

5. The period from Fall 1939 through early December 1941 is well documented by the premonastic journals published as *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation* (Journals, 1; 1939–1945; ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995). However, aside from six brief journal entries from 13 December 1941 to 3 April 1942, consisting mainly of poems (including one, 'How Long We Wait', to be discussed below), there is no further journal material extant until October 1946 (first entry in the journal-memoir of Dom Frederic Dunne), and consecutive journal entries do not begin until 10 December 1946, almost four months after the 25 August publication of *A Man in the Divided Sea*; see Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and a Writer* (Journals, 2; 1941–1952; ed. Jonathan Montaldo; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp. 2–12, 19, 31. (An as yet unpublished nine-page typescript of dated 'meditations' from 23–30 December 1941 is also extant in the Van Doren file at Columbia University.) For the years 1942–46 there are only 24 published letters: three from 1942; two from 1943; five from 1944; eleven from 1945; three from 1946; aside from two 1946 translations (*The Kingdom of Jesus* by St John Eudes and *The Soul of the Apostolate* by Jean Baptiste Chautard) and 'A Brief Comment on Modern Poetry' included in Selden Rodman's *New Anthology of Modern Poetry* from December of the same year, there is no Merton prose published in the years 1942–46. (See Patricia A. Burton, *Merton Vade Mecum* [Louisville, KY: Merton Center Foundation, 1998], pp. 4–5.)

6. See J.A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), p. 60: 'aubade (F "dawn song") The Provençal and German equivalents are *alba* and *Tagelied* ... respectively. The dawn song is found in almost all the world's early literatures and expresses the regret of parting lovers at daybreak. The earliest European examples date from the end of the 12th c. There is a theory that the *aubade* grew out of the night watchman's announcement from his tower of the passing of night and the renewal of day.' Two other early poems also share the 'aubade' title: 'Aubade: Bermuda' appeared in *Columbia Poetry* (New York: Colum-

bia University Press, 1939) but was not reprinted in Merton's lifetime; it can be found in Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 691. 'Aubade: Lake Erie', first published in the 1 August 1942 issue of *The New Yorker*, was included in Merton's first volume, *Thirty Poems* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1944), p. [7]; *Collected Poems*, p. 35. See also the 1966 poem 'Aubade on a Cloudy Morning', first published in Thomas Merton, *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985), pp. [17–18]; it also appears in Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (Journals, 6; 1966–1967; ed. Christine M. Bochen; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 59.

the coming of a new day: 'How Long We Wait' was composed very soon after Merton's arrival at Gethsemani, while 'After the Night Office—Gethsemani Abbey' and 'The Trappist Cemetery—Gethsemani' were written when Merton had become fully integrated into monastic life. While it would be unwarranted to make overly facile or dogmatic generalizations on the basis of this relatively small sample, an examination of these six poems does suggest a significant shift of tone and focus as Merton moves from the city to the abbey, and can serve as a helpful starting point for broader studies; it also calls attention to a group of challenging, interesting, well-crafted poems that deserve and reward a careful reading.

## I

'Aubade—Harlem' was inspired by the brief but critically important period in the late summer of 1941 that Merton spent at Catherine de Hueck's Friendship House on 114th Street in New York.<sup>7</sup> The poem testifies to the profound effect of this encounter with the destitute and exploited people of Harlem, which would subsequently lead not only to some of the most powerful pages in *The Seven Storey Mountain*<sup>8</sup> but to his passionate advocacy of the civil rights movement two decades later.<sup>9</sup> The germ of the poem is the realization that the experience of waking up in Harlem bears little resemblance to conventional perceptions of dawn as a time of renewal and heightened expectations: here the returning light reveals only the harsh lot of the poor, trapped in desperation and abandoned by the more affluent, but perhaps equally hopeless, residents of their city. The poem opens with a series of increasingly more ominous images of confinement:

7. See *Run to the Mountain*, pp. 384–86, 464–65.

8. See *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 345–48.

9. See especially the essays collected in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays* (ed. William H. Shannon; New York: Crossroad, 1995).

Across the cages of the keyless aviaries,  
The lines and wires, the gallows of the broken kites,  
Crucify, against the fearful light,  
The ragged dresses of the little children (ll. 1-4).

Surrounded by the intersecting network of clotheslines and electrical wires, the tenements themselves are envisioned as cages, 'keyless' both because there is no possibility of release and perhaps also as being tuneless or discordant: no songs emanate from these 'aviaries'. Any efforts to escape are frustrated, particularly those of the children, whose kites,<sup>10</sup> images of an aspiration to soar free of earthbound constraints, become tangled and broken on the crisscrossed 'lines and wires', which also form the pattern against which the children's clothing, hung out to dry, recalls the crucifixion. The spiritual implications of the situation are reinforced by the scriptural echo: whereas Christ instructed his followers to 'become like little children' and identified with them by declaring, 'whoever receives one such little child for my sake, receives me' (Mt. 18.3, 5), in Harlem this identification is inverted as the fate of Christ is symbolically inflicted on the children.

In such a setting, dawn is indeed 'fearful', for the light of day makes it impossible for the poor to evade or ignore their plight. The sun itself is perceived as a relentless enemy:

Soon, in the sterile jungles of the waterpipes and ladders,  
The bleeding sun, a bird of prey, will terrify the poor,  
Who will forget the unbelievable moon (ll. 5-7).<sup>11</sup>

With all the dangers but none of the fecundity or vitality of the true jungle, Harlem is a stifling inferno with no way out; even the ladders, traditional symbols of ascent, are here merely tenement fire escapes, but there is no escaping the torrid heat of the sun, imagined, in a distorted echo of the bird imagery of the opening line, as a rapacious predator. In this context, language itself is subverted: an image that in other circumstances might be interpreted as compassionate identification with the poor, and in concert with the previous reference to the

10. See the 15 August 1941 reference to 'hundreds of little negro kids, holding kites' in *Run to the Mountain*, p. 384, as well as the entry on the next day describing 'the gentle, ragged kids running fast in the dark warrens of the tenements and out into the street. The mother cries out to one, "don't go on the roofs to fly your kite, it might pull you over the edge"' (p. 385).

11. In *Collected Poems* (p. 82), the text of 'Aubade—Harlem' differs slightly; l. 7 begins: 'These will forget ...' This and other textual changes are based on handwritten alterations made by Merton in a copy of *A Man in the Divided Sea*, now part of the collection at the Bellarmine College Merton Center. While all changes will be noted, discussion is based on the original published text of the poem.

crucifixion might even be identified with its homophone, the bleeding Son, is here taken to be a threat and portent, as the very rays of the sun seem to be pouring down blood on the ghetto. This almost apocalyptic vision reverses the biblical pattern,<sup>12</sup> as it is the sun that is turned to blood rather than the moon, which is called 'unbelievable' because as the symbol of the hopes and dreams of the night it is driven away by the fierce, pitiless light of day.

Of course, this is not to be taken as an objective, factual description: the cause of the fear and antagonism felt by the poor is to be found not in nature but in the 'unnatural' conditions in which they are forced to live. Here the poem's strategy becomes evident: by effectively exploiting the gap between the reader's expectations of an aubade and a description of dawn that undermines these expectations, Merton in this first section of the poem highlights the ways in which poverty and discrimination transmute blessing into curse, pervert what should be a source of life and joy into a sign of estrangement and oppression.

But as the poet goes on to point out, the privileged classes are in their own way no less alienated from the natural patterns and rhythms represented by the dawn:

But in the cells and wards of whiter buildings,  
Where the glass dawn is brighter than the knives of surgeons,  
Paler than alcohol or ether,  
Greyer than guns and shinier than money,  
The white men's wives, like Pilate's,  
Cry in the peril of their frozen dreams: (ll. 8-13).<sup>13</sup>

Those who inhabit these 'whiter buildings', suggesting at once skin color, antiseptic cleanliness, pallid colorlessness and perhaps even the hypocrisy of biblical 'whited sepulchres' (Mt. 23.27), are subject to their own forms of imprisonment and illness, whether physical, mental or spiritual. Their perceptions of the new day, described as 'the glass dawn' perhaps because it is encountered through the protective, and isolating, medium of windows, or because it serves as a kind of mirror for their own preoccupations, are presented in a series of banal, mutually incompatible, progressively narrower similes indicative of imaginative and spiritual impoverishment. The first pair of responses both seem to be associated with the 'wards': those who liken the sunrise to the bright gleam of a surgeon's knife are apparently at

12. See Joel 3.4 (also quoted in Acts 2.20) and Rev. 6.12.

13. In *Collected Poems* (p. 82), 'and wards' and 'Greyer than guns and' are omitted and ll. 10-11 are printed as a single line.

least conscious of a sickness in society, though whether it can be excised in so clinical a fashion as their image suggests remains doubtful; in contrast are those who project onto the 'paler' dawn their own desire simply to blot out awareness of their problems, whether through drink or anesthetic, that is, whether the outcome is curative or not. The second set of responses descends to even more superficial comparisons of dawn to guns or money, irreconcilable ('greyer' or 'shinier') on the surface but in each case an image of control, security, power, reflecting a crassly materialistic perspective. While the way of money is more socially acceptable than the way of the gun, it may be just as acquisitive, just as aggressive, just as oppressive, just as aptly associated with 'the cells' mentioned earlier, albeit its adherents are less likely to arrive there. Viewed simply as a new opportunity for profit, the dawn of the rich represents the antithesis to the dawn that 'terrifies the poor' in Harlem; yet it may be inferred that the two responses are not without a connection.

Such a supposition draws support from the sudden outcry of the 'white men's wives', which abruptly breaks through the triteness of the previous lines. While their 'frozen dreams',<sup>14</sup> suggesting emotional numbness and absence of passion and of love to be characteristic of white society, implicitly contrast with both the 'jungle' heat and the unattainable dreams of Harlem, the recognition of 'peril' in their nightmares links these wives to their poorer neighbors. The full extent of the danger is revealed by their visions, which also clarify the comparison to Pilate's wife (cf. Mt. 26.19), whose dream impelled her to warn her husband not to execute an innocent man:

Daylight has driven iron spikes,  
 Into the flesh of Jesus' hands and feet:  
 Four flowers of blood have nailed Him to the walls of Harlem  
 (ll. 14-16).<sup>15</sup>

These crucial lines express a full awareness of the religious implications of poverty and racial prejudice: though expressed in a dream-

14. An earlier version of the poem reads 'broken dreams'.

15. An earlier version of the poem includes after l. 15 four lines omitted in all published versions:

And when the lance's tooth, as deep as death,  
 Found out His heart in hiding,  
 Lips of the fifth wound can only utter  
 Speechless blood and speechless water.

As these lines have no specific reference to the Harlem context, the poem is stronger without them.

logic that defies full rational analysis, the vision makes clear that Jesus himself is being crucified in Harlem. The identification of Jesus with the sufferings of the poor, already recognized by the poet, is now admitted by members of the dominant sector of society, and cries out for a response. While in the dream Jesus is crucified by 'Daylight', it is daylight as taken for granted in the 'whiter buildings', the accepted pattern of 'normal' life as exemplified by the shallow perspectives of the powerful and wealthy; like Pilate, they hold the fate of the innocent in their hands. Thus the 'peril' voiced by the women refers not only to the physical dangers faced by the poor but to the even more serious spiritual dangers faced by the rich, who are aligning themselves with Christ's persecutors by allowing or abetting the mistreatment of 'these least ones' (Mt. 25.45). Although the wives intervene only after the crucifixion has already begun, a sign of hope is suggested by the paradoxical image of Jesus ultimately held to Harlem's walls not by the 'iron spikes' of a malevolent sun's beams but by 'flowers of blood',<sup>16</sup> an emblem of his compassionate love and a hint of life issuing forth from death. But redemption of those responsible for this new crucifixion demands repentance and restitution; they must themselves become agents of life and liberation for those fastened to the cross of poverty and exploitation.

Unfortunately, however, their reactions recapitulate those of their New Testament counterparts:

Along the white halls of the clinics and the hospitals  
 Pilate vanishes with a cry:  
 They have cut down two hundred Judases,  
 Hanged by the neck in the opera houses and museums (ll. 17-20).

The two responses to this revelation of complicity are denial and despair: as Pilate washed his hands of Jesus' death, so here he refuses the healing role represented by the 'clinics and the hospitals' and 'vanishes with a cry',<sup>17</sup> a feeble echo of the women's impassioned utterance. Those who do acknowledge their responsibility but refuse to do anything about it have chosen death, physical or spiritual; claiming to be disciples, they have betrayed Christ. Their suicides, a grim reprise of the 'gallows' of the kites in the poem's second line, exemplify the moral bankruptcy of white culture, even the 'high culture' of 'the opera houses and museums'.

16. Merton owes this image to Federico García Lorca's *Romancero Gitano*: see Patrick F. O'Connell, 'Under the Spell of Lorca: An Important Influence on Thomas Merton's Early Poetry', *American Benedictine Review* 49.3 (1998), pp. 256-86 (284).

17. The text in *Collected Poems* (p. 82) reads: 'evaporates with a cry'.



Following this abdication of responsibility, the poem concludes with a repetition of the opening four lines, which seems to suggest a pessimistic vision of death without resurrection: nothing has changed; the cycle begins again; the same situation is set to continue dawn after dawn, day after day. But an alternative interpretation is also available: by returning to the beginning of the poem, Merton is providing an opportunity to begin over, with the hope that this time the outcome will be different; he is implicitly issuing a challenge to his readers to repudiate the hardheartedness of the Pilates and Judases, to 'rewrite' the poem in their own lives by seeing the presence of Jesus in the poor and doing unto them as they would do unto him. In this way 'Aubade—Harlem' functions as a kind of wake-up call, a summons to deepened awareness and committed action.

## II

Although 'Aubade—Harlem' is followed immediately in *A Man in the Divided Sea* by 'Aubade—The Annunciation', which provides an effective counterpoint to the Harlem poem by its positive presentation of the dawn, there are two good reasons for postponing consideration of this poem in favor of 'Aubade—The City': first, the latter poem shares with 'Aubade—Harlem' both an urban setting and a hostile response to the dawn; secondly, it is possible, despite its location in the volume, that 'Aubade—The Annunciation' was actually written after Merton had entered Gethsemani: in any case it provides an apt transition to the monastic dawn poems. Hence for these two poems the order of analysis will reverse the order of appearance.

An initial reading of 'Aubade—The City' might well consider it to be derivative of and inferior to 'Aubade—Harlem'. Certainly a negative reaction to the coming of a new day has substantially lost any shock value with its second appearance here. But in this poem the dawn is resisted for reasons quite different from those in 'Aubade—Harlem', and the complete absence of all religious imagery gives this poem a strikingly different tone. Taken on its own terms 'Aubade—The City' provides a strong and cogent critique of secular urban society, alienated from nature, from meaningful human existence, and implicitly from God.

The opening lines of the poem quickly establish an opposition between the city, personified by the windows of its buildings, and nature, represented by the morning sun:

Now that the clouds have come like cattle  
To the cold waters of the city's river,

All the windows turn their scandalized expression  
Toward the tide's tin dazzle,

And question, with their weak-eyed stare,  
The riotous sun (ll. 1-6).

Despite the urban setting, the poem begins with the decidedly rural image of clouds drinking from the river 'like cattle', an unexpected yet apt figure for evaporation, mists over the water at dawn. Though attention is quickly shifted elsewhere, this depiction of the processes of nature as operating according to a harmonious, orderly pattern of interaction remains an alternative interpretation to the perspective represented by the windows, 'scandalized' by the dazzling light glinting off the water, too bright for its 'weak-eyed stare'. From this point of view, the natural world, exemplified by the 'riotous sun', violates proper standards of order as established in the city. It is invasive, intrusive, unwanted.

Hence the coming of day evokes resistance, though it is ineffectual:

From several places at a time  
Cries of defiance,  
As delicate as frost, as sharp as glass,  
Rise from the porcelain buildings  
And break in the blue sky.

Then, falling swiftly from the air,  
The fragments of this fragile indignation  
Ring on the echoing streets  
No louder than a shower of pins (ll. 7-15).

The impression given by these lines is one of impotence and artificiality. The protests are no match for the power of nature's light: the comparisons to frost and glass merely suggest how easily the 'cries of defiance' can be melted and/or shattered by the sun. The whole process of rebellion can be read as a kind of effete parody of the natural cycle of drawing up water into clouds to fall as rain, but here the result is an unnatural 'shower of pins', weapons hurled against the 'blue sky' but reduced to insignificant proportions and falling back useless. Yet the description of the buildings as 'porcelain', evocative of refinement as well as fragility, still maintains the city's claim to embody order and culture in contrast to the boisterous, unruly presence of the sun.

But the presumption of an inescapable opposition between nature and city is undermined by the lines that follow, which demonstrate that urban reality is not inherently incompatible with nature:

But suddenly the bridges' choiring cables  
Jangle gently in the wind  
And play like quiet piano strings (ll. 16-18).

With its homage to the 'choiring strings' of Hart Crane's poem 'To Brooklyn Bridge',<sup>18</sup> this brief description of the harmonious interplay of wind and cables, producing a far different sound than pins ringing on 'echoing streets', is the turning point of the poem; for it implicitly raises the question why conflict between the urban and the natural exists, since it can no longer be regarded as inevitable.

Thus the second half of the poem will shift the focus from personification to persons, will look behind the façades of the 'porcelain buildings' and their windows to discover the human sources of hostility to the light. But first a contrasting response, a refusal of contact and interaction, is described:

All down the faces of the buildings  
Windows begin to close  
Like figures in a long division (ll. 19-21).

The comparison is ingenious yet apt: the rows of windows closing to shut out the daylight can be compared to rows of figures in a long division problem because they begin to close at the top of a building, where the sun first strikes, and then continue down the side as the sun hits floor after floor. But this 'long division' serves as well as a kind of metonymy for isolation from the natural world, an artificial division of the world outside the buildings' walls from the human world within, which now becomes the main focus of the poem.

To this point human beings have been oddly absent from the poem. Resistance to the new day has appeared to come from the city itself, as though it had a life of its own. It is not clear whether even the 'Cries of defiance' that challenged the dawn were human cries or those of the personified buildings themselves. But such a mythic approach is unable to provide a fully satisfactory explanation of the opposition, particularly after the moment of harmony on the bridges has signaled the possibility of a completely different relationship between nature and the city. It becomes necessary to look behind 'the faces of the buildings' to see the actual human faces within, and even to look behind those faces in the hope of discerning hidden attitudes and motivations. Only by penetrating the façades can the true sources of the conflict be uncovered. This is what the poem now proceeds to do:

18. See Hart Crane, *Complete Poems and Selected Letters* (ed. Brom Weber; Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1966), p. 46.

Those whose eyes all night have simulated sleep,  
Suddenly stare, from where they lie, like wolves,  
Tied in the tangle of the bedding,  
And listen for the waking blood  
To flood the apprehensive silence of their flesh.  
They fear the heart that now lies quenched may quicken,  
And start to romp against the rib,  
Soft and insistent as a secret bell (ll. 22-29).

What is discovered in the rooms behind the closing windows are people who are at odds with their environment because they are at odds with themselves. These are not the victimized poor of Harlem, who fear the day because it brings a renewal of their oppression; these are creatures filled with a malevolent but impotent fury, who 'stare ... like wolves' as the light returns, but like captive wolves, 'Tied in the tangle of the bedding'. They have created their own bondage, are tied up by their own restlessness and discontent. They experience even the flowing of their own blood as a disturbance, a 'flood' that overwhelms their 'apprehensive silence'. Their primary motivation, the source of their hostility, is fear. They prefer a 'quenched' heart, deadened to life and love, and are worried that it will 'quicken' and begin to 'romp', not merely to beat but to beat with joyous abandon, with the spontaneous freedom of a child at play. The same objection made to the 'riotous sun', to the supposed disorder of nature, is now directed within, but with no more validity: even the metrical regularity of these lines, comparable to the rhythm of a heartbeat, makes clear that the quickened heart is not out of control. In fact the romping heart is also described as being 'Soft and insistent as a secret bell', which suggests that what is most deeply feared is the heart's summons to commitment and involvement, its call to go both within and beyond the self. These are people who would rather continue to maintain a kind of emotional and spiritual numbness than to hear and respond to their own hearts' longings, their own hearts' demands.

This fear of the heart parallels and explains their fear of the dawn:

They also fear that light will grow  
Into the windows of their hiding places, like a tree  
Of tropical flowers  
And put them, one by one, to flight (ll. 30-33).

The image of the light as a tree reaching its branches through the windows and spreading throughout the room, invading and filling all available space, is nightmarish, but of course delusory, a paranoid response: light occupies no space, and drives them away only because they have chosen to dwell in darkness. Unresponsive to the beauty

and warmth of the light, for them the 'tree / Of tropical flowers' represents only the uncontrollable enemy that violates the sanctuary of their 'hiding places' and forces them into the street 'one by one', still in isolation, without even a sense of shared experience.

The final section of the poem follows those routed from their apartments through the crowded city streets to their workplaces:

Then life will have to begin.  
 Pieces of paper, lying in the streets,  
 Will start up, in the twisting wind,  
 And fly like idiot birds before the faces of the crowds.  
 And in the roaring buildings  
 Elevator doors will have begun  
 To clash like swords (ll. 34-40).

These lines may initially seem inconsistent with what has preceded. That is, the reader may be led to wonder whether the city dwellers were not right to try to repel and avoid the day when this is what it brings, apparently purposeless activity and meaningless commotion. Outside, there is movement without direction, bits of paper blown about 'like idiot birds'. Once indoors, the crowds are confronted with noise and confusion, and to get to work they must pass through elevator doors that 'clash like swords', a sort of debased echo of the challenges faced by questing knights, but here representing only their own feelings of being threatened by the burdens of modern urban society. Given this scenario, it is little wonder that people hate to get up in the morning, and that they don't hesitate to express their resentment.

This final verse paragraph seems to evoke a much more sympathetic response to the people's dilemma than the preceding sections, and calls into question the coherence of the speaker's perspective. But in fact this purposeless daily round is not so much an alternative to the night's restless isolation as its consequence and continuation. Despite the supposition of those driven from their 'hiding places' that 'Then life will have to begin', in actuality authentic life, meaningful life, does not begin. They have brought with them the 'death-in-life' of fear and alienation, which simply assumes a more public, more social form. It is not to this diminished existence that the 'secret bell' of the heart has summoned them. But in fearing and shunning the light, in refusing to listen to their own hearts, they have chosen to ignore all hints of transcendence, and have settled for a definition, and an experience, of life that cannot bring genuine fulfillment. By their failure of vision and failure of courage, they are the creators, if also the victims, of the soulless, faceless society they have futilely tried to escape.

Rather than contradicting what has preceded, the poem's conclusion reveals the full extent of the damage caused by a reductivist worldview that finds in the vitality of nature not an invitation to a richer life but a searching, threatening critique that exposes the hollowness at the core of both the individual and society and so is resented and resisted at all costs. Far from being just an inferior copy of 'Aubade—Harlem', 'Aubade—The City' reworks the basic motif of the previous poem to strikingly different effect, developing a probing analysis of those who shun the dawn not because it is a sign of death but because it is a sign of life.

### III

With its scriptural subject, the third of the aubades contrasts dramatically with the two poems of contemporary life already discussed, and its positioning immediately after 'Aubade—Harlem' provides a note of hope and joy, though not unmixed with a sober realism, to balance the grim depiction of Christ crucified in his exploited people. While the only source of external evidence lists 'Aubade—The Annunciation' among those poems written in 1941 before Merton entered the monastery, it is a letter written ten years later and is not necessarily definitive.<sup>19</sup> The reference to the divine office in the opening line indicates possible monastic influence, but perhaps the most telling, though easily overlooked, piece of internal evidence is the phrase 'our peaceful barns' in line 22, Merton's characteristic way of referring to monastic property after joining the Trappists,<sup>20</sup> which suggests the poem may have at least been revised, if not composed, after he entered Gethsemani. Also, while it is not necessary for the poem to have been written close to the time of the feast it commemorates, this would have been a likely occasion for doing so, and its placement in the volume lends no support to a dating in March of 1941 (before Merton had even visited Gethsemani). So it is at least possible that

19. See Labrie, 'Ordering', p. 116.

20. See for example 'our barns' (l. 8), 'our windows' (l. 18), 'our barns and houses' (l. 20) in 'The Evening of the Visitation' (1942) in *Thirty Poems*; 'our grassy hills' (l. 5), 'our vineyards' (l. 12), 'our Trappist cedars' (l. 17) in 'How Long We Wait' (1942); and 'our saws' (l. 1), 'our saws and axes' (l. 6), 'our regions' (l. 10) in 'Trappists, Working' (1942) in *A Man in the Divided Sea*; 'our forests' (l. 6), 'our green woods' (l. 19) in 'A Letter to America' (1946) and 'our world of fruit and wheat' (l. 2), 'our bursting barns' (l. 12), 'our vines and garden' (l. 13) in 'The Transformation: For the Sacred Heart' (1946) in *Figures for an Apocalypse (Collected Poems, pp. 43-44, 89-90, 96, 152, 175)*.



'Aubade—The Annunciation' dates from late March 1942, and was placed in an earlier position in the generally but not rigidly chronological ordering of *A Man in the Divided Sea* in order to describe a very different response to dawn from those in the two urban aubades. In any case, the scriptural and liturgical setting of the poem makes it an effective prelude to the dawn poems definitely written at Gethsemani.

The opening lines situate the events to be related in a liturgical, if not strictly monastic, time frame,<sup>21</sup> though of course the Annunciation predates the Christian pattern of the hours of prayer:

When the dim light, at Lauds, comes strike her window,  
Bellsong falls out of Heaven with a sound of glass (ll. 1-2).

The deliberate anachronism, which will recur elsewhere in the poem as well, has the effect here of linking the time of writing with the time being described, but more importantly suggests that the office of Lauds in this case refers to a heavenly service of praise, particularly appropriate for the day of the Incarnation. The first light of morning coincides with and even merges into the sound of music from heaven—it is the light that strikes the window but the 'bellsong' that makes 'a sound of glass'. There is a suggestion of the revelatory quality of the light, accompanied as it is by the sound of the heavenly liturgy, which can be heard because the heavens themselves have been opened, though the reason why is not yet mentioned. This correspondence between light and sound indicates that this is to be a moment of epiphany, an experience of *kairos*, God's time.

The lines that follow focus on the upward movement of prayer, complementing the downward movement of the bellsong:

Prayers fly in the mind like larks,  
Thoughts hide in the height like hawks:  
And while the country churches tell their blessings to the distance,  
Her slow words move,  
(Like summer winds the wheat) her innocent love:  
Desires glitter in her mind  
Like morning stars: (ll. 3-9).

The lark is of course famed as a dawn bird that sings in flight, as in Shakespeare's famous reference to the 'lark at break of day arising' to sing 'hymns at heaven's gate',<sup>22</sup> and the hawks, while not particularly

21. In *Thomas Merton: Monk and Artist* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), Victor A. Kramer associates these lines with a monastic setting; he comments: 'Interestingly, the time designation which Merton uses in this poem is that of the monastery where he himself has found peace' (p. 46).

22. William Shakespeare, Sonnet 29, ll. 11-12.

associated with daybreak, may owe something to Hopkins' 'dawn-drawn falcon' in 'The Windhover'.<sup>23</sup> The first comparison suggests the upward direction of Mary's prayer, as well as implying a similarity to the lark's joyful response to the dawn, while the second indicates that the thought remains elevated like soaring hawks, almost beyond human perception. But these images of elevation are balanced by the image of rootedness, being grounded in the earth like wheat: always for Merton having eucharistic connotations, here an analogue for the 'transubstantiation' of the Incarnation about to be realized. While her thoughts are on high her words stir her love into movement as wind does wheat—the implication that love, like wheat, grows will be developed later in the poem. The 'country churches' in the background are of course another anachronism, enabling, or forcing, the reader to see both the time of beginning (the Annunciation) and the time of fulfillment of their faith simultaneously—the churches 'tell their blessings' of course by ringing their bells, so there is a reciprocity between the heavenly bellsong and the earthly response. (If these are conceived as angelus bells, the blessings of which they tell are to be recognized specifically as those about to be enacted: the 'Aves' repeat the angel's greeting and declare Mary and the fruit of her womb to be blessed.) This section concludes by returning to the higher plane to describe her 'desires', her hopes, aspirations, dreams, as heavenly, specifically as 'morning stars' preceding and preparing for the coming of full daylight.

But what actually happens surpasses the expected arrival of the dawn in its impact and its significance:

Until her name is suddenly spoken  
Like a meteor falling (ll. 10-11).

As in the first two lines, there is again a merging of sound (her name) and light (meteor), and as the bellsong fell from heaven, so now Mary's name (never actually mentioned throughout the poem!) is spoken with the sudden, unexpected, bright, shattering impact of a meteor, in a sense the fulfillment of her desires, as a star falls from heaven to earth, becomes accessible and able to be realized. Thus these two lines both complete a frame around the description of Mary's prayer by recapitulating the movement of the first two lines, and extend in a paradoxical way the star image that concludes the

23. See Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose* (ed. W.H. Gardner; Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 30 (cf. also 'hide in the height' with 'my heart in hiding' [l. 7] of that poem).



previous passage, bringing to a conclusion the pattern of alternation between falling and rising that has given the entire poem thus far its form.

While the preceding lines are filled with imagery related to the dawn, the revelatory experience so transcends ordinary life that it renders Mary oblivious to the actual arrival of the morning sun:

She can no longer hear shrill day  
Sing in the east,  
Nor see the lovely woods begin to toss their manes.  
The rivers have begun to sing.  
The little clouds shine in the sky like girls:  
She has no eyes to see their faces (ll. 12-17).

The natural light of dawn, as beautiful and attractive as it is, cannot even begin to compare to the more profound dawning of heavenly light. Paradoxically, the coming of day brings a kind of deafness and blindness: having heard her name spoken, Mary is unable to hear the coming of day, described as a 'shrill' song, as compared with the sound of the angelic greeting; blinded by the light of revelation, she is unable to see the 'lovely woods', which are filled with vitality and movement as though they were horses about to gallop away. A second pair of images continues this alternation between hearing and sight, as the rivers join in the song of day and the clouds in the sky catch the sunlight so as to suggest young girls with glowing, rosy cheeks. The scene presents not only the coming of a new day but the beginning of a new year, with budding trees and once frozen rivers flowing musically.

Though the beauty and harmony of this scene is vividly presented, Mary's inability to see or hear it is explained by the fact that the natural landscape is only the palest analogue to the inner, spiritual landscape entered and transformed by the angel's message:

Speech of an angel shines in the waters of her thought like diamonds,  
Rides like a sunburst on the hillsides of her heart,  
And is brought home like harvests,  
Hid in her house, and stored  
Like the sweet summer's riches in our peaceful barns (ll. 18-22).

Again the dimensions of sound and light are merged as the words of the angel, explicitly mentioned for the first time in the poem, are compared to light reflecting off water like diamonds, symbol of preciousness and of course traditionally associated with the gift of a lover to his beloved. Here is a source of light that infinitely surpasses the sunlight, the true dawn compared to which the new day remains but a

'dim light'. The angel's message both illuminates her mind and lights up her heart, as overwhelming as the sun itself leaving heaven and riding among the hills. It is evident here that it is not simply the angel's words but the content of his message that is being described: what shines and rides is in fact the Divine Word of whom the angel speaks, now to become the Word Incarnate, 'hid in her house' as a child in the womb. This speech/Word is already compared to the harvest: it is the fruition of Mary's 'innocent love', likened earlier to waving wheat, the fulfillment of the entire process of prayer and longing already described; it is also the harvest of the seeds of revelation sown throughout history, bringing to fulfillment the expectations of the patriarchs and prophets; but it is likewise to be recognized as the fulness of redemption to be accomplished by the Word become flesh, anticipated and already experienced in its beginning. In the final, most meaningful anachronism, the whole course of salvation is foreseen in this *kairos*, this timeless moment in time.

But the poet is too honest, too faithful to the truths of experience, simply to conclude at this point, as satisfying as it is.<sup>24</sup> In the final lines of the poem the reader is brought back to the 'unsaved' world, unaware of the angelic revelation and unresponsive even to the 'natural' revelation of the dawn:

But in the world of March outside her dwelling,  
The farmers and the planters  
Fear to begin their sowing, and its lengthy labor,  
Where, on the brown, bare furrows,  
The winter wind still croons as dumb as pain (ll. 23-27).

Here the reader is pulled back into the world of *chronos*, a sober reminder of the need for incarnation and redemption, as the fulfillment of the harvest is juxtaposed to the recognition of the onerous task of sowing. At this point, even the beauty of nature is seemingly absent, and human experience is marked only by fear, labor and pain. Not the harmony of spring, or the rippling of growing wheat in the 'summer winds', but the 'dumb'—inarticulate, meaningless—'crooning' of the winter wind, reminiscent of a mother's song to her child, but expressing not joy and love but pain, is the sound of the bare fields. The question is raised: does the sound of pain cancel out the singing of day and river? Does the winter wind 'dumb as pain' drown out the angel's speech? The answer is obviously 'no', but it is

24. An earlier version of this poem, now in the Van Doren file at Columbia University, does not in fact include ll. 23-27; the present ll. 18-22 precede the present ll. 12-17, which conclude the poem.

important that the question be posed. The two radically different scenes grouped around the angel's message, as though in a medieval triptych, suggest that the material world in and of itself is ambiguous in its witness. There is a need for an intervention beyond the natural to validate the sacramentality of the first scene and to transcend and transform the suffering world of the second. All three of these scenes are true, and it is part of the Christian mystery to be faithful and responsive to all three. Christians are not allowed to enjoy the vision of fulfillment without recognizing the struggles that precede it. The 'world of March', that is, the Lenten world, is a reminder that the harvest is produced only because the seed falls into the ground and dies (Jn 12.24). Even at the glorious moment of the dawn of salvation, the darkness of Calvary cannot be ignored. But if 'pain' is the last word of the poem, it is not the last word of the story: the speech of the angel, the Word enfleshed in Jesus, is the promise that those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy, and that all who labor will find rest in the One whom the angel announced.

#### IV

Merton continued to write poetry after entering Gethsemani, and one of his earliest efforts was another dawn poem, entitled 'How Long We Wait', dated Epiphany 1942,<sup>25</sup> less than a month after his arrival. It provides fascinating insights into his adoption of a monastic identity and outlook. His use of the first-person plural voice, characteristic of the early monastic verse, is indicative of how fully he had already assumed the perspective of his new community; in fact the reader might be permitted a smile when reflecting on the poem's opening words and realizing that 'how long' Merton himself has been waiting, at least as part of the collective 'we', has been about 28 days. How quickly and deeply he had become immersed in the liturgical life of the monastery is revealed by the central role psalm paraphrases and allusions play in the poem. But the most significant evidence for his developing monastic sensibility is his adaptation of the traditional fourfold method of scriptural interpretation. Though the theme of the poem is obviously deeply spiritual, it is conveyed only by indirection. On the literal level, the poem simply describes the experience of waiting for the coming of dawn. There is no explicitly religious language used anywhere in the poem (if the personified 'Heaven', and the abbey steeple and 'Trappist cedars' are excepted). But

25. See *Entering the Silence*, pp. 4-5.

traditional patristic and monastic exegesis considered that in addition to the literal sense, up to three figurative levels of meaning could be found in a scripture passage (or even in a poem like Dante's *The Divine Comedy*):<sup>26</sup> the typological or allegorical level would refer to the life of Christ, the tropological or moral level to Christ's relations with the individual soul, and the anagogical or eschatological level to the end times, the final consummation of the drama of salvation. This monastic way of approaching a text is also the best way to read this poem, in which the literal sense points beyond itself to deeper levels of meaning.<sup>27</sup>

The opening lines provide an introduction to how this method works:

How long we wait, with minds as quiet as time,  
Like sentries on a tower.  
How long we watch, by night, like the astronomers (ll. 1-3).

No mention is yet made of just what the speaker and his fellows are waiting for. The emphasis is on the slowness of the process (emphasized by the three successive stressed syllables with a long 'i' in the first line) as well as the alertness and fidelity ('Like sentries') of the watchers. But the first sentence is clearly a reworking of a verse from Psalm 129:<sup>28</sup> 'My soul waits for the Lord, more than sentinels for the dawn, more than sentinels for the dawn.' If this allusion is recognized, both the literal and figurative levels are clarified, though in the poem, unlike the psalm, waiting for the dawn becomes the literal level and waiting for the Lord the figurative. But the traditional method identifies three figurative levels: which is operative here? There are hints, at least, of all three. The second sentence calls to mind both the

26. See Dante's famous letter to Can Grande Della Scala for a clear description of the fourfold interpretation, quoted in Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Hell* (trans. Dorothy L. Sayers; Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1949), pp. 14-15.

27. While in his discussion of the Psalms in *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953), Merton simplifies the terminology to speak of 'the literal sense ... and the typical sense' (p. 29), in applying these distinctions to the Genesis flood story he clearly makes the threefold figurative application to Christ, to the individual soul and to the final judgment, without using the terms 'tropological' and 'anagogical' (pp. 63-64). In his not yet published novitiate lectures on 'Cassian and the Fathers', Merton refers to the fourfold interpretation explicitly: 'By 'contemplation' Nesteros means only the penetration of the meaning of Scripture, first through the *historical* sense, then in its *spiritual* sense (tropological, allegorical, anagogical)' (Part II, p. 8).

28. The numbering of the Psalms will correspond to the Vulgate text that Merton would have used at the time of composing these poems.

shepherds, 'keeping watch... by night' (Lk. 2.8) and the Magi, 'the astronomers' watching for the star in the east (an appropriate allusion for a poem written on the Feast of the Epiphany). Here the second, or typological, level can be seen: waiting for the dawn is like waiting for the birth of Christ. Since the poem will focus on the future rather than the past, this parallelism will not be developed further, but it does support the analogy between those who awaited the first coming of the Lord and those who await his coming now. The other two levels of interpretation will predominate throughout the rest of the poem, but they are only touched on here in the comparison of the waiting mind to time, which suggests both the quiet contemplative expectation of the individual soul (the tropological level) and the temporal waiting that lasts throughout history (the anagogical level). As the poem develops, these two possible figurative interpretations will each emerge as a legitimate way of reading the poem.

The section of the poem that follows both clarifies the literal level and provides appropriate images for the figurative levels:

Heaven, when will we hear you sing,  
 Arising from our grassy hills,  
 And say: 'The dark is done, and Day  
 Laughs like a Bridegroom in His tent, the lovely sun,  
 His tent the sun, His tent the smiling sky!' (ll. 4-8).

The point at which heaven can be seen arising from the hills is best understood as the first faint flush of light when the line of the horizon makes it possible to distinguish earth from sky; but it also suggests that the coming of day is an image of resurrection, a return to life from the darkness of death. By imagining the (not yet spoken) words of Heaven,<sup>29</sup> the poet is able to juxtapose descriptions of expectation and of realization, to convey vividly the reasons for their longing. The switch from future to present tense imaginatively transports the listener into the time of fulfillment—on the literal level the arrival of Day, on the figurative level the coming of the Lord. Here again a psalm verse provides the imagery and suggests the proper interpretation: 'He has pitched a tent there for the Sun, which comes forth like a groom from his bridal chamber, and like a giant, joyfully runs its course' (Ps. 18.5-6). The image as expressed by Heaven is slightly but significantly revised from that of the psalm: it is Day that is compared to the Bridegroom, rather than the sun, which is described as his tent, later expanded to the entire 'smiling sky' as the new light spreads,

29. In the earlier version of the poem included in *Entering the Silence*, the address both here and in line 11 is made to Earth rather than to Heaven.

which has the effect of making the dome of the sky itself the bridal chamber, which Day does not leave but enter—a more apt image for bridal union as applied to the figurative levels. For the role of the Bridegroom is frequently associated in the New Testament with the person of Jesus, as in Mk 2.17, when the wedding guests do not fast while the bridegroom is with them, or in the parable of the ten bridesmaids in Mt. 25.1-13, which appears repeatedly in Merton's poetry.<sup>30</sup> Thus the coming of the Day is able to symbolize the coming of Christ; and since the bridegroom symbol has a long history of use both to describe Christ the spouse uniting the soul to himself in contemplative love, and to describe the triumphant Christ come to bring the elect to the wedding banquet of the Kingdom of God, the words of Heaven can be read on both the tropological and the anagogical levels, as representing both the mystical and the eschatological return of Jesus: the two senses mirror each other and are equally appropriate. Thus without any overt mention of the deeper significance of this process of waiting for dawn, the poem has taken on a rich spiritual texture in which the approaching Day can be recognized as Christ, the Light of the World.

The structural development of the poem operates by a kind of repetition and variation: the lines that follow both parallel the opening lines and bring the address to Heaven to a conclusion by repeating the opening apostrophe:

How long we wait with minds as dim as ponds  
 While stars swim slowly homeward in the water of our west!  
 Heaven, when will we hear you sing? (ll. 9-11).

The anticipated joy of the future in Heaven's speech is immediately countered by the present experience of delay: minds are now described as 'dim as ponds' that reflect the darkness of the night sky, though it is not complete darkness, since they reflect as well the stars that 'swim ... in the water of our west'. The impression of slowness is effectively conveyed by this description: the three successive alliterated stressed syllables ('stars swim slow-') as well as the repetition of

30. See for example 'The Winter's Night' (ll. 15-17); 'The Trappist Abbey—Matins' (ll. 12-16); 'The Holy Sacrament of the Altar' (ll. 10, 14, 19); 'The Peril' (ll. 8-9); 'Figures for an Apocalypse' I (ll. 34-44) (*Collected Poems*, pp. 38, 45, 50, 87, 136); see also the epigraph to *Figures for an Apocalypse*, taken from this parable (Mt. 25.6): 'And at midnight there was a cry made: Behold, the Bridegroom cometh, go ye forth to meet Him' (*Collected Poems*, p. 134). Merton returns to this parable in his late poem in French, 'Les cinq vierges', written for Jacques Maritain (*Collected Poems*, p. 819; English translation, pp. 826-27).



the long 'o' sound in 'slowly' and 'homeward' make the sound effectively reinforce the sense of sluggish movement.

By extending the process of waiting back into the past, this impression of seemingly interminable waiting is reinforced:

How long we listened to the silence of our vineyards  
And heard no bird stir in the rising barley.  
The stars go home behind the shaggy trees.  
Our minds are grey as rivers (ll. 12-15).

These lines are dominated by the perception of unchanging delay, yet contain certain hidden indications of some progression. The absence of birdsong, which typically begins just before dawn, is a negative sign, emphasized once again by the sound of the verse, here the heavy beat of the four stressed monosyllables of 'heard no bird stir', three of which rhyme fully or partially and the remaining one an open long 'o', an arrangement that retards the voice significantly. With the return to present tense the situation may appear to have become even more difficult, as the darkness increases because the light of the stars has become blocked by the 'shaggy trees.' But the reason for their disappearance is that they 'go home', itself an indication that the deeper darkness precludes the coming of light, and the mind is now compared not to a still pond but to a flowing river, an image of movement even if it remains grey; and although there is no birdsong in the field, the barley itself is able to be described as 'rising', an image of growth and an echo of the anticipating 'Arising' of Heaven at the coming of the Day. While these signs of hope are obscure, they are nevertheless present.

As the poem draws toward its conclusion, the earth is now addressed, paralleling the earlier cry to Heaven:

O earth, when will you wake in the green wheat,  
And all our Trappist cedars sing:  
'Bright land, lift up your leafy gates!  
You abbey steeple, sing with bells!  
For look, our Sun rejoices like a dancer  
On the rim of our hills' (ll. 16-21).

The reference to the 'green wheat' here, complementing that of the 'vineyards' in the previous section as well as succeeding the earlier ripening barley, suggests the process of growth, dependent on the sunlight, as continuing, and points to the harvest as another image of completion, one that of course has traditional Christian associations, as already seen in 'Aubade—The Annunciation', and also has eucharistic overtones—another dimension of the coming of Christ and

the transformation of the earthly into the divine through the actions of the 'Sun of Righteousness'. Again there is an imagined address to the dawn, this time by 'our Trappist cedars',<sup>31</sup> whose height heralds the dawn because they will be touched by the sun's first rays. These words are addressed both to the earth, whose 'leafy gates' must be lifted to allow the light of day to stream through, and to the steeple of the abbey church, whose bells greeting the new day will make the song of greeting audible to human ears. Here it is the sun itself, described by 'our Trappist cedars' as 'our sun', the plural form emphasizing the sense of kinship, that is envisioned at the very moment of dawn, ready to spring like a dancer into the sky, moving to the song of heaven and earth. Again an echo of a psalm suggests the figurative significance of the greeting, in this case Ps. 23.9-10: 'Lift up, O gates, your lintels, reach up, you ancient portals, that the king of glory may come in! Who is this king of glory? The Lord of hosts; he is the king of glory'. Who is this long awaited son? The Lord of hosts; he is the true sun, and his appearance symbolizes both the enlightenment of the contemplative and the dawn of the eternal Sun that will know no setting, for each of which, for both of which, the reader is also invited to say, 'How long we wait'.

After this exultant, triumphal announcement, the one final line, standing alone, comes as something of a letdown, an anticlimax, or rather an anteclimax:

In the blue west the moon is uttered like the word: 'Farewell' (l. 22).

It draws the poem back from the future into the present, a staid reminder that the fulfillment imaginatively celebrated with such enthusiasm is not yet realized, that the sun is not yet 'on the rim of our hills'. Yet it is nevertheless a statement of hope: the moon is near the completion of its journey, seen in the west, 'the blue west' not the black west, a hint of color even in the far horizon. She is seen as the embodiment of the word 'Farewell', an expression of the end of the old order and a prophecy of the beginning of the new. Even though the poem ends before the waiting ends, the assurance that dawn is indeed imminent, that patience and fidelity have not been in vain, marks the quiet but hopeful conclusion of the poem. Poised on the brink of dawn, anticipating the inbreaking of light at any moment, this poem provides a wonderful insight into Merton's state of mind as a new Trappist, in the first flush of enthusiasm for the new life he has embarked upon, suffused with hope and expectation, with his

31. The earlier version of the poem reads 'our Trappist oaks and cedars'.

excitement held in check, but barely, impatient for the full illumination of the divine presence to make its appearance in his own life and the life of the world. It is a poem that perhaps only someone young in religious life could write, but also a poem that someone young in religious life should write.

## V

'After the Night Office—Gethsemani Abbey', written in 1945,<sup>32</sup> is clearly the work of a more experienced, more mature monk, and one who has become deeply versed in apophatic or negative theology, which finds in darkness the place of encounter with God. Rather than looking forward to the dawn, the speaker prefers the night in which he meets the hidden Christ. Rather than focusing on the analogy between natural and divine light, he contrasts the two and chooses the second in preference to the first, realizing that the divine light is experienced only in darkness, and that therefore night is superior to day.<sup>33</sup>

The poem begins with a description of that predawn period of prayer after the communal celebration of matins and lauds at 3 am:

It is not yet the grey and frosty time  
When barns ride out of the night like ships:  
We do not see the Brothers, bearing lanterns,  
Sink in the quiet mist,  
As various as the spirits who, with lamps, are sent  
To search our souls' Jerusalems  
Until our houses are at rest  
And minds enfold the Word, our Guest (ll. 1-8).

The present is described as a time of stillness and complete darkness, contrasted with the time of transition to come, the 'journey' from darkness to light imaged as the barns that 'ride out of the night'. It is differentiated as well from the movement of light into darkness, represented by the brothers disappearing into the mist in various

32. See Labrie, 'Ordering', p. 116.

33. In *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1979), Ross Labrie calls attention to 'Merton's finely tinted portrait of his fellow monks [which] is enhanced by an astute structuring that brings out the heavenly paradox underlying their nocturnal lives' (p. 119), and adds, 'The poem's color, serenity and tenderness make it one of the most appealing lyrics' (p. 120) in the volume. For an extended discussion of the poem, see Sheila M. Hempstead, 'Bells in Thomas Merton's Early Poetry, 1940-1946', *The Merton Annual* 2 (1989), pp. 257-87 (273-76).

directions with their lanterns. Neither movement is of great significance to the speaker because both involve change rather than being 'at rest'. The brothers are likened to the spirits, presumably guardian angels, who function as night watchmen sent to protect 'our souls' Jerusalems', but whereas the brothers go to check on material concerns until the natural light makes their lanterns unnecessary, the spirits are checking on spiritual concerns until the supernatural darkness makes their lamps unnecessary. In view of the line that follows, they are probably to be identified with the watchmen of the Song of Songs, whom the Bride encounters as she seeks 'him whom my heart loves' (Song 3.3). With their lamps they represent a preliminary stage of spiritual development, for they search only 'Until our houses are at rest', a line borrowed from the poem 'The Dark Night' of John of the Cross,<sup>34</sup> symbolizing the state of contemplative recollection, the darkness of the intellect and emptiness of the spirit, in which 'the Word, our Guest' may be received.

The verse paragraph that follows explores the paradox that this darkness is light, and this stillness is swiftest movement:

Praises and canticles anticipate  
Each day the singing bells that wake the sun,  
But now our psalmody is done.  
Our hasting souls outstrip the day:  
Now, before dawn, they have their noon.  
The Truth that transubstantiates the body's night  
Has made our minds His temple-tent:  
Open the secret eye of faith  
And drink these deeps of invisible light (ll. 9-17).

The psalmody of the night office 'anticipates' the function of the bells to usher in the new day not only in the sense that its songs precede the 'singing' of the bells, but that it prepares the soul for the coming of a divine light long before the arrival of daybreak. Though 'at rest', the souls of the monks have already reached 'their noon' when the Sun is at its height. As in 'How Long We Wait', the poet alludes to the 'tent for the sun, which comes forth like a groom from the bridal chamber' from Psalm 18. But here it is not the dome of the sky but the mind, the inner self, which is the 'temple-tent', the place of encounter with the Lord, filled with the light of the divine Sun. For what appears to be darkness to the senses ('the body's night') has been transformed,

34. See line 5: 'Estando ya mi casa sosegada' ('My house being now all stilled'), in St John of the Cross, *Collected Works* (trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), p. 711.

transubstantiated, into light by the power of divine Truth: just as in the Eucharist the appearance of bread and wine remain after the words of consecration have been spoken, so here the outward form of night is in reality the divine Sun. Therefore the spiritual senses must be awakened to recognize and respond to the mystery of 'invisible light', to 'taste and see', in the words of Psalm 33, 'how good the Lord is' (v. 5).

But the soul is invited not only to drink in the 'deeps' of light, but to be immersed in them:

The weak walls  
Of the world fall  
And heaven, in floods, comes pouring in:  
Sink from your shallows, soul, into eternity,  
And slake your wonder at that deep-lake spring.  
We touch the rays we cannot see,  
We feel the light that seems to sing (ll. 18-24).

The floods of heavenly light overwhelm the distinctions between this world and the next, the human and the divine, the temporal and the eternal. The soul is exhorted to sink from the shallows of ordinary encounters with God, the safe and conventional channels of religious experience, into the bottomless depths of eternity, outside the temporal process, beyond the distinction between day and night, darkness and light; it is invited not merely to drink at the surface but to 'slake your wonder' at the very source and fountainhead of light springing from the deepest point of the 'deep-lake' of divinity. Again the verse paragraph concludes with a focus on the mystical senses, a touch that encounters what cannot be seen and a feeling that takes the place of both sight and hearing; but now the sentences are declarative rather than imperative, not exhortation but a statement of the fact that the true Light is experienced as darkness, the true Word as silence.

Having experienced a light infinitely surpassing that of day, the speaker can address the sun in an almost playful, bantering tone:

Go back to bed, red sun, you are too late,  
And hide behind Mount Olivet—  
For like the flying moon, held prisoner,  
Within the branches of a juniper,  
So in the cages of consciousness  
The Dove of God is prisoner yet:  
Unruly sun, go back to bed (ll. 25-31).

These lines deliberately recall one of the most famous dawn poems in English literature, John Donne's 'The Sunne Rising', even borrowing

the phrase 'Unruly sun' from that poem,<sup>35</sup> but whereas Donne's speaker tried to block out the sun for the sake of human love, here the sun is dismissed in favor of divine love. As with the allusions to John of the Cross and to Psalm 18, the traditional mystical image of the Word as Bridegroom of the soul, though never explicitly used in the poem, is again implied by this allusion to Donne's love poem. But these lines also suggest that the experience of divine encounter, like the darkness itself, must come to an end. The sun is instructed to 'hide behind Mount Olivet', the site of the Ascension (as well as the name of the very hill above the Abbey of Gethsemani on which Merton's hermitage will one day be built):<sup>36</sup> while this reference suggests that the risen Jesus takes the place of the rising sun, it may also be a reminder that as the bodily presence of Jesus was removed, so in a temporal world spiritual encounters with the Lord are inevitably impermanent. The bold image of holding the flying moon prisoner to keep it from setting and thereby to keep daylight from arriving, and the even bolder claim to be imprisoning the Holy Spirit 'in the cages of consciousness', by their very exaggeration suggest the speaker's awareness that divine darkness will have to be relinquished to the routine duties of ordinary temporal experience, that *kairos* must inevitably give way to a return of *chronos*, that after all the 'Dove of God' is no bird to be kept in a cage.

Despite the command repeated to the sun, daylight of course arrives nonetheless:

But now the lances of the morning  
Fire all their gold against the steeple and the water-tower.  
Returning to the windows of our deep abode of peace,  
Emerging at our conscious doors  
We find our souls all soaked in grace, like Gideon's fleece (ll. 32-36).

The poet envisions the first rays of the sun striking the highest points in the landscape as a kind of attack, but it is of course a benign attack, its 'lances' bringing warmth as well as golden light. The speaker and his fellow monks are brought back to the world of everyday experience, looking out on the natural world of the dawn through 'the windows' of their senses and stepping through their 'conscious doors' into the world of space and time to proceed on their daily round. But

35. See John Donne, 'The Sunne Rising', in *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (ed. John T. Shawcross; Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1967), p. 93.

36. See Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984); Mott titles the sixth of his seven sections in this biography, focused on the hermitage years, 'Mount Olivet'.



the effect of their nocturnal encounter endures: the 'houses' which had entertained the Word as Guest remain 'our deep abode of peace', and like Gideon in the book of Judges they have not been left without a sign of the divine visitation and an assurance of continued divine assistance: if the floods of eternity have receded, nevertheless their souls are still 'soaked in grace.'

Whereas 'How Long We Wait' was a poem of expectation, 'After the Night Office' is a poem of realization, a revelation that for those who are aware of it, the present darkness *is* the future light, that in one sense there is no need to 'wait' because the expected One has been present all along. While the earlier poem developed the analogy between natural and supernatural light, this poem explores the congruence between the divine darkness of contemplative awareness and the natural darkness, the time of quiet recollection and receptivity, when there is nothing to distract the senses so one can more readily direct one's focus within. 'After the Night Office' is Merton's version of the lines of John of the Cross in praise of darkness in 'The Dark Night':

O night more lovely than the dawn!  
O night that has united  
The Lover with His beloved.<sup>37</sup>

## VI

'The Trappist Cemetery—Gethsemani', the last of the dawn poems in *A Man in the Divided Sea*, was written in 1946,<sup>38</sup> the same year the volume was published. Addressed to the monks buried in the abbey graveyard,<sup>39</sup> it can be considered a dawn poem only in virtue of its concluding lines, since it begins at sunset and moves through the night to daybreak. It combines an apophatic focus on the darkness of contemplation and of death with a holistic, sacramental, 'Franciscan' appreciation of creation, which converge in a final vision of eschatological fulfillment.<sup>40</sup>

37. See 'The Dark Night', ll. 22-24, in St John of the Cross, *Collected Works*, p. 711.

38. See Labrie, 'Ordering', p. 116.

39. In *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk: The Quest for True Freedom* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987), Basil Pennington remarks of 'The Trappist Cemetery—Gethsemani' that it 'teaches us of [Merton's] leisure, for it was there that Tom spent much of his free time in his early days, when he could not yet go beyond the confines of the enclosure walls' (p. 199).

40. For a detailed discussion of this poem, see Hempstead, 'Bells', pp. 267-73.

The poem opens with a promise that the monks' life of humble obscurity will be preserved in death:

Brothers, the curving grasses and their daughters  
Will never print your praises:  
The trees our sisters, in their summer dresses,  
Guard your fame in these green cradles:  
The simple crosses are content to hide your characters (ll. 1-5).

These lines emphasize a sense of continuity between the dead and the living, the human and non-human. Nature is presented as profoundly respectful and protective of the monks, cooperating with the monastic community itself, represented by the grave markers containing only names and dates with no individual variations, in preserving the privacy of the dead. The grass covering the graves conceals the virtues of those lying beneath, while the trees keep their reputations hidden away. The familial reference to the grasses' 'daughters' introduces the theme of mutability, suggesting the generations of grass that will succeed one another as the years pass, but also the sense of continuity as the grass remains faithful to its commitment. It links up as well with the address to the 'Brothers' and characterization of the trees as 'our sisters', a recognition of the kinship of all creation. The personified trees 'in their summer dresses' signal the season but also are an emblem of the seasonal, impermanent character of all life, an appropriate reminder in a cemetery. Yet they are said to guard 'these green cradles', a striking metaphor for the graves that suggests the trees are actually older sisters watching over their younger brothers in their beds: the reference seems to equate death to the sleep of innocent children, the little children to whom Jesus said the Kingdom of God belongs (Mk 10.14). Thus the emphasis on the transitory nature of life seems to be balanced by hints of the transitory nature of death as well.

As the poem continues with additional reassurances, it moves in time from evening to sunset:

O do not fear  
The birds that bicker in the lonely belfry  
Will ever give away your legends.  
Yet when the sun, exulting like a dying martyr,  
Canonizes, with his splendid fire, the sombre hills,  
Your graves all smile like little children,  
And your wise crosses trust the mothering night  
That folds them in the Sanctuary's wings (ll. 6-13).

The word 'legends' here is used in its original sense of saint's life, suggesting both that the dead brothers are saints and that their stories

will not be revealed even by the noisy birds. This reference creates both a point of similarity and of difference with the setting sun and the earth which reflects its light. The sunset is described as a glorious death, a martyrdom, and therefore worthy of a *'legenda'*; the hills too are described as canonized, officially proclaimed saints, through the sun's witness (the literal meaning of *'martyr'*). The light thus calls attention to itself in both the heavens and on earth, while the monks' graves, in contrast, are content to watch the spectacular display while drawing no notice to themselves, like *'little children'*, making explicit by metonymy the characterization of their inhabitants, the dead monks themselves, who are not *'canonized'* or glorified in legends, but are not thereby to be considered unworthy: it is simply that the monks by their very choice of vocation have indicated their preference for darkness rather than the light. They appreciate the *'splendid fire'*, but from a distance, in the shadow of the abbey church, like young chicks beneath the wings of the *'mothering night'*, which merges the earlier images of children and birds with the language of Psalm 90: they *'shall dwell in the shelter of the Most High'* and *'under his wings ... take refuge'* (vv. 1, 4).

The harmony between nature and humanity that this scene presents contrasts violently with the relationship that is typical in the world outside the monastery, which makes a sudden disruptive but brief intrusion:

You need not hear the momentary rumors of the road  
Where cities pass and vanish in a single car  
Filling the cut beside the mill  
With roar and radio,  
Hurling the air into the wayside branches  
Leaving the leaves alive with panic (ll. 14-19).

A passing car embodies the meaningless tumult of secular society with its loud but incoherent noise and its transient, insubstantial presence; these lines could be read as a brief reprise of *'Aubade—the City'*, as the speeding intruder disrupts the natural world with which it feels no kinship. This is the alternative to the sense of holistic order represented by the monastic world, a pattern restored in the lines concluding this first part of the poem:

See, the kind universe,  
Wheeling in love about the abbey steeple,  
Lights up your sleepy nursery with stars (ll. 20-22).

Here the universe revolves around the steeple as its center, recalling

both Eliot's *'still point of the turning world'*<sup>41</sup> and Dante's climactic view of *'the love that moves the sun and the other stars'*.<sup>42</sup> But the cosmic is balanced by the intimate, as the stars are also depicted as *'night lights'* for a nursery, a renewed focus on death as the sleep of children.

The second part of the poem moves both forward into the darkness of the night and backward into the earthly lives of the monks, and progressively reveals the correspondence between the two. The initial reflection continues, appropriately, the use of the Psalms as a source of both images and insight:

God, in your bodily life,  
Untied the snares of anger and desire,  
Hid your flesh from envy by these country altars,  
Beneath these holy eaves where even the sparrows have their houses.  
But oh, how like the swallows and the chimney swifts  
Do your free souls in glory play!  
And with a cleaner flight,  
Keener, more graceful circles,  
Rarer and finer arcs  
Than all these innocent attacks that skim our steeple!  
How like these children of the summer evening  
Do your rejoicing spirits  
Deride the dry earth with their aviation! (ll. 23-35).

The comparison to birds continues here, first with another allusion to Psalm 90, this time to the *'snare of the fowler'* (v. 3) from which God rescues the converted sinner, then to Ps. 83.4, which compares those who dwell in the Lord's temple to birds, a favorite verse for monastic meditation: *'Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest in which she puts her young—your altars, O Lord of hosts, my king and my God.'* The bodies of the monks were at home in the church as they are now at home in its shadow. Hidden away in life, as in death, they were protected from temptation by their renunciation of attachment to possessions or power or fame. But as the passage continues, they are likened not in body to the sparrows but in spirit to the swallows, not nesting as in the psalm but soaring in the evening sky in unfettered *'play'* like children; birds and souls are aligned with the pattern of the universe, *'wheeling'* around the steeple, but souls surpass birds in their *'graceful'* flight. Here the full significance of the

41. See T.S. Eliot, *'Burnt Norton'*, l. 64, in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1962), p. 119.

42. See Dante, *Paradiso*, 33.145, in *The Divine Comedy: Paradise* (trans. Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds; Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1962), p. 347.

monks' escape from the 'snares' of sin is revealed: their 'free souls' are now able to 'deride' all attempts of 'the dry earth' to capture them, for they are now beyond the reach of all temptation. Thus the stillness of the monks' bodies, in life and in death, is complemented by the exhilarating dynamism of their souls.

As the darkness deepens, creation begins to sing its own 'divine office':

But now the treble harps of night begin to play in the deep wood,  
To praise your holy sleep.  
And all the frogs along the creek  
Chant in the moony waters to the Queen of Peace.  
And we, the mariners, and travellers,  
The wide-eyed immigrants,  
Praying and sweating in our steerage cabins,  
Lie still and count with love the measured bells  
That tell the deep sea leagues until your harbor (ll. 36-44).

The 'treble harps' (of peepers?), recalling David's traditional authorship of the Psalms, do praise the monks, but in no language the world will comprehend; the frogs are heard chanting Compline, singing their own 'Salve Regina' in praise of 'the Queen of Peace'.<sup>43</sup> This parallelism between the world of nature and the world of the monastery introduces, with Merton's characteristic 'we', the present generation of monks, who in their own way are seen to be leaving behind the 'dry earth', though their voyage in 'steerage cabins' (an apt metaphor for monastic dormitories) is far less spontaneous, slower, more crowded and more terrestrial (even if metaphorically afloat) than the 'aviation' of their dead predecessors. Their sense of being 'immigrants' who have set out for a new home, 'strangers and exiles' on the earth (cf. Ps. 78.13, Heb. 11.13-14, 13.14) coexists with the feeling of unity with the created world: they hear both the creatures' praises and the bells signaling the passage of time, sounds that unite them to the earth and sounds that remind them that they have here no lasting city. This tension between belonging and not belonging to the earth will be resolved only at the poem's conclusion.

Part of the answer is apophatic renunciation, a lesson the dead monks have learned and now teach:

43. There is a remarkable anticipation in these lines of the 'huge chorus of living beings' in the 'Firewatch' entry in *Entering the Silence*, p. 486 (which first appeared in *The Sign of Jonas* [New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953]), as well as of the image of the monastery as a ship in that passage.

Already on this working earth you knew what nameless love  
Adorns the heart with peace by night,  
Hearing, adoring all the dark arrivals of eternity.  
Oh, here on earth you knew what secret thirst  
Arming the mind with instinct,  
Answers the challenges of God with garrisons  
Of unified desire  
And facing Him in His new wars  
Is slain at last in an exchange of lives (ll. 45-53).

Monastic life includes not only the ascetic liberation of the flesh from the 'snares of anger and desire' but the contemplative entry into divine darkness where 'nameless love', beyond all words and concepts, gives the heart of the beloved tokens of peace that come only 'by night'. These 'dark arrivals of eternity' prefigure the final goal of 'your harbor', as the contemplative night prepares for the definitive arrival of eternity in the dark night of death. But in this life, the experience of peace is recognized as alternating with times when the desire for God remains unfulfilled, when God seems to be hidden away in an inaccessible fortress, that must be stormed not by the intellect but only by 'instinct', dark, intuitive unknowing. When peace gives way to 'new wars', the 'secret thirst' for God must fuse previous desires for various objects into a 'unified desire' for one thing only, union with God: in such a 'war', thirst itself is slain: that is, it dies, is slaked, through 'an exchange of lives', the gift of eternal life in place of temporal life.

At this point, the address to the dead monks is transformed into a prayer for their instruction and intercession:

Teach us, Cistercian Fathers, how to wear  
Silence, our humble armor.  
Pray us a torrent of the seven spirits  
That are our wine and stamina:  
Because your work is not yet done.  
But look: the valleys shine with promises,  
And every burning morning is a prophecy of Christ  
Coming to raise and vindicate  
Even our sorry flesh (ll. 54-62).

Though they have completed their journey, they have not yet completed their work because they remain united to their fellow monks in example and in prayer. Their own 'wars' are over, but they must continue to show their successors how to wear Cistercian silence as 'humble armor', that will both ward off attacks of vices and allow the dart of divine love to penetrate and make possible a true death to self. Through their intercession will come 'a torrent of the seven



spirits', both the sevenfold gift of the Holy Spirit, the living water promised by Jesus (Jn 7.37-39) and the seven spirits associated in the book of Revelation with the eschatological fulfillment of the final days (Rev. 1.4; 2.1; 4.5; 8.2). The Spirit is the source both of present strength, the 'stamina' to remain faithful to their calling, and of future joy, the water of life transformed into the wine of the wedding feast in the kingdom of God. These eschatological images coalesce with the sudden arrival of the dawn, for this meditation that began with the sunset has passed through the night to be present for the coming of the new day, which is greeted with joy as a prophetic sign of the final triumph of the risen Christ, the true sun that knows no setting. This poem is a reflection on death that concludes with a joyous affirmation of faith in the resurrection, not only of the bodies of the monks in the Gethsemani graveyard but of the 'sorry flesh', both pitiful and repentant, of those who have yet to die.

In the final lines, the speaker turns to address the abbey itself as he foresees the resurrection not only of the monks but of all creation:

Then will your graves, Gethsemani, give up their angels,  
Return them to their souls to learn  
The songs and attitudes of glory.  
Then will creation rise again like gold  
Clean, from the furnace of your litanies:  
The beasts and trees shall share your resurrection,  
And a new world be born from these green tombs (ll. 63-69).

Here is a vision of utter and total fulfillment, reminiscent of Paul's promise of cosmic redemption in Romans 8. The affinities of creation with humanity seen earlier in the poem now reveal their deepest significance, as the tension between unity with the world and separation from the world is transcended in the new creation, as resurrected flesh brings the whole world of matter with it. The monks' tombs are the 'wombs' of the new world because their fidelity to the promise of the Christian vision has been a participation in the redemptive power of Christ: the 'beasts and trees', the 'trees our sisters in their summer dresses', the swallows and swifts that soared around the abbey steeple, and even the frogs in the creek are all included in this glorious experience of life, cleansed and purified by the 'litanies' of the monks. In an initially puzzling image, the bodies in the graveyard are referred to as 'angels', but it is now clear how appropriately these monks addressed throughout the poem have fulfilled the literal meaning of the word angel: they have indeed served as messengers of God's will and God's word.

Here Merton provides the most triumphantly satisfying use of the

imagery of dawn. Unlike 'Aubade—Harlem' and 'Aubade—The City', the dawn is not to be feared or avoided as revealing oppression or meaninglessness; unlike 'Aubade—The Annunciation' it presents not the beginning of the salvific process but its culmination; unlike 'How Long We Wait', it describes what will happen after the waiting is ended; unlike 'After the Night Office' it affirms not only the darkness of the apophatic way but the light of ultimate glory. In brief compass, it presents the entire process of creation and redemption as a unified development and with a serene, radiant sense of vision it shows how faith in the future brings reconciliation in the present, how acceptance of death is the gateway to life, how kinship with creation in the present is a prelude to the eschatological new creation. Of course this vision of final resurrection remains a prophecy, and the other dawn poems in their various ways are salutary reminders that the true definitive dawn has not yet arrived. But this poem does provide testimony that after nearly five years in the monastery, Merton is a man who has passed through the divided sea and is able at least, like Moses, to see into the Promised Land from afar.