

BELLS IN THOMAS MERTON'S EARLY POETRY, 1940-1946

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*Laudo Deum verum, plebum voco, congreco clerum,
Defunctos ploro, pesto fugo, fiesta decoro.*
Anon.

INTRODUCTION: MERTON'S EARLY YEARS AND THE INFLUENCE OF BELLS

The bell has been a powerful public and private symbol throughout recorded history. As Wendell Westcott writes in his book, *Bells and Their Music*: "The ringing voices of bells have comforted man in time of despair, warned him of impending danger, and accompanied him in battle, in revelry, and in worship."¹ Bells hold a certain fascination for many of us. Their sounds evoke a response in the listener. The response can range from one of awe and solemnity to one of frivolity and gaiety. The wide range of responses points to the illusive quality the sound of the bell possesses. We struggle to capture the mystery of the bell's illusive sound.

1. Wendell Westcott, *Bells and Their Music* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970), p. 4.

Bells were a powerful symbol for Thomas Merton. In 1968, he said:

The true symbol does not merely point to some hidden object. It contains in itself a structure which in some way makes us aware of the inner meaning of life and of reality itself. A true symbol takes us to the center of the circle, not to another point on the circumference. It is by symbolism that man is spiritually and consciously in contact with his own deepest self, with other men and with God.²

At significant turning points in Merton's childhood and young adulthood the sounds of bells often formed an important part of his experience. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton recounts an experience that occurred when he and his family lived in Flushing, New York. It was, perhaps, his earliest numinous experience:

It was Sunday. Perhaps it was an Easter Sunday, probably in 1920. From across the fields, and beyond the red farmhouse of our neighbor, I could see the spire of St. George's church, above the trees.

The sound of the churchbells came to us across the bright fields. I was playing in front of the house, and stopped to listen. Suddenly, all the birds began to sing in the trees above my head, and the sound of birds singing and churchbells ringing lifted up my heart with joy. I cried out to my father:

"Father, all the birds are in their church."

And then I said: "Why don't we go to church?"

My father looked up and said: "We will."

"Now?" said I.

"No, it is too late. But we will go some other Sunday."³

Although Merton, at five years of age recognized the purpose of the church bells and responded to them, his father, although benignly, denied his desire to answer their call. An echo of this experience is heard in Merton's poem, "Aubade: Lake Erie": "And when their shining voices, clean as summer, / Play, like churchbells over the field . . ."

The natural desire to worship occurred early in his life as he was to discover later in his mother's record of his childhood. Ruth Jenkins Merton wrote that Tom displayed a deep and serious urge to adore the gas light in the kitchen, with no little ritualistic veneration. Merton was about four years old at the time. He was six when his mother died in 1921. The period of freedom from all restraints ended when Owen Merton took young Tom to

2. Thomas Merton, "Symbolism: Communication or Communion" in *New Directions 20* (New York: New Directions, 1968), pp. 11-12. See also *Love and Living*; edited by Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), pp. 48-49.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harvest / HBJ Books, 1978), p. 10. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SSM*.

France. He was entered in the Lycee at Montauban where he first encountered utter desolation of spirit. The cruelty of his fellow students was summed up in his recollection of the sounds he heard in his bed at night:

Nevertheless, when I lay awake at night in the huge dark dormitory and listened to the snoring of the little animals all around me, and heard through the darkness and the emptiness of the night the far screaming of the trains, and the mad iron cry of a bugle in a distant caserne of Sengalese troops, I knew for the first time in my life the pangs of desolation and emptiness and abandonment. (*SSM*, p. 49)

Merton was eleven and a half years old. The sounds of the "mad iron bugle" framed, for him, the awful sense of isolation.

That dreadful period ended in the spring of 1928. He describes the elation he felt as he left the Lycee and France for England. Again it was a bell-like sound which represented his happiness. "The cab horses' hoofs rang out and echoed . . . 'Liberty!' They said, 'liberty, liberty, liberty, liberty'" (*SSM*, p. 60).

Merton's elation continued for a little more than a year at Ripley Court, a typical English preparatory school. Called by the bells, Merton and the other pupils attended Sunday services at a nearby village church. Later he was admitted to Oakham, an obscure but decent little public school, in the Midlands. Meanwhile, his father was diagnosed as terminally ill with a brain tumor. Again, a deep sense of isolation engulfed him when, in January 1931, his father died. He wrote: "And so I became the complete twentieth century man . . . a man living on the doorsill of the Apocalypse, a man with veins full of poison, living in death" (*SSM*, p. 85). The sense of despair at the existential loneliness that began at Montauban had become fully developed — he was sixteen years old.

Dr. Thomas Izod Bennett, a physician and Merton's godfather, and his wife Iris became Merton's guardians. Bennett decided that Merton should prepare for the Diplomatic Service and, so, he entered Clare College at Cambridge University. He was not to remain at Cambridge, however. From the age of sixteen until his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1938, he was to lead "an intense life as a sophisticated Bohemian."⁴ Merton accepted from the Bennetts their sophistication in manners and modern ideas as a rule for living. However, the Bohemian ideas they enjoyed discussing were not embraced in their own way of life and, when

4. Elena Malits, *The Solitary Explorer: Thomas Merton's Transforming Journey* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 23. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Malits."

Bennett decided that Merton was ungoverned by any moral constraint, he strongly suggested that Merton return to the United States. Merton described himself while at Cambridge as "vain, self-centered, dissolute, weak, irresolute, undisciplined, sensual, obscene and proud" (*SSM*, p. 132).

In 1935 Merton entered Columbia University. He was converted to Roman Catholicism and baptized in 1938. A year after his baptism, he decided to join the Franciscans and, at that time, he practiced the exercises of St. Ignatius. At the stage in the exercises when Merton was called upon to examine his conscience concerning his need to hoard money and material possessions, Merton described an interesting anecdote that began with the sound of the doorbell ringing. At the door, a stranger announced that he had a friend who had read one of Merton's articles. However, the stranger's reason for the visit was to ask Merton for money to enable him to get home to Connecticut as he had spent all of his money traveling in New Jersey looking for work. Merton kept a dollar for his supper and gave the man the rest of the contents of his pockets.

Following the incident of the stranger who put some meaning into the St. Ignatius meditation, Merton describes another occasion which was heralded by the sound of a bell. He developed acute appendicitis and was recovering from surgery at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in New York. He said: "I would lie quiet, in happy expectancy, for the sound of the bell coming down the hall which meant: Communion . . . And he [the priest] was gone. You could hear the bell disappear down the corridor" (*SSM*, p. 276). Following his recovery from surgery, Merton traveled to Cuba. He arrived during Holy Week 1940 and he wrote of the Cubans ringing bells and yelling lottery numbers outside in the street while he was in the church of Our Lady of Cobre.

Merton's plans to enter the Franciscans did not work out and he eventually went to St. Bonaventure University in Olean, New York, to teach English literature. At the suggestion of Dan Walsh, his teacher at Columbia, he decided to go to the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky to make a silent retreat for Holy Week and Easter of 1941. Of this time he wrote: "Something had opened out, inside me, in the last months, something that required, demanded at least a week in that silence, in that austerity, praying together with the monks in their cold choir" (*SSM*, p. 310). The silence of the night ended at four o'clock in the morning. Merton awoke to the sound of bells "flying out of the tower" (*SSM*, p. 322). Yet, as he stepped into the cloister, "the silence with people moving in it was ten

times more gripping than it had been in my own empty room" (*SSM*, p. 323). Merton believed in experiential prayer and I believe that for him the sound of the bell was a tangible expression of a part of the mystery. "Monks consider the sound of the bell as the Voice of the Lord calling them to prayer or to work. In this sense, the bells can be considered God's voice."⁵ The bell could even represent the "flute of interior time."⁶ He became aware of this flute of interior time in the silence of Gethsemani. In a sense, then, through its clarity of tone, the bell represents the truth, as the Word.

At that time, Merton claims, he suddenly began writing poetry. One or two of the poems were accepted for publication. He struggled with a tempestuous nature. However, he achieved simplicity in many of the early poems and in his life during the struggle of his nature with the nature of the ultimate Reality, God. The struggle was a necessary part of the journey on which he had embarked at Gethsemani. "But more tranquil journeys would have destroyed him," wrote Anthony T. Padovano in *The Human Journey*.⁷ Merton's paradoxical nature demanded the severe and austere simplicity of the Cistercians to provide a structure for his passionate nature. Padovano astutely observes: "The tension in Merton between anarchy and discipline proved creative. Too much of either would have destroyed him as an artist. The secret of his genius has something to do with the balance between extremes" (*Padovano*, p. 7).

Most of the poems studied in this essay were written during Merton's first years of silence, 1940-1946, and the essay focuses on bell imagery to provide a key to their interpretation. Due to his abundant canon it is necessary to concentrate on a limited number of poems. As he journeyed into deeper silences, so his writing changed. However, the foundation for later writing was laid in this period. Essentially, the simplicity of ideas remained unchanged in the later works, while the elaboration of ideas became more detailed.

Merton's most significant experience of the powerful symbol of the bell, as a call home, occurred when he "heard" in his imagination the great bell of Gethsemani calling him there. Elena Malits observes that, at the end of November 1941: "Merton, paralyzed by a conflict between negative feelings of unworthiness about himself and the strong positive attraction of

5. Brother Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O., Letter to Sheila M. Hempstead, 7 November 1983.

6. Robert Bly, *The Kabir Book* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977), p. 21.

7. Anthony T. Padovano, *The Human Journey: Thomas Merton, Symbol of a Century* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1982), p. 53. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Padovano*.

his will to monastic life, heard a bell summoning him to Gethsemani. The symbol arose in his consciousness and released him to the power to act" (*Malits*, p. 33). Describing that inner event, Merton wrote:

Suddenly . . . in my imagination, I started to hear the great bell of Gethsemani ringing in the night . . . as if it were just behind the first hill. The impression made me breathless, and I had to think twice to realize that it was only in my imagination that I was hearing the bell of the Trappist Abbey ringing in the dark. (*SSM*, p. 365)

Malits goes on to explain that:

Merton interpreted this fantasy as a signal. "The bell seemed to be telling me where I belonged — as if it were calling me home." The symbol, welling up from his feelings, allowed Merton to recognize and accept his true vocation In less than a week, Merton was on the train to Gethsemani. (*Malits*, p. 33)

Perhaps that train which carried Merton to Gethsemani also heralded its departure and arrival with the sounds of a bell.

Merton marked the end of his secular life and the beginning of his monastic life when he pulled the bell rope to gain admittance to Gethsemani Abbey on 10 December 1941. He was a few weeks short of turning twenty-seven years old. Exactly twenty-seven years later on 10 December 1968, he died in Bangkok, Thailand.

ELUCIDATION AND BELL IMAGERY IN SEVEN OF MERTON'S EARLY POEMS

Throughout his poetic career Merton used bells as an important part of his imagery. I have chosen to study those poems in which the image of bells occurs.⁸ The period, 1940-1946, begins before Merton's entrance into Gethsemani and includes the first five years in the monastery. All of the poems were written after his conversion.

8. The selection of poems in this study is based solely on my preferences and, although there are many poems written between 1940 and 1946 in which the image of the bell occurs, I have chosen two poems in which I believe there to be bell sounds represented through another image. The year dates of these poems are obtained from Sister Rosemarie Julie Gavin's thesis, *An Analysis of Imagery in Selected Poems of Thomas Merton: A Comparative Study of Seven Early Poems with Three Late Representative Ones* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America, 1951). Concerning the poem, "Trappist Abbey: Matins," Sister Therese Lentfoehr notes in *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1979) that it was actually written at St. Bonaventure in 1941, after the Holy Week retreat Merton

The bell, an important image in Merton's life, is his daily companion in the monastery of Gethsemani. The daily schema is indicated and marked by the sounds of one or all three bells — Mary, Michael and Thomas. They ring to indicate time, work and worship. Within the framework of the sounds of the large bells, situated high in the belfry, which surround and encompass the monastery and its immediate vicinity, are the sounds of the small altar bells used during the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the Mass. Merton recounts in his autobiography his sense of joy and relief when the bells of Gethsemani, silent during Lent, ring out to celebrate Easter (*SSM*, p. 201).

I will begin this study by looking at the poem Merton claimed was his first "real poem," "Song for Our Lady of Cobre." It contains a clear image of bells. The poem was written during Merton's visit to Cuba in April 1940. He described the visit as "one of those medieval pilgrimages that was nine-tenths vacation and one-tenth pilgrimage" (*SSM*, p. 279).

SONG FOR OUR LADY OF COBRE (1940)

The white girls lift their heads like trees,
The black girls go
Reflected like flamingoes in the street.

The white girls sing as shrill as water,
The black girls talk as quiet as clay.

The white girls open their arms like clouds,
The black girls close their eyes like wings:
Angels bow down like bells,
Angels look up like toys,

Because the heavenly stars
Stand in a ring:
And all the pieces of the mosaic, earth,
Get up and fly away like birds.

The poem is short, lyrical, and enigmatic. However, Merton helps elucidate the poem:

had made at the Abbey of Gethsemani (p. 8). The poems in the study are arranged in a particular sequence. The first poem, "Our Lady of Cobre," opens the study because Merton claimed it was his first important poem. "Trappist Cemetery" begins in the evening and ends with the dawn. The Gethsemani poems which follow, "After the Night Office" and "Matins" concentrate on the early hours of the new day. "Trappists, Working" celebrates the natural "liturgy" in the manual labor of the monks during the day. "Evening" comes full circle back to the time of day of the opening lines of "Trappist Cemetery." "For My Brother" recalls the day of the crucifixion, the night of the harrowing of hell, and the new morning in the promise of the Risen Christ.

I was sitting on the terrace of the hotel, eating lunch. La Caridad del Cobre had a word to say to me. She handed me an idea for a poem that formed so easily and smoothly and spontaneously in my mind that all I had to do was finish eating and go up to my room and type it out, almost without a correction So the poem, turned out to be both what she had to say to me and what I had to say to her. It was a song for La Caridad del Cobre, and it was, as far as I was concerned, something new, and the first real poem I had ever written It pointed the way to many other poems, it opened the gate, and set me traveling on a certain and direct track that was to last me several years. (*SSM*, p. 283)

The poem uses complementary similes and unites opposite images in an extraordinary manner. While the colors black and white do reflect the traditional values of darkness and light, they do so on a cosmic level encompassing total harmony. The delicate, equally balanced juxtaposition of the colors represents completeness through the feminine principle which refers to the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Cobre, to whom and for whom the poem is written.⁹ In 1959, in a letter to Victor Hammer, Merton wrote:

God is not only Father but a Mother. He is both at the same time, and it is the "feminine aspect" or feminine principle in the divinity that is Hagia Sophia This is a very ancient intuition of reality which goes back to the oldest Oriental thought For the "masculine-feminine" relationship is basic in all reality — simply because all reality mirrors the reality of God. . . . Hence, Sophia is the feminine, dark, yielding, tender counterpart of the power, justice, creative dynamism of the Father.¹⁰

The significance attributed to the color black in the poem is made clear by the fact that La Caridad is black and explains why the *black* girls represent desirable qualities of peace and tranquillity. Merton also writes that there were many altars to black as well as white saints (*SSM*, p. 279).

The first two stanzas consist of unlikely similes in parallels. Each simile is, in fact, a contrast between color, sound, and action. In the opening lines, the girls — white and black — are compared to what appear to be related images: the first, "The white girls [who] lift their heads like trees" and the next, "The black girls [who] go / Reflected like flamingoes in the street." Trees are habitats for many birds; however, while flamingoes roost and nest in trees, we commonly visualize them wading in shallow

9. Erich Neumann in *The Great Mother* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1955) says: "Bearing and releasing belong to the positive side of the elementary character: their typical symbol is the vegetation symbol, in which the plant bursts out of the dark womb of the earth and sees 'the light of the world.'" This release from the darkness to the light characterizes the way of life and also the way of consciousness. Both ways lead always and essentially from darkness to light In so far as the Feminine releases what is contained in it to life and light, it is the Great and Good Mother of all life" (p. 65).

10. Quoted in Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), pp. 241-242.

water, which Merton encourages with the word "reflected." The commonality between trees and flamingoes is in how we perceive them. All trees are not stately, but in this instance of comparison, the trees are stately. And that is certainly a fitting way to describe flamingoes. The flamingo's most resplendent feature is its color, brilliant pink with black under the wings. The action is gentle in these lines and the tension between the colors black and white is muted by the images used in the simile. The girls, both white and black, are suggestive of the Virgin Mary.

The two lines of the second stanza present opposing sounds: "The white girls sing as shrill as water" and "The black girls talk as quiet as clay." The action of talking and singing is defined by the quality of sound. The shrill singing is modified by the unlikely simile of water which is then compared to the black girls who talk as quiet as clay. Thus two contrasting vocalizations represent sound and silence. Images of water and clay are major symbols of life and of the genesis of humankind. It would seem that Merton is attempting to encompass all of creation through the motherhood of Mary, the mother of Christ. The third stanza enlarges upon this all-encompassing creation and directs the reader to the focal point of the poem. The first line expands our view away from the street and into the sky: "The white girls open their arms like clouds." Earth is embraced through the motion of the multiple Marys' "open arms." The black girls continue to be passive and receptive in response to the action of the white girls: "The black girls close their eyes like wings." The function of complementary yet opposite qualities enables Merton to join earth and heaven. Black girls and white girls are joined as they become angels in the final lines of the stanza: "Angels bow down like bells, / Angels look up like toys." The size and color of the status of Our Lady of Cobre is important to the poem: she is small, doll-like and black.

The bell image is an integral part of the poem but it is only one image among other equally important images. It represents the joining of heaven and earth. As angels bow down like bells, those on earth, seen from the perspective of the heavens, appear as small as toys. A bell's action is limited to moving back and forth as it swings, but its function is sound. The bell here represents sound ringing from the heavens over the earth. The toys, as people, represent the silence necessary to hear the sounds of heaven.

The focal point of the poem is situated in the heavens as the final stanza states. The upward motion of the previous stanza — "The white girls open their arms like clouds" — culminates in the final stanza as "the pieces

of the mosaic, earth, / Get up and fly away like birds." The final action is a pulling together of the movement of the poem. The ring symbolizes eternity and wholeness [holiness?] and this symbol incorporates the pieces which are released. The clay, the created things of earth, is released from gravity and being and is thus transformed as birds into images of transcendence.

The poem has little to do with Merton's petition that Our Lady of Cobre obtain the priesthood for him, and, yet, in some obscure way, it has everything to do with Merton's vocation as writer and monk. In Cuba he realized "the real uselessness of what I had been half deliberately looking for: the visions in the ceiba trees" (*SSM*, p. 283). He discovered something vastly more important. The experience occurred in the Church of St. Francis in Havana during Mass. All at once the voices of the children burst out: "Creo en Dios." Suddenly he became aware of the personal presence of God during the Consecration of the Host. "It struck me like a thunderclap . . . And the first articulate thought that came to mind was: 'Heaven is right here in front of me: Heaven, Heaven!' " (*SSM*, pp. 284-285). This concept left Merton breathless, but he was struck, too, by the ordinariness of the experience. It was this quality of *ordinariness* which Merton exemplified in his life and thought during twenty-seven years in the monastery. In a posthumously published work, he wrote:

The contemplative is not the man who has fiery visions. . . . The contemplative has nothing to tell you except to reassure you . . . that if you dare to penetrate your own silence and dare to advance without fear into the solitude of your own heart, and risk the daring of that solitude with the lonely other . . . You and He are in all truth One Spirit.¹¹

Like St. Francis, Merton entered into a unified relationship with nature — and with people. He recorded in his journal, published as *The Sign of Jonas*, that, on a visit to Louisville in 1948: "Although I felt completely alienated from everything in the world and all its activity I did not necessarily feel out of sympathy with the people."¹² This event shows that Merton's passionate nature was slowly being tempered and his focus which had been turned inward upon himself had begun to shift outward in compassion. John J. Higgins has pointed out, however, that in his early years in the monastery, Merton was mainly concerned with his relationship with

11. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*; edited by Brother Patrick Hart (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1977), p. 173.

12. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953), p. 111. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SJ*.

God and that this demanded an estrangement from the world.¹³ The poem, "The Trappist Cemetery — Gethsemani" was written during this period when Merton's focus was still turned inward upon himself and upon his relationship with God and nature. The image of the bell occurs twice in the poem, and the sound of the bell's ringing reverberates through the poem and frames it in much the same way that Merton's life itself is framed by the monastery bells.

THE TRAPPIST CEMETERY — GETHSEMANI (1946)

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.

Oh 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 somber hills,
Your graves all smile like little children,
And your wise crosses trust the mothering night
That folds them in the Sanctuary's wings.

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.

See, the kind universe,
Wheeling in love about the abbey steeple,
Lights up your sleep nursery with stars.

* * *

God, in your bodily life,
Untied in the snares of anger and desire,
Hid your flesh from envy by these country altars,
Beneath these holy eaves where even sparrows have their houses.
But oh, how like the swallows and the chimney swifts
Do your free souls in glory play!

13. John J. Higgins, *Merton's Theology of Prayer* (Spencer, Massachusetts: Cistercian Publications, 1971), p. xvi.

And with a cleaner flight,
 Keener, more graceful circles,
 Rarer and finer arcs
 Than all these innocent attacks that skim our steeple!
 How like the children of the summer evening
 Do your rejoicing spirits
 Deride the dry earth with their aviation!

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.

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.

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
 Even our sorry flesh.

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.

The first line addresses the dead brothers and extends the familial order to the grasses and their daughters in an allusion to St. Francis's canticle, "Brother sun, Sister moon." Merton embraces all natural life as God's good creation. The first stanza shows nature united in silence with

the dead Trappist monks. Trees and grasses, beautiful as they are, guard and protect the privacy of the monks in death just as the enclosure hid them in their lifetimes. The last line indicates that the personalities of the monks are hidden in the cross. Also, there is a sense that the dead brothers are like children, if not newborn infants, as denoted in "these green cradles."

The next stanza sustains the note of secrecy hidden in nature and the cross. The alliteration of the softly sensuous "s" sound of the first stanza gives way briefly to "Oh do not fear / The birds that bicker in the lonely belfry / Will ever give away your legends." The brothers' histories are secure because the birds are busily bickering among themselves. "The birds that bicker in the lonely belfry" carries the sound of the bells, not harmonious sounds, but the din of bells played rapidly and out of sequence. The noisy discordant notes of birds bickering accentuates the silence of the cemetery and the "lonely belfry" is a reminder that the dead brothers have spiritually left Gethsemani. The alliteration of the "s" sound returns in the following lines and restores a sense of hope and well being. The sun sanctifies with brilliant shafts of light the "somber hills," the natural world of darkness and ignorance, just as Christ does. The "green cradles" of the first stanza smile with the innocence of children. So, too, the "simple crosses" of the first stanza become "wise crosses" in a nurturing night, an all-encompassing darkness which hides them in the safety of a holy place, perhaps represented here as Christ's body, referring to the "sun" four lines earlier. In another link to the poem's second line, the "birds that bicker" are transformed into the "Sanctuary's wings," an image of the Holy Spirit.

The holy place, or holy one, is represented as an image of a bird enfolding the brothers within its wings. The wings of Yahweh are a metaphor of His protection (shadow) in Psalms 17: 8, 36: 7, 57: 1, and 63: 7. Merton most certainly would have been aware of the image of wings. However, it is also possible, particularly as he uses the sun as a metaphor for Christ, that the wings refer to Malachi 4: 2 and Hebrews 3: 20 which "apparently allude to the emblem (originally Egyptian) of the winged sun disk, which was widespread in the ancient Near East, here describing the dawn of the eschatological aeon."¹⁴

In the third stanza there is a change of emphasis as the poet / narrator directly addresses the brothers again. The narrator hears the sounds, but perhaps the brothers can choose not to because they are

14. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 852.

protected as they lie in their "green cradles." In this stanza a single car becomes a microcosm of the city. The sound of the "rumors" is subdued, but becomes suddenly loud and forceful as the car passes the cemetery. The noise and speed of the car causes panic, not only in the leaves, but perhaps in the startled monk who feels assaulted by the intrusion. Rumor, road, roar and radio emphasize the double meaning in the word "rumor," which in obsolete usage, also meant a disturbance. The car is linked with the city and with the rumor of the road, and a sense arises of the sound of inconstancy. Sound amplifies the city as the secular world, something inauthentic and intrusive. This is in sharp contrast to Merton's sense of the authenticity of the lives of monks within the Abbey seeking God through Christ. In the setting of the poem, the secret lives of dead brothers are hidden within the absolute nameless love, wisdom.¹⁵

The stanza's first line recalls the image of "our deserted hearing" in "Evening" (1941). Evidently Merton is experiencing a sense of enclosure within the Abbey of Gethsemani. In fact, journal entries between 1941 and 1957 indicate that Merton came to trust the outside world only slowly.¹⁶ When he was writing this poem he believed that the monastery offered a separate holy existence from what he perceived as the evil world. Thus, Merton's view of the emptiness and temporal quality of the world outside Gethsemani is expressed in the poem by "cities pass and vanish in a single car." What is more, the noise of the vanishing cities fills "the cut beside the mill." If the earth which cradles the monks can be seen as the body of Christ, the "cut" may be seen as the wound inflicted by the noise of the evil world upon the body of Christ. The city may represent Merton's own frenzied, willful life before his conversion. He wrote on 7 April 1941, while on a retreat at Gethsemani:

This is the only real city in America — and it is by itself, in the wilderness. It is an axle around which the whole country blindly turns, and knows nothing about it. Gethsemani holds the country together the way the underlying substrata of natural faith that goes with our whole being and can hardly be separated from it, keeps living on in a man who has "lost his faith."¹⁷

It is apparent from *The Seven Storey Mountain* that Merton embraced new

15. See, for example, Merton's remarks on wisdom in his prose poem, "Hagia Sophia." *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977, p. 363.

16. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), p. 140.

17. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1969), p. 167.

ideas and concepts with great enthusiasm and, in the days following his conversion and during the early days at Gethsemani, the enthusiasm confirms the answers "neatly packaged," as Anthony T. Padovano has said. The first part of the poem concludes with reassurance. The whole universe is friendly toward the brothers in their "green cradles" and it provides light for their nursery. The starlight of the "kind universe" concludes the first part by expanding the image of the world from the city of the car toward a wheeling starlit universe. The sun sets and the night begins with the appearance of the first stars. So, too, concludes the time of the "cradles."

The next stanza, the fifth, shows triumph over anger and desire through the intervention of God in monastic life. The reflection on the dead brothers' lives reveals the struggle of the monk with anger and desire which only God can eradicate through seclusion in the monastery. Many priests celebrated simultaneously at "country altars" at the Abbey of Gethsemani. God "hid" or protected the brothers within the walls of Gethsemani just as the sparrows are "hid" and protected beneath the "holy eaves." The cells of the monks in the abbey correspond to the nests of the sparrows, yet both live a communal life. This reminds us of the parable of the lilies of the field who do not sow and the sparrows who do not weave but who are cared for and provided for by God. The stanza sustains the image of birds whose sounds are now subdued but run in an undercurrent, somewhat akin to a solo *obbligato* where a single instrument plays alone, belonging to the whole piece but providing an oasis separate for the moment.

An analogy of the brothers as birds emerges as their souls soar "like the swallows and the chimney swifts." These birds are communal, too, and they nest in barns near human habitation. The swifts fly high and, with the sparrows and the swallows, form a trinity of different species. The birds' flight describes the freedom and joy of the brothers who now dwell with God. The flight of the souls continues to be compared with the birds. However, the souls outmatch the birds' aerial displays. Merton had an eye for detail and was an astute observer of nature. Most of the flights of these particular birds surpasses all other flights. Yet Merton, like Dante, extends the flight to a more perfect level of the imagination as he claims the souls' free flights are superior to "these innocent attacks that skim our steeple." The stanza concludes with the birds in union with the souls of the brothers as they both "deride the dry earth with their aviation!" The day ends on a note of rejoicing and, in the next stanza, the sounds of night appear.

The next half of the sixth stanza is about the living brothers at Gethsemani, though still addressed to the dead monks in the cemetery. Like travelers at sea, Merton, along with the living brothers, are the "wide-eyed immigrants" on a spiritual journey to a new land. They experience the discomfort of those who travel by the lowest class, that is, under vows of poverty and chastity. Like the ship's bells, the abbey's bells mark time and distance in the progress of the lives of the monks as they journey home to God. The ship's cabins are like the monastic cells and like the graves. "Your harbor" symbolizes the cemetery of the poem and is the goal of the spiritual journey of the living monks.

The seventh stanza continues the image of the journey and of the peaceful night. Addressing the dead brothers, Merton shares with them the knowledge of the "nameless love" which "adorns the heart with peace by night," and the image of love and peace of the earth allows "the hearing, adoring all the dark arrivals of eternity." Merton continues to praise and acknowledge the brothers who share one overwhelming quality, the longing for God, the nameless love. The desire for God causes conflict. The struggle is surmounted by the "unified desire" which, in turn, answers the challenge of God. The "secret thirst" is the struggle to know God. It is translated as an adversary who is slain in the exchange of the brothers' lives. Merton's praise is for the brothers' struggle to know God while they lived. The perfected life of the dead brothers is the example for the living brothers and, in the next stanza, Merton entreats them: "Teach us, Cistercian Fathers, how to wear / Silence, our humble armor." In the war for the soul, silence is protection. Merton continues to invoke the Fathers. The prayer to the "seven spirits" probably refers to the seven sent by the Apostles, although seven has a numinous quality throughout the Bible and is commonly understood as having the power of good. The wine of the Eucharist is the food which sustains and gives life and stamina to the brothers. These prayers addressed to the dead brothers by the poet indicate that the lives of the living and dead brothers still intermingle. Night has passed and dawn appears as the stanza ends. The sun that died as martyr makes its daily resurrection as does Christ in the hearts of His followers, the brothers of Gethsemani.

In the last stanza the final day is anticipated. Only then will the work of the living and dead brothers be done. The "cleaner flight" of the souls of the brothers echoes in the emergence of a new creation through the burning away of all selfishness in the purifying effect of saying daily litanies.

The Biblical allusion to purification through the burning of dross is extended by Merton in a comment published in 1961: "God is a consuming fire."¹⁸ Merton's view of the liturgy ("litanies") is unconventional. David Steindl-Rast writes:

One might have to go back to Pseudo-Dionysius or even to the Vedic experience to find a view of liturgy that is at once so profoundly mystical and so explosively charged for practical action. Obviously we have to give to the term *liturgy* here the richest possible, the most dynamic meaning. For Merton the poet, the mystic, the monk who took the world to heart, liturgy is — in so many different ways — incarnation.¹⁹

In the same essay Steindl-Rast claims that liturgy for Merton is the dynamic medium for the journey of transformation in Christ.

Fr. Louis, celebrating Mass on some ordinary day, in some insignificant side-chapel, is aware of holding in his hands the promise of new life in the midst of an aging world. As he elevates the host, its shape suggests the Easter sunrise:

Great Christ, my fingers touch Thy wheat
And hold Thee hidden in the compass of Thy paper sun
Here in my hands I hold that secret Easter. (*Twomey*, p. 158)

The last two lines of the poem incorporate the earth of beasts and trees. Green cradles have become green tombs signifying the completed lives of the dead brothers in the birth of a new world. A Franciscan theme unites with the brothers' spirits in the promise of a new creation, marked by the sounds of the Abbey's bells and nature's bells, the birds. Thus the central theme of day and night, life and death concludes in a new day, a new world, arising from "the furnace of your litanies," announced and proclaimed by the calling bells.

In the poem "After the Night Office — Gethsemani Abbey" (written in 1945, one year before "Trappist Cemetery — Gethsemani"), Merton directs his focus toward a new beginning through a description of life at Gethsemani. He celebrates, in both poems, the freedom of heart he discovered as a novice within the Abbey enclosure. In spite of the harshness of Cistercian life, he finally was having a good time. "Merton's crucial choice of opting for a good time in the sense of genuine self-fulfillment in the freedom of obedience" was defined by David Steindl-Rast in the inaugural

18. Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*; edited by Thomas P. McDonnell (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1974), p. 319. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Reader*.

19. David Steindl-Rast, O.S.B., "Destination: East; Destiny: Fire," in *Thomas Merton: Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox*; edited by Gerald S. Twomey (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 159. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Twomey*.

Merton lecture at Columbia University.²⁰ Through his faithful obedience to the Rule, Merton discovered an inner freedom which, in turn, led to an enormous increase in energy.

AFTER THE NIGHT OFFICE — GETHSEMANI ABBEY (1945)

It is not yet the grey and frosty time
 When barns ride out 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 World, our Guest.

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.

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.

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.

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.

20. David Steindl-Rast, O.S.B., "The Peacemaker: Merton's Critique and Model," in *The Merton Annual* 7; edited by Robert E. Daggy, Brother Patrick Hart, Dewey Weiss Kramer and Victor A. Kramer (New York: AMS Press, 1988), pp. 117-128.

As with others of Merton's early poems, "Night Office" is derivative, reminiscent of Shakespeare's "Winter" and Donne's "The Sun Rising." Yet it also has an original quality all its own. It begins quietly. As the title tells us, the time is after the Night Office, probably around four a. m. The opening image of the barns riding out the night like ships is majestic and mysterious. Winter has yet to come. The mystery deepens as the stanza continues. The "souls' Jerusalems" shows the microcosms of the city of God within each brother. Merton chooses to illustrate Jerusalem, the heavenly city, in this way whereas Blake, in his anthem "Jerusalem," depicts it as a heavenly city encompassing all of England. Quiet and mystery are then revealed in the last two lines (the entire first stanza is one sentence). The analogy of houses at rest as minds enfolding the guest prepares us for the Word as it represents God and as it is enclosed within the mind of each brother following the Night Office.

The second stanza is alive with sound. The brothers' songs in the darkness of the night precede the songs of the bells which wake the sun. Elizabeth Yates writes: "The aim of any discipline of prayer is to become quietly but constantly aware of God The hours come along as reminders and they may be aided by . . . the sound of a bell."²¹ The celebration of God in the middle of the night when only the monks are awake separates the Abbey from the sleeping world outside. The Night Office provides the monks with a different time structure. Their praises sung, the brothers' souls celebrate the middle of the day before the dawn! The darkness of each brothers' body is transformed into light because their minds become "His temple-tent." This line echoes the closing line in the poem "Song for the Blessed Sacrament": "The Child is singing in His tent of stars." The light of the Word ("the truth"), the sacrament, also allows for the assimilation of light in the concluding lines of the second stanza.

In the following stanza the bodies of the brothers are the broken walls of the world, and are broken in order to receive the light of heaven. Throughout this stanza the sounds are subterranean rumbles following the bright and clear sounds of the canticles and bells of the previous stanza. The fourth line echoes the fourth line of the first stanza where the brothers, unseen, sink into the quiet mist. Presently, the brothers are being addressed and, paradoxically, sink deeper yet from shallows into eternity where they may find satisfaction. The eternal lake allows for a combination

21. Elizabeth Yates, *Book of Hours* (Norton, Connecticut: Vineyard Books, 1976), p. 8.

of the senses where Merton conveys the quality of touching the singing light. This light represents the clear sound of the "singing bells" of the second stanza.

In the fourth stanza, Merton chides the sun for being late (Donne chides the unruly sun for interrupting his lovemaking), with the reminder of the cruel night and dawn at the Garden of Gethsemane. The blood-red sun is told to hide. The image of the sun calls forth the moon, captive in juniper branches. The juniper, associated with the wilderness, imprisons the moon, the Christ, and prepares us for our own "cages of consciousness" in which "the Dove of God is prisoner yet." The stanza concludes with the sun's dismissal: "go back to bed."

The chiding is, however, too late. The clash of the sun on the steeple and the water-tower and the ringing of the bells herald the morning and daylight takes the place of the mystery of the light of the Word, the Truth made manifest in Christ. The sunlight returns to shine upon the Abbey and its inhabitants. Daylight reveals the prisoner, the Dove of God. In the closing line the result is revealed: God's grace for Gideon in his fleece is transformed into a sign of the new day for the brothers of the Abbey of Gethsemani.

Merton wrote "The Trappist Abbey: Matins (Our Lady of Gethsemani, Kentucky)" in 1941, after his Easter retreat there but prior to his entrance in December. It reflects Merton's concern for silence and sound, for World War II, and for the monastic way of life. He connects Christ's betrayal at the first Gethsemane with Christ's betrayal in this second global war.

THE TRAPPIST ABBEY: MATINS
(Our Lady of Gethsemani, Kentucky) (1941)

When the full fields begin to smell of sunrise
And the valleys sing in their sleep,
The pilgrim moon pours over the solemn darkness
Her waterfalls of silence,
And then departs, up the long avenue of trees.

The stars hide, in the glade, their light, like tears,
And tremble where some train runs, lost,
Where fire flares, somewhere, over a sink of cities.

Now kindle in the windows of this ladyhouse, my soul,
Your childish, clear awakens:
Burn in the country night

Your wise and sleepless lamp,
For, from the frowning tower, the windy belfry,
Sudden the bells come, bridegrooms,
And fill the echoing dark with love and fear.

Wake in the windows of Gethsemani, my soul, my sister,
For the past years, with the smokey torches, come,
Bringing betrayal from the burning world
And bloodying the glade with pitch flame.

Wake in the cloisters of the lonely night, my soul, my sister,
Where the apostles gather, who were, one time, scattered,
And mourn God's blood in the place of His betrayal,
And weep with Peter at the triple cock-crow.

Merton was overwhelmed during the retreat with the simplicity of the Trappists but he was also overcome with love and fear. He described his reaction as he was greeted at the door and the brother asked him if he had come to stay. "The question terrified me. It sounded too much like the voice of my own conscience." The fear subsided after the brother left Merton in the guest room. "And I felt the deep, deep silence of the night, and of peace, and of holiness enfold me like love, like safety" (*SSM*, p. 321). Merton was beginning to understand the call of his vocation. The poem also reflects, perhaps, his sense of guilt over his life up to 1938. The title suggests a simple theme, yet the poem is complex. Merton's concerns are set within a framework combining the Biblical Garden of Gethsemane and the Abbey of Gethsemani where he had been a retreatant. He had a particular fondness for dawn and the poem begins with anticipation of it. Sound imagery is integral to the poem, but all the senses are employed by its end. The sensuous imagery of the smell of sunrise in the fields blends into the sleeping valleys, but the valleys *sing*: their sleep and song become fused. The moonshine which "pours over the solemn darkness / Her waterfalls of silence" joins sound with silence in a way which creates powerful images of quiet effect. The reader enters easily into the quiet and stillness invoked, but is also aware of the implied sounds. The combination of opposites is interesting and yet, for all the implied sounds, the result is silence.

In the second stanza, the dominant image of light changes from that of the moon to that of stars. Recalling the "solemn darkness," there is an ominous note in the silence and beauty of the night. Foreboding is enhanced as the stars "tremble" because the horn of a train runs "lost." The

lost train first points eastward to Palestine and back in time to the Garden of Gethsemane where Christ was betrayed by Judas Iscariot. It may also point eastward to Europe where World War II was raging and cities were lighted by the fires of bombing.

The trembling starlight becomes "fire" and silence and sound combine in a unique form pointing us to the "eastward mysteries of distance." The clue is posited, but is left alone for the next stanza as the poet steps aside from the movement of the poem to address his soul as an image of the Abbey. His entreaty kindles a "clear awareness" and the image of light "Burns in the country night/ Your wise and sleepless lamp." When this poem was written, Merton, unsure of entering the Trappists, was gradually awakening to the possibilities of sacrifice and was later to embrace the rigors of Cistercian life.

Acutely aware of the Abbey's architecture, he describes "the frowning tower, the windy belfry" and the sound of the bells which awaken and call the monks to worship. The bells remind us of the wise virgins who, when the bridegroom came, had their lamps trimmed and burning. The bells dominate this stanza as they "fill the echoing dark" of the monastery and its environs "with love and fear" in the mystery of the nameless One.

The next stanza repeats the entreaty to awaken his soul. He uses the windows as an analogy for the admittance of light into his soul and the abbey becomes his "sister." Visual images of violence fill this stanza: "smokey torches," "betrayal," "burning world," and "bloodying the glade." A transition occurs here: the entreaty for light refers to the past and is personal, a reflection of what Merton sees as his sinful life. His sinfulness combines with the moment in the Garden of Gethsemane when the soldiers came with torches and arrested Christ. Yet again, the poet steps back from that vivid scene of betrayal to address, for the third time, his soul within "the cloisters of the lonely night." The Abbey of Gethsemani, whose bells call him to Matins, becomes the Garden of Gethsemane where "the apostles gather." Merton himself is like the scattered apostles and one with them as "they mourn God's blood." In the last line of the poem, the cock-crow announces the sunrise by recalling Peter's triple denial of Christ. The poem ends with an immense sense of mortification that joins Merton with Peter.

Another Gethsemani poem describing the liturgy is "Trappists, Working," which Merton wrote in 1942. He changed his original title, as noted by Sister Therese Lentfoehr, from "Woodcutters and Harvesters"

(Twomey, p. 113). George Woodcock notes that the Psalms were a major influence on Merton's writing. He says: "He had reason to know the subject well, since every week the choir of Gethsemani would chant its majestic Gregorian way through all the hundred and fifty Psalms."²² With the exception of "Our Lady of Cobre," the poems discussed thus far illustrate Woodcock's observation concerning the influence of Psalms upon what he calls the "poetry of the choir." In the poem "After the Night Office," Merton uses the term "psalmody" to describe the chanting of psalms and canticles. In "Trappists, Working," he celebrates the liturgy in nature and the manual work of the brothers.

TRAPPISTS, WORKING (1942)

Now all our saws sing holy sonnets in this world of timber
Where oaks go off like guns, and fall like cataracts,
Pouring their roar into the world's green well.

Walk to us, Jesus, through the wall of trees,
And find us still adorers, in these airy churches,
Singing our other Office with our saws and axes.
Still teach Your children in the busy forest,
And let some little sunlight reach us in our mental
shades, and leafy studies.

When time has turned the country white with grain
And filled our regions with the thrashing sun,
Walk to us, Jesus, through the walls of wheat
When our two tractors come to cut them down:
Sow some light winds upon the acres of our spirit,
And cool the regions where our prayers are reapers,
And slake us, Heaven, with Your living rivers.

Merton's remarkable use of sound imagery in "Trappists, Working" creates the structure of a song. The bells are the sounds of the oaks as they are cut and felled, going off "like guns." The association of the bell sounds with gun shots follows from a very early derivation for the word "bell." One origin for the bell sound is thunder. In 1941 Merton wrote in his poem, "The Sponge Full of Vinegar": "Knowing it is thy glory goes again/ Torn from the wise world in the daily thundercracks of massbells." There is a crescendo of

22. George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978), p. 51.

sound in the "cataract" as the tree crashes to a shuddering fall. The clear sound becomes muffled within the earth, "the wood's green well." Swiftly orchestrated sounds create the work and the place in the first three lines. This terseness is followed by a gentle entreaty, a hymn which reverberates with the initial sounds, as a bell reverberates, and carries the melody to completion.

In this poem can be seen Merton's ardor and enthusiasm for his new life, his childlike delight in the manual labor of the monks, and his appreciation of the aesthetic beauty in the simplicity of the Trappist life. He welcomed the sense of belonging to a fraternity of men dedicated to God in what was to become, in fact, his first real home. In his first years at Gethsemani, his emotional and spiritual energies were greater than his physical capabilities, but he eagerly sought to integrate the daily Offices with the daily manual work. The second stanza recalls St. Bonaventure where Merton prayed aloud the Offices daily. "No one would ever come and disturb me out there in all that silence, under the trees, which made a noiseless, rudimentary church over my head, between me and the sky" (*SSM*, p. 309). The hymn begins with an entreaty for a miracle, as Merton invites Jesus to walk through "the walls of trees," perhaps as He walked on the waters of Galilee. The sounds of axes and saws here are reminders of the sounds of the opening lines. In the work of clearing the forest to plant wheat Merton integrates physical labor with prayer. It is a time to learn more of God's grace and to "let some little sunlight reach us, in our mental shades, and leafy studies." He likens the clearing of the forest, to himself being prepared to allow the light of God to enter the darkness of his being. At the same time, in the last stanza, the sounds crescendo in the image of "the thrashing sun." Thus, in one image, the wheat is ripened and harvested and also transformed into the Eucharist wafer, the mystical body of Christ of which all baptized souls are members. The gentle entreaty is repeated as Jesus is invited to walk "through the walls of wheat."

Echoes of the bell-sound of the cataract mingle in the noise of the two tractors which will come to cut the wheat and again the sounds become muffled into silence. The melody of the "mental shades" and "leafy studies" is muted in the "light wind" and prepare the reader for the analogy of the spirit with a field of wheat. As the sounds diminish so does the temperature. The hot sun is replaced by winds which "cool the regions where our prayers are reapers." The reaper prayers harvest satisfaction and fulfillment in heaven.

The song ends on a quiet note full of light and hope in the abundance of "Your living rivers." The harvest of prayer and faith is eternally satisfied in the stillness of the nameless One. Meditation and prayer were the central motivating forces of Merton's life, as Henri Nouwen points out. This poem particularly shows that prayer and contemplation were Merton's "way to relevance."²³

Nouwen is correct in his assessment of the value of prayer and meditation in Merton's life. That prayer life is reflected in his poetry, particularly through the Psalms in his early poems. Toward the end of his life, Merton's ordinary daily activities concentrated on prayer. He revolutionized spiritual writing, bringing it away from the stultifying narrowness often associated with it. After he moved into the hermitage in 1965, Merton wrote an ironic piece, *Day of a Stranger*, in which he describes his daily rituals:

Rituals. Washing out the coffee pot in the rain bucket. Approaching the outhouse with circumspection on account of the king snake who liked to curl up on one of the beams inside. Addressing the king snake in the outhouse and informing him that he should not be there. Asking the formal question that is asked at this time every morning: "Are you in there, you black bastard?"

More rituals. Spray bedroom (cockroaches and mosquitoes). Close all the windows on south side (heat). Leave windows open on north and east sides (cool). Leave window open on west side until maybe June when it gets very hot on all sides. Pull down shades. Get water bottle. Rosary. Watch. Library book to be returned.

It is time to return to the human race.²⁴

Merton no longer needed the austere and severe adherence to the communal life at the Abbey. External observances became an internal reality that set him apart and freed him although he maintained daily contact with the monastery.

During the momentous year 1941 Merton wrote "Evening," a poem which illustrates an unconventional song of praise. Sound images carry its movement and it is one of the finest of Merton's lyrical poems.

23. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Thomas Merton: Contemplative Critic* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1972), p. viii.

24. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger*; edited with an introduction by Robert E. Daggy (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), p. 53.

EVENING (1941)

Now, in the middle of the limpid evening,
 The moon speaks clearly to the hill.
 The wheatfields make their simple music,
 Praise the quiet sky.

And down the road, the way the stars come home,
 The cries of children
 Play on the empty air, a mile or more,
 And fall on our deserted hearing,
 Clear as water.

They say the sky is made of glass,
 They say the smiling moon's a bride.
 They say they love the orchards and apple trees,
 The trees, their innocent sisters, dressed in blossoms,
 Still wearing, in the blurring dusk,
 White dresses from that morning's first communion.

And, where blue heaven's fading fire last shines
 They name the new come planets
 With words that flower
 On little voices, light as stems of lilies.

And where blue heaven's fading fire last shines,
 Reflected in the poplar's ripple,
 One little, wakeful bird
 Sings like a shower.

The reader is drawn immediately into the "Now" and becomes captive to the tranquil scene. As the silhouette of the moon "speaks clearly to the hill," the wheatfields make simple music in "praise to the quiet sky." The utterance of the moon and the wheatfields' praise together with the sky form a unity, a wholeness created by sound and silence. First the moon, then the stars, come home, framing the voices of the children which carry in the evening because the day's noise is over. The stanza brings in the narrator's viewpoint and explains the scene. Merton and his fellow monks are separated from the outside world within the enclosure of the Abbey and grounds, yet the sounds outside penetrate to them. Merton the poet welcomes the intrusion as he recognizes a unique quality to the children's voices. While "clear as water" points to innocence, it also indicates the sound of bells. (How often the sound of children's voices is irritating rather than pleasing!) Perhaps Merton recaptures his own childhood in this idealized point of view. Merton's paradoxical nature is clearly visible here. He managed to absorb and synthesize the activities and thoughts of his

private world, the enclosed world of the Abbey, and the world at large. Later he wrote: "Let me seek, then, the gift of silence and poverty, and solitude, where everything I touch is turned into prayer: where the sky is my prayer, the birds are my prayer, the wind in the trees is my prayer, for God is all in all" (*SJ*, p. 91).

The third stanza is a delightful fantasy: common things are transformed by the innocence of the childrens' make-believe world. The trees become their sisters, but unlike the children, the trees still wear their morning garb at dark. The wheatfields' praise of simple music is realized in the wafer of the holy Eucharist, the trees with white blossoms are realized as children. Thus the mystery of communion with God is quietly and reverently introduced beside the innocent fantasies of childhood. The children continue to be the focal point of the poem in the fourth stanza as they name the first stars of evening. The last line is an example of Merton's extraordinary sense of sound and represents the small altar bells which sound simultaneously all around the Abbey each morning. "At all the various altars, the bells began to ring . . . all around the church the bells rang as gentle and fresh as dew" (*SSM*, p. 324).

The exquisite sound continues into the last stanza as an echo. The first line of the previous stanza is repeated and the echo effect is seen in the last rays of the sun. The little wakeful bird singing like a shower is the final vocalization of the childrens' voices, "Light as stems of lilies," and of the altar bells ringing "fresh as dew." The bird represents the innocence of the children and also Merton's prayer. The culmination and the pivotal sound of the poem is posited in one little bird's song which recalls the treble harp of heaven in "Trappist Cemetery" as well as the wind, the sun and the bobwhite in "O Sweet Irrational Worship." The bell-like song of the little, wakeful bird is, for Merton, a sign of Christ's resurrection. The notes of the bird's song relate to what Merton calls the "consonantia: all notes, in their perfect distinctness, are yet blended in one" (*Reader*, p. 437).

Merton, though he had written prose for years, only began to write poetry seriously in 1938. "In November 1938, I acquired a sudden facility for rough, raw Skeltonic verses — and that lasted about a month, and died . . . but now I had many kinds of sounds ringing in my ears and they sometimes asked to get on paper" (*SSM*, p. 235). This rough form was rapidly replaced by a light, lyrical and smoother one. Merton acutely observed small details and conveyed them in concrete images and in unusual combinations to provide a clarity of feeling. Also, he is central as the narrator in many of his

poems. He often uses himself as the *persona* and thus allows the reader to enter into that role as the poem is read. He is very much present in "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943," a highly personal quality is achieved as the reader easily identifies with the poet-narrator.

FOR MY BROTHER:
REPORTED MISSING IN ACTION (1943)

Sweet brother, if I do not sleep
My eyes are flowers for your tomb;
And if I cannot eat my bread,
My fasts shall live like willows where you died.
If in the heat I find no water for my thirst,
My thirst shall turn to springs for you, poor traveller.

Where, in what desolate and smokey country,
Lies your poor body, lost and dead?
And in what landscape of disaster
Has your unhappy spirit lost its road?

Come, in my labor find a resting place
And in my sorrows lay your head,
Or rather take my life and blood
And buy yourself a better bed —
Or take my breath and take my death
And buy yourself a better rest.

When all the men of war are shot
And flags have fallen into dust,
Your cross and mine shall tell men still
Christ died on each, for both of us.

For in the wreckage of your April Christ lies slain,
And Christ weeps in the ruins of my spring:
The money of Whose tears shall fall
Into your weak and friendless hand,
And buy you back to your own land:
The silence of Whose tears shall fall
Like bells upon your alien tomb.
Hear them and come: they call you home.

The title gives the reason and meaning of the poem. Merton's only brother, John Paul, who had joined the Canadian Air Force, was first reported missing and then was reported killed. Merton was given the first message ten days after the incident. John Paul's plane had crashed into the sea. He lay severely injured in a raft and, after three hours during which he suffered terribly from thirst, he died (*SSM*, pp. 402-403). It was the sixteenth

of April, during Passion Week and on the day of the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows. Before John Paul left for Europe, he visited his brother at Gethsemani and was baptized. Merton, who undoubtedly had a feeling of guilt about his past relationship with his brother, experienced a sense of retribution when he was allowed to instruct John Paul for baptism.

The poem is addressed to John Paul, Merton's last surviving immediate relative, his last tie with the world outside of Gethsemani. Merton's relationship and the cruel reality are swiftly stated and, in an unusual image, his sleepless eyes become flowers for his brother's tomb. Merton offers his poverty as a gift to John Paul — his sleep, his bread and water, his fasts. Trees of life transform his thirst into water for John Paul's final journey home.

The second stanza asks two questions: where John Paul's body and spirit are. The following stanza joins with the first as the narrator offers first his sorrow and then his life and death in exchange for "a better rest" for John Paul. The fourth stanza affirms a brotherly unity of affiliation in the only thing left, their salvation through Christ who is represented by the crosses which will mark each brother's grave when all wars are finally over. The final stanza refers to the time of year and to Merton's projection of his personal grief onto the sufferings of Christ. Christ is crucified once again in the wreckage of John Paul's plane. At Gethsemani that crucifixion is honored and celebrated. Merton has offered all he has in order to win for John Paul a safe refuge and he turns to Christ to accomplish that end. Christ's tears "buy" John Paul "back to [his] land." The tears are transformed into bells in the form of a metaphysical conceit and an oxymoron: "The silence of Whose tears shall fall/ Like bells upon your alien tomb." These poignant lines convey Merton's personal grief which is joined with the universal grief of Christ. Resolution is achieved in the final line as Merton simply asks John Paul to hear and obey the bells' call: "Hear them and come: they call you home."

CONCLUSION:

BELLS: CALL TO OBEDIENCE AND UNION WITH GOD

The symbolic significance of the bell and its sound is magnificent when, as with a harmony, all its qualities are considered as a whole. The vault-shape signifies the heavens. The sound is a symbol of creative power.

In the hanging position it holds the mystic significance of objects, and life forms like birds, suspended between heaven and earth. The bell sound is equated, through its qualities of range, reverberation, harmonious tone, illusiveness, and lingering note, to the voice of God. The sounds of bells evoke innumerable responses in the listener, and the sounds reach the listener no matter what the listener is doing. The sounds of bells accompany the Christian in his or her humility of prayer and work.

In the middle of the last century, quoting the voice of the bell itself, Alfred Getty translated a popular old Latin couplet: "I praise the true God, call the people, convene the clergy, / I mourn the dead, dispel the pestilence, and grace festivals."²⁵ Percival Price, in his excellent study of the bell, includes and extends the meaning of the voice of the bell to represent all truth. Price could be describing Merton's daily reverence, devotion and detachment as monk, priest and artist devoted to the mystery of the one Truth when he writes that perhaps a lone monk in Tibet sounds a bell every morning and evening to send out the unfathomable truth over Lake Tsomavang, indifferent as to whether anyone may hear it or not.²⁶

The "ringing voices of bells" have served so long as a call to worship and a reminder of the grace of salvation that any modern spiritual and mystical association with bell sounds is a natural one. The altar bell marks the progress of the liturgy, of the mystical sacrifice of Christ. The deep, sonorous bong of the tuned bell seems to come from the earth itself, as thunder, or crashing waves, or even artillery. To Merton, a poet who revered the senses and a monk whose life was devoted to silence, the symbol of the bell is powerful. Merton relied on the bells of the Abbey as a symbol of obedience. The primary theme of his use of the image of bells is as a call home. Bells signify the tangible quality of God. God is the spiritual goal and center of Merton's life, a life that is realized in the silence and solitude of Gethsemani.

Merton finally found a home, or at least a safe refuge from the world, when he entered the monastery. His peripatetic childhood and wild adolescence ended in the silence of Gethsemani. In 1943, Merton's faith enabled him to affirm his brother's death as a final homecoming. Framed by bells, Gethsemani provided the structure so necessary for Merton's interior journey. During the first seven years, he struggled with a desire for a more

25. Alfred Getty, *The Bell: Its Origin, History and Uses* (London: George Bell, 1848), p. 15.

26. Percival Price, *Bells and Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 242.

complete solitude. However, that desire for silence and solitude was not satisfied until he entered the hermitage in 1965.

In all the poems discussed in this essay, the bell imagery indicates the primary theme of the bell as the voice of God, as a call home. In the Gethsemani poems, the bells call the brothers, regulate their routine and celebrate their liturgy. Bells also encompass the countryside surrounding Gethsemani and unite the natural liturgy of the fields, trees, and birds with the daily liturgy celebrated in the Abbey. In "Song for Our Lady of Cobre" the bell represents a holy sound ringing from the heavens and encompassing the earth as "angels bow down like bells." In response, earth's created things are transformed as birds into images of transcendence. In "The Trappist Cemetery — Gethsemani" the brothers become analogous to birds, their souls soaring on their journey home. The ship's bells, like the Abbey's bells, mark their progress. In "After the Night Office" the brothers' songs of praise in the dark and quiet night precede the songs of the bells which awaken the sun. Bells serve as reminders of the brothers' relationship through prayer to God. Daylight becomes the mystery of the light of the Word. In "The Trappist Abbey: Matins" the valleys sing of the sunrise, but there is foreboding in the light of fires: the bells awaken and call the monks to remember with love and fear the mystery of the nameless One, their true home.

"Trappists, Working" has the structure of a song and celebrates the liturgy in nature and the manual work of the brothers. Images of sound and light progress to the possible illumination of the soul in holy silence. In "Evening" bell sounds recall the innocence of Merton's childhood and link the present with the association of altar bells. The bell sound is also symbolically represented by the bird's song as a sign of Christ's resurrection. Christ's silent tears in "For My Brother" unite Merton's personal grief with the universal grief of Christ: tears fall on the tomb with the sound of bells calling the brother home to heaven.

Merton achieved a simplicity in these poems, as he does in later poems, and eventually in his life. Nonetheless, he continues to struggle with what T. S. Eliot calls a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything. The mystery of the poverty and detachment of the monk binds him to the earth paradoxically when he gives everything to God.

Bells first called Merton when he was a child. The sound of Gethsemani's bells called him to his vocation, to obedience and union with God for the remainder of his life.