Landscapes of Disaster: The War Poems of Thomas Merton

Patrick F. O'Connell

Although Thomas Merton's best known poem, and certainly one of his best, is his elegy to his brother, John Paul, killed in action in 1943,[1] and although Merton's writings on war and peace, in both prose and verse, during the last ten years of his life are among the most influential of his works,[2] relatively little attention has been paid to the fact that during the period preceding his entrance into the Abbey of Gethsemani in December 1941, the very week America entered World War II, Merton wrote a substantial number of poems concerned with this war. The fact that these poems have not been considered as a group is not surprising, since they are scattered through three different volumes of verse, *Thirty Poems* (1944), *A Man in the Divided Sea* (1946),[3] and the posthumously published *Early Poems: 1940-1942* (1971),[4] and they are concerned with a period before the direct involvement of the United States in the hostilities, although for Merton, born in France and educated largely in England, this initial phase of the war had a greater immediacy and urgency than it would have for most native-born Americans. Though not all of these war poems are fully realized, they display a remarkable variety of frames of reference and strategies of analysis, so that considering them as a group provides an opportunity both to observe Merton's struggles with the moral, political and spiritual issues of war at this critical point in his own life, and to see him trying to articulate these struggles in poems that are aesthetically coherent and intellectually and emotionally effective. What follows is an analysis, in roughly chronological order, of Thomas Merton's premonastic war poems,[5] highlighting the particular approach to the war taken in each poem.

* * * * * * *

Probably the earliest of the war poems, simply entitled "Poem 1939" (*MDS* #2),[6] takes what might be described as a cosmic perspective on the conflict that began with the German invasion of

Poland on September 1 of that year. Written in three fairly regular trimeter quatrains,[7] it opens with an image of universal order symbolized by the constellations:

> The white, the silent stars
> Drive their wheeling ring,
> Crane down out of the tall black air
> To hear the swanworld sing. (ll. 1-4)

In the first two lines, the stars are depicted as having their own perfect, self-contained pattern, perhaps a reminiscence of Henry Vaughan's celebrated image of eternity as "a great ring of endless light" in his poem "The World."[8] Even the assonance of "white," "silent" and "Drive" and the echoing effect of "wheeling ring" reinforce this impression of celestial accord. Yet the parallel verb phrase in the two following lines reveals that the heavens are not detached from or indifferent to what is taking place on earth; the "silent stars" are depicted as listening "to hear the swanworld sing," a striking image of the beauty of the earth recalling the kennings of early English verse;[9] the metaphorical implications of the verb "Crane" suggest both a kinship and a contrast between stars and earth, perhaps to the advantage of the earth, as swans are generally considered more beautiful than cranes. The impression is that the celestial world, while perfect in its own way, is nevertheless drawn to the earth because of a melody, a harmony, available only there, in the "swanworld" which is also, more pertinently, the world of human beings.

But as the rest of the poem reveals, the stars listen in vain, for earthly order, unlike that of the heavens, is contingent on human decisions and actions, and is at best precarious in what has become a fallen world. In fact the image of the "swanworld sing[ing]" itself carries an element of foreboding, because in the classical tradition the swan is said to sing only when it is dying.[10] The middle stanza reflects the world situation in 1939, during the opening phase of the war in Europe:

> But the long, deep knife is in,
> (O bitter, speechless earth)
> Throat grows tight, voice thin,
> Blood gets no regrowth, . . . (ll. 5-8)

The swan has been stabbed, its throat constricts so that its "thin" voice is difficult if not impossible to hear, and it is in any case "speechless" with bitterness at its betrayal and perhaps with surprise as well. Its blood pours forth profusely and cannot be replaced, "no regrowth" providing an ironic verbal echo to "Throat grows tight" in the previous line. The staccato effect of the stanza's two final lines, with articles omitted, presents an almost clinical description of the dying process. The appealing picture of cosmic order complemented by earthly harmony in the opening stanza has been shattered by human discord and violence.

The final stanza personalizes the situation: "As night devours our days, / Death puts out our eyes" (ll. 9-10). Surrounded by so much destruction, it becomes impossible to see the light, to perceive the truth. For eyes blinded by death, night is regarded simply as a monstrous power of darkness that "devours" the daylight. As the stars hear no music from the earth, so in turn the earth has become unable to perceive the pattern of the stars. The poem concludes in a sort of anti-Pentecost in which "Towns dry up and flare like tongues / But no voice prophesies" (ll. 11-12). The towns which have caught fire, presumably from aerial bombing, recall the tongues of flame that descended on the apostles, but now there is no prophecy, no proclamation of the Word of God. The forces of destruction have apparently usurped and reversed the creative action of the Holy Spirit. The final silence is the opposite of the contemplative silence of the stars; the earth ravaged by war, blinded, speechless and apparently bereft of any source of insight into its tragic condition, fails to reflect and participate in the cosmic order of the "wheeling ring" of the heavens; darkness, for the time being at least, has overcome light.

* * * * * * *

"The Dark Morning" (*TP* #4),[11] a second poem from 1939,[12] also consisting of three stanzas written in the rhymed quatrains that Merton would soon leave behind, takes a very different approach that might be labeled "psychospiritual," though it too begins with natural description:

> This is the black day when
> Fog rides the ugly air:
> Water wades among the buildings
> To the prisoner's curled ear. (ll. 1-4)

The opening "weather report," presented in very simple words (only "ugly" has more than one syllable), is less simple in meaning that may initially be apparent. The use of the definite article in the first line (not "*a* black day" but "*the* black day"[13]) implies that it is a day that has been anticipated, and the personification of the fog, which "rides" on the air, suggests that the forces of darkness are abroad and that the blackness of the day is of more than meteorological significance, an impression reinforced by the cacophony of the harsh plosives in "black," "Fog" and "ugly." The parallel personification in the two final lines of the stanza (reinforced by their identical placement in two successive lines and by the slant rhyme of "rides" and "wades") suggests that here water is not to be taken as a sign of life or renewal but as another agent of darkness, finding its way through flooded passageways until it reaches its apparent its goal, "the prisoner's curled ear." Presumably the meaning is that the noise of the storm and its rushing water fills his ear so as to drown out all other sounds. The status and situation of "the prisoner" are not as yet further identified, but it is at least clear that he is unable to escape or evade the water's invasive presence. As vision is obscured by the darkness, so hearing is immersed in the sounds of the storm.

Yet the second stanza reveals that the prisoner is in fact quite receptive to the message of the storm:

> Then rain, in thin sentences,
> Slakes him like danger,
> Whose heart is his Germany
> Fevered with anger. (ll. 5-8)

The rhythm here switches to anapestic, a quickness that perhaps reflects the sound of the falling rain striking the already flooded streets (an aural and even visual impression of raindrops that would also explain how water could be said to "wade" in the previous stanza). In any case the rain's message, its "thin sentences" (a description that may refer to both the sight and the sound of the falling rain, but also to the lack of substance in its "words"), are said to satisfy the prisoner's thirst, but to do so "like danger." That is, the prisoner has a thirst, an attraction, for danger, which the storm "slakes": the power of darkness represented by the water is welcome to the prisoner, whose heart is "Fevered with anger." The rain provides a kind of counter-revelation, the opposite of sun,

light, illumination, words of darkness and disillusion, perhaps emotionally satisfying lies that allay, or justify, or rationalize, or excuse his anger, or do all at once. They claim that the storm, the blackness, is the most authentic reality, so that his own inner turmoil corresponds to the upheavals of the outer world. For the prisoner's "heart is his Germany": his enemy, his attacker and betrayer, is not external to himself but is identified with his own interior passions. Like the Merton of the opening page of *The Seven Storey Mountain*,[14] he is a prisoner of his own disordered desires, and his feverish inner conflict leaves him open to the seductions of the dark rain that pours in from the day deprived of all light.

The final stanza recapitulates the first two, reemphasizing the sense of imprisonment, with one significant difference:

> This is the dark day when
> Locks let the enemy in
> Through all the coiling passages of
> (Curled ear) my prison! (ll. 9-12)

The "dark day" (altered from "black day" of the otherwise identical first line of the poem) symbolizes the despair of the prisoner's state, held captive by his own "Germany" which he had evidently struggled against to no avail, unable to free himself from what Merton will later describe as the false self of egotistical desires,[15] and powerless to keep out the tempter's voice that confirms his own hopelessness by claiming it is the true condition of the world. It is the voice of the serpent that whispers in Eve's ear in *Paradise Lost*, the insinuating voice that traces the labyrinthine pathways to the prisoner's cell which are also the "curled" channels of his ear, an appropriately twisted path for a twisted message. But in the final words of the poem the speaker no longer refers to "his" but to "my prison." He has recognized that the condition he had analyzed in the first two stanzas also applies to himself – he too is imprisoned by his anger, longing for the dark rain's "thin sentences" to penetrate the "coiling passages" of his own ears. He has realized, as Merton repeatedly emphasizes in his prose works from this same period,[16] that as a sinner he shares in the culpability for the conditions that have made the war possible. This evidence of self-knowledge is then, paradoxically, a slight but genuine countersign to the hopelessness that has dominated the poem up to this final confession.

* * * * * * *

"The Philosophers" (*EP* #1)[17] uses literary parody to make its point about the worldviews that have led to the current conflict. The speaker is evidently a plant:

> As I lay sleeping in the park,
> Buried in the earth,
> Waiting for the Easter rains
> To drench me in their mirth
> And crown my seedtime with some sap and growth,...(ll. 1-5)

This opening section, a long subordinate clause clearly organized into parallel verbal phrases, is marked by the contrast between the participles modifying "I," which are passive and receptive ("sleeping," "Buried," "Waiting"), and the dynamic, active infinitives associated with the rain ("To drench . . . / And crown"), which is thus to bring potency into act, as the outer flow of the water evokes a responsive flow of the sap within. The specification of "Easter rains"[18] suggests that the vitality of rebirth in spring is analogous to and a sign of the spiritual renewal found in the resurrection of Christ. The speaker waits to be inundated not just by water but by the joy associated with this celebration.

The section that follows opens with the main clause of this first sentence, which contains a radical shift in focus and tone that will continue through most of the remainder of the poem:

> Into the tunnels of my ears
> Two anaesthetic voices came.
> Two mandrakes were discussing life
> And Truth and Beauty in the other room. (ll. 6-9)

These "anaesthetic voices" represent a counterforce to the power of the rains, conveying not vitality but its opposite, not only without feeling but inducing a lack of feeling, serving as instruments of anaesthesia. There may also be a pun in which "anaesthetic" refers to an atrophy of the aesthetic sense, an insensitivity to or denial of the reality and meaningfulness of beauty – despite the fact that this is the subject of the voices' discussion.[19] The mandrake roots, considered to have a human shape,[20] are appropriately personified as speakers here, but as the mandrake, or mandragora, is used both as a narcotic and as a poison, their words are hardly to be taken at face value. The reference to "the other room"

is rather odd for an underground locale, but it is apparently an allusion to Emily Dickinson's poem #449, "I died for Beauty,"[21] in which the speaker is "In an adjoining Room" (l. 4) to one who died for Truth, and says "We talked between the Rooms" (l. 10). The mandrakes' conversation, of course, covers these very topics, though their words reflect Dickinson less directly than a source that she herself probably was alluding to, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all, / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" – the famous final lines of John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn,"[22] which each of the two mandrakes reworks to articulate its own twisted "philosophy":

> "Body is truth, truth body. Fat is all
> We grow on earth, or all we breed to grow."
> Said one mandrake to the other.
> Then I heard his brother:
> "Beauty is troops, troops beauty. Dead is all
> We grow on earth, or all we bleed to grow."[23] (ll. 10-15)

The first statement reduces all to matter – if body is truth and truth body then the spiritual dimension is denied and the only growth is in quantity, in marked contrast to the holistic sense of "growth" in the first section of the poem, which suggests an analogy between material and spiritual development. Here greed and gluttony reign; successive generations are no more than a succession of bodies. The second mandrake's version is not just materialistic but militaristic and even nihilistic: power and violence are the only beauty recognized and death is ultimately triumphant.

This poem might seem to be only tenuously related to the war being waged at the time of its composition, except that the final lines, in which the speaker once again voices its own perspective of organic development counter to the reductive proclamations of the previous lines, conclude with a reference to conflict between the mandrakes:

> As I lay dreaming in the earth,
> Enfolded in my future leaves,
> My rest was broken by these mandrakes
> Bitterly arguing in their frozen graves. (ll. 16-19)

These lines recapitulate the movement of the entire poem, with the first line a compressed version of the two opening lines and the second emphasizing once again a sense of organic develop-

ment. The lyric tetrameters of these two lines give way to the unmetrical rhythms of the two final lines which summarize the central sections of the poem, with one crucial piece of additional information. Even though there might seem to be little real difference between them, the mandrakes are described as engaging in a bitter disagreement, which suggests that their views may be reflective of the military conflict currently in progress, in which case the materialistic philosophy of the first brother could be taken to represent the hedonistic worldview of the Western democracies, and the militarism of the second brother the totalitarianism of the Fascist powers. The distinct yet similar variations on Keats' lines suggests that the two are thus more closely linked than they are willing to admit, though the second does appear much more aggressive and frightening than the first. As the slant rhyme of "future leaves" and "frozen graves" indicates, the real contrast is between the pessimistic materialism the two brothers have in common and the expectation voiced by the speaker of a renewal that is both natural and supernatural.[24]

* * * * * * *

The poem entitled "Two British Airmen" (*EP* #3),[25] and subtitled: "(Buried with ceremony in the Teutoburg Forest)," written in rhyming couplets and probably dating from October 1939,[26] takes a historical approach to the war, setting it in the context of patterns of conflict dating back to classical times. The fliers of the title have apparently been shot down or crashed in the Teutoburg Forest in northern Germany, the site of a catastrophic defeat of three Roman legions by Germans in the first decade of the common era.[27] The poem opens with a focus on the warriors whose rest has been left undisturbed for 1900 years, a situation about to be changed:

> Long buried, ancient men-at-arms
> Beneath the beechtrees and the farms
> Sleep, and syntax locks their glory
> In the old pages of a story. (ll. 1-4)

The cumulative effect of "Long," "ancient" and "old" is to emphasize the gap, psychological as well as chronological, separating the as yet vaguely described past events from contemporary consciousness, a remoteness increased by the "dead" language in which the story is preserved.

In the second section of the poem, this distance is suddenly bridged by the experience of the two airmen of the title, described in their own words:[28]

> "We knew that battle when it was
> A curious clause in Tacitus,
> But were not able to construe
> Our graves were in this forest too;
> And buried, never thought to have found
> Such strange companions, underground." (ll. 5-10)

They begin by looking back to their schooldays, when the story of the Roman defeat as told by the Roman historian Tacitus[29] was of at most mild interest because of its grammatical structure; the event itself was too far removed from their own experience to generate much in the way of empathy or vicarious identification with the human drama of the battle. They had no premonition at the time that their own destiny would be to be buried in the same location. The use of "construe," which carries both the specific connotation of grasping the meaning of the Latin and the more general sense of "understand" or "interpret," marks the point of transition from schoolboy indifference to military engagement: war, and death in war, is no longer a historical curiosity of merely academic interest. Suddenly what was distant in time and space has become intensely relevant as the Roman soldiers are recognized as "strange companions" whose fate and burial site they now share. While the transition from "ancient men-at-arms" to contemporary "airmen" provides evidence of "progress" in the technology of violence, death remains death and war is still war – there is a sense of kinship in the sudden awareness of how little has changed over the centuries.

The poem then switches from the words of the dead airmen to those of the people burying them, who would of course be Germans living in the area:

> "– Bring his flag, and wrap, and lay him
> Under a cross that shows no name,
> And, in the same ground make his grave
> As those long-lost Romans have.
> Let him a speechless exile be
> From England and his century,
> Nor question these old strangers, here,
> Inquisitive, around his bier." (ll. 11-18)

Attention remains focused on the affinity of the dead airmen with the dead Romans, specifically identified for the first time in the poem, who are apparently the "inquisitive" "old strangers" (echoing the airmen's reference to "strange companions" above) seen gathered around the gravesite, disturbed by the reopening of the earth in which they have lain; they are neither to be questioned (about their own experiences), nor, evidently, to be answered (satisfying their curiosity about what is happening). The airmen are to be consigned to the same oblivion in which their buried predecessors have been left for all these centuries, at least as far as the speaker of this section is concerned. They too are to be "speechless exile[s]," not only cut off from their homeland but removed from time, from history, made contemporaries in death, as it were, with the "long-lost Romans," slain by the ancestors of the Germans now at war with Britain. Their very identities have been obliterated, as their nameless crosses attest. But the reference to the cross has another dimension, noteworthy even while remaining unexpressed. The opening couplet briefly notes that each flier is wrapped for burial in a British flag, and interred beneath a cross: national and religious symbols are juxtaposed here with no sense of tension between them, even though the buried and the buriers presumably have the religious symbol in common. The cross is reduced to its conventional function as a gravemarker, with no notice taken of the fact that the cross does in fact distinguish the gravesites of the airmen from those of the Romans, one difference amongst all the similarities.

The significance of this omission becomes evident in the final section of the poem, in which the speaker returns to his own voice:

> Lower, and let the bugle's noise
> Supersede the Parson's voice
> Who values at too cheap a rate
> These men as "servants of their state."
> Lower, and let the bombers' noise
> Supersede the deacon's voice:
> None but perfunctory prayers were said
> For the unquiet spirits of these dead. (ll. 19-26)

These final lines may initially seem to have wandered away from the main theme, as the comparison with the Romans is not mentioned at all. The speaker instead criticizes the parson officiating at the gravesite for identifying the dead airmen simply as "ser-

vants of their state," and ironically calls for the sound of the bugle, associated both with military funerals and with military engagements, to drown out the parson's banal superficialities; the speaker's comment that this appraisal values the men "at too cheap a rate" suggests that he at least recognizes that they have a more significant identity – that they are not simply functionaries of a political entity. Likewise he calls for the sounds of war and destruction to "Supersede" the graveside prayers of the deacon, "perfunctory" platitudes which fail to mediate any genuine encounter with God. In fact it is here that the true significance of the poem is revealed. The poem is not just about how things haven't changed over the course of two millennia, but also about how they should have changed. It is about the incongruity, indeed the scandal, of German Christians officiating at the gravesite of British Christians and not noticing any contradiction in the fact that they are fighting a war against one another. The evident irrelevance of religious affiliation on both sides makes them more like the Romans and Germans of the first century than the accident of a shared burial site. The dead airmen are finally described as "unquiet spirits," not truly laid to rest, because the deeper issues of their loyalties and identities have been left unresolved. The poem is ultimately about the failure of a conventional Christianity that has become an adjunct to national identity to advance contemporary civilization beyond the point where pagans had left it almost 2000 years earlier.[30]

* * * * * * *

"Iphigenia: Politics" (*TP* #13)[31] uses classic myth rather than ancient history to illuminate the current international situation. Iphigenia was the daughter of Agamemnon, leader of the Greek forces during the Trojan War, who was sacrificed for political expediency, to obtain favorable winds in order to sail to Troy. This destruction of innocent life becomes the paradigm for the destruction of innocence in all wars and in this war in particular. The scene of political betrayal is set in the opening section not on a beach but in a meeting room:

> The stairs lead to the room as bleak as glass
> Where fancy turns the statues.
> The empty chairs are dreaming of a protocol,
> The tables, of a treaty;
> And the world has become a museum. (ll. 1-5)

The room was apparently the scene of some past diplomatic activity, and has been preserved as it was arranged for that event. The comparison "as bleak as glass" is enigmatic at this point, but will be clarified later in the poem where the glass will be identified as mirrors and the bleakness seen as a reflection of the events that have taken place there. The main impression is one of emptiness and lifelessness: the statues may appear to be alive, but it is a mere fancy;[32] the furniture is described as "dreaming" of some political agreement, but this is just as surely a product of fancy as the turning of the statues. The reference to a museum in the final line here would seem to pertain quite aptly to the room itself, but is expanded to encompass "the world" – as though this room somehow represents the world in microcosm, its bleakness a reflection of a similar static lifelessness beyond its walls.

The three parenthetical lines that follow seem to have no connection to what has preceded. (The link will come only in lines 14 ff.) They are a précis of Euripides' drama *Iphigeneia at Aulis*,[33] in which the girl to be sacrificed to win the favor of the gods is rescued by the goddess Artemis:

> (The girl is gone,
> Fled from the broken altar by the beach,
> From the unholy sacrifice when calms became a trade-wind.) (ll. 6-8)

The Iphigenia story is an archetypal image of war's duplicity and brutality, its willingness to destroy even one's own children for political and even economic (cf. "trade-wind") ends, in which even religion may be implicated, as the "broken altar" suggests. But in Euripides' version it is also a counter-image of hope, a claim that the girl is not dead, that the powerful fail to execute their design, that the apparent success of *realpolitik* is actually itself illusory.

But for the time being this sentence is simply a parenthetical aside. The focus returns to the "empty upper rooms" in the following verse paragraph:

> The palaces stare out from their uncurtained trouble,
> And windows weep in the weak sun.
> The women fear the empty upper rooms
> More than the streets as grey as guns
> Or the swordlight of the wide unfriendly esplanade. (ll. 9-13)

The identification of the buildings as "palaces," in the plural, is suggestive: it hints at a link between past and present, between the palace of the ancient myth, the house of Agamemnon at Argos, and the building that houses the room of the opening lines, which would then also be a palace. Even though they are uninhabited, the buildings are ironically personified here as embodying the despair they project. The windows are eyes which stare and even weep, but which also reveal the "trouble" behind them, a variation on the "bleak as glass" image earlier in the poem. Amidst this emptiness it is somewhat of a surprise to encounter "the women" in line 11, the first human figures in the poem – other than the vanished girl in the previous section. Their fear of the "empty upper rooms" is not yet explained, but it outweighs the threat of the streets, described in a carefully balanced pairing of simile and metaphor, drawn from modern and ancient weaponry – the dull grimness of "streets grey as guns" and the glitter of "swordlight," both instruments of death but still considered less dangerous than the palace rooms.

The explanation that follows serves as well to link the contemporary situation to the classical myth:

> Thoughts turn to salt among those shrouded chairs
> Where, with knives no crueler than pens, or promises,
> Took place the painless slaying of the leader's daughter. (ll. 14-16)[34]

The ancient pattern is replayed in contemporary Europe, but nowadays the "unholy sacrifice," the violation of innocence for the sake of power, is likely to take place not on the beach but in an office or meeting hall, in the "empty upper rooms" that the women find so fearful. Yet the description here is filled with problematical elements. "Thoughts turn to salt" may simply indicate that sad recollections lead to tears, but with its echo of the earlier line "fancy turns the statues," it also recalls the story of Lot's wife fleeing Sodom and being turned into a statue, a pillar of salt, for looking back at the destruction: here it seems to suggest that an attempt to see clearly what has happened paralyzes thought and so should be avoided. The chairs are described as "shrouded" because they are covered with dust cloths, but the word of course also recalls the shroud covering a dead body, as well as the idea of concealing a deed, "shrouding" it in secrecy. The equation of knives with "pens, or promises" is likewise ambiguous: it can be read to say

that the spoken and written word can be just as cruel, just as deadly, as actual weapons, but the phrasing ("no crueler") also lends itself to a kind of palliation or mitigation of the knife as no worse than the pen. This would correspond with the reference to the "painless slaying" of the girl in the next line, an apparent effort to make the killing sound less offensive. It becomes apparent at this point in the poem that the perspective is not consistent throughout – there is no indication here that the girl has escaped, no revulsion at an "unholy sacrifice." The effect is that of a Greek tragic chorus, perhaps composed of the women mentioned in the previous section, oscillating from one point of view to another, with one chorus member or another contributing to a "mosaic" with an associative rather than logical progression, encompassing a range of responses from horror to acquiescence, from propaganda to prophecy.

This choric effect becomes more evident in the following section, which adopts a first-person-plural voice:

> O, humbler than the truth she bowed her head,
> And scarcely seemed, to us, to die.
> But after she was killed she fled, alive, like a surprise,
> Out of the glass world, to Diana's Tauris. (ll. 17-20)

Here the girl is said to be "humbler," lowlier, less powerful, than the truth – implying that the truth is likewise lowly and powerless. The peacefulness of her death, without struggle or resistance, is emphasized, but the claim is unconvincing,[35] a state of denial, an effort to minimize the outrage (in both an objective and subjective sense). Likewise the claim that after dying "she fled, alive" is compromised by the speakers' own passive acceptance of the injustice, their acquiescence in the crime. The weak comparison "like a surprise" suggests that this is just rhetoric, and unconvincing rhetoric at that, a facile parroting of official propaganda, a refusal to think lest one be turned into salt.

This effort to mouth the "party line" cannot be sustained indefinitely however. In the following section a progressive disillusion sets in:

> Then wind cheered like a hero in the tackle of the standing
> ships
> And hurled them bravely on the swords and lances of the
> wintry sea –
> While wisdom turned to salt upon the broken piers. (ll. 21-23)

The first line maintains a positive, enthusiastic perspective, as the sound of the wind in the rigging suggests the warrior's shout of enthusiasm going into battle. The cheer is a response neither to the girl's death or to her putative restoration to life but to the opportunity to head into war, made possible by her sacrifice which brought favorable winds. But the following line is more ambiguous: the wind has in fact hurled them into the hostile environment of the "wintry sea," imaged as an army with weapons at the ready. Nature is depicted as hostile after the unnatural act of sacrifice. Finally the interpretation turns completely negative in the third line, which recalls both line 14 ("Thoughts turn to salt . . .") and line 7 ("broken altar"): the salt suggests the sea spray thrown against the piers by the wind, as well as salt tears and the pillar of salt – but in any case it is clear that wisdom has not accompanied the ships on their expedition. When thought turns to salt, propaganda takes its place and truth is denied; when wisdom has turned to salt, actions take place that are shortsighted and unsound. But the departure of the ships has apparently freed the chorus from the influence of the callous arbiters of political power, though not from their fear of "the empty upper rooms" first expressed back in line 11. They now chant:

> This is the way the ministers have killed the truth,
> our daughter,
> Steps lead back into the rooms we fear to enter;
> Our minds are bleaker than the hall of mirrors:...(ll. 24-26)

The first line here seems finally to come to terms with what has happened, to recognize the fact that in war, truth is always the first casualty, truth that is not merely the "leader's daughter" but "our daughter"; the chorus seems to be acknowledging their own personal loss, their own stake in the disaster. However, it is still not clear if truth is dead, in which case they are unable to see and speak the truth, or if truth has indeed come back to life as Euripides' version of the Iphigenia myth would have it. Are they speaking the whole truth when they place the blame solely on "the ministers," or are they trying to absolve themselves of any complicity in the crime? To discover the truth, they must return to "the rooms we fear to enter," to look in the mirrors and see themselves as they actually are, to acknowledge that they too reflected to some degree the political opportunism they now distance themselves from.

The poem as a whole is not only about the way "Politics" sacrifices truth to apparent (but ultimately illusory) political advantage, but the way in which ordinary people – the "chorus" – consent to such policies when they seem advantageous, and try to dissociate themselves from those same policies when their true consequences become evident.

The reference to "the hall of mirrors" – the famous room in the Palace of Versailles where the treaty bringing World War I to an end was signed – suggests a specific (though not exclusive) application in the context of the new conflict: the French population approved the settlement of 1919, but now blame the politicians after the Fall of France, without acknowledging the elements of injustice in the original treaty that eventually contributed to Germany's declaration of war and subsequent invasion. The chorus must confront their own past by facing themselves in these mirrors and so acknowledging their own complicity; they must enter the scene of former triumph that has now become a sterile, lifeless museum. Their only path to salvation is up the stairs to confront the past and come to terms with it, to restore truth not "Out of the glass world" but within it. Any effort at avoidance is futile, since they carry around the bleakness, the emptiness and despair associated with the room, within themselves.

But the poem ends without a resolution, with a repetition of line 5: "And the world has become a museum" (l. 27). The atmosphere of the room has pervaded the entire world because it has taken over the inner world, "Our minds." The poem develops a triadic relationship between three spaces: room and world are identified in lines 1-5; lines 6-26 seek to break this relationship by interposing the mind, but the attempt fails: only by returning to the room can the room's hold on the world and on the mind be broken, but this does not happen because it requires the moral courage of an honest self-examination that is not undertaken. The poem concludes with an identification of room, mind and world: all are in the grip of bleak despair. The repeated declaration of the final line takes on apocalyptic overtones as it proleptically anticipates that the lifelessness of the Hall of Mirrors, the sterility and callous inhumanity it represents, will spread throughout the entire world as the war extends its power over physical and moral life.[36]

* * * * * * *

"The Night Train" (*TP* #6)[37] describes an imagined journey through wartime France that transposes the actual world situation into the quasi-surreal landscape of a dream. It opens with a rapid passage through what are eventually revealed to be successive phases of the war:

> In the unreason of a rainy midnight
> France blooms along the windows
> Of my sleepy bathysphere,
> And runs to seed in a luxuriance of curious lights. (ll. 1-4)

The "unreason" of the opening line seems to signal the bizarre logic of a dream, but may also suggest the fact that the actual situation of the war is irrational, representing the triumph of the Nazis' rejection of rational principles, so that the nightmarish quality of the ensuing description is only too appropriate. The train is described as "my sleepy bathysphere,"[38] a submarine craft that may initially seem to be referring simply to the rainy weather outside the train's windows, but also suggests that this journey is a descent beneath the surface of waking observation to confront a deeper level of awareness revealed through his dreaming. The immediate scene observed from the train window seems to reveal the vividness and vitality of the French spring, but within two lines the period of blooming is over and has been succeeded by the ambiguous period of "run[ning] to seed" – which could suggest seeds of future growth but commonly carries connotations of degeneration and decline. The laconic reference to "a luxuriance of curious lights" adds to the ambiguity – luxuriance suggests abundance, but also excess, and the "curious" nature of the lights implies they are somehow odd, abnormal, not simply the usual lights of cities and towns that "bloom" as the train passes through them, but unexpected, as yet unexplained illumination that at this point is only curious but that will take on an ominous meaning as the poem develops.

These opening lines make no overt reference to the current political situation, nor does the second section of the poem, though the sense of menace becomes somewhat more apparent here:

> Escape is drawn straight through my dream
> And shines to Paris, clean as a violin string,
> While spring tides of commotion,
> (The third-class pianos of the Orient Express)
> Fill up the hollow barrels of my ears. (ll. 5-9)

The journey is now discovered to be one of escape, though from whom or what remains as yet unspecified. The goal is to reach Paris, envisioned as a safe haven; the route of escape is described as "straight," "shin[ing]," and "clean as a violin string," all suggestive of the rails reflecting the light of the train's headlight as they stretch out toward the goal. Yet the possibility of escape seems compromised by the fact that forces of disorder are present on the train itself, now identified as the "Orient Express," the setting of any number of fictional intrigues: the "bathysphere" is being flooded by the rising tide of disruptive noises from the "third-class pianos" (both coming from a third-class carriage of the train and of less than superior quality), which threaten to overwhelm the calm resolve symbolized by the purity of the violin string mentioned earlier. The speaker's own inability to resist this disorder is evident from his description of his ears as "hollow barrels," empty of anything more substantial and so susceptible to being controlled by the hectic, disruptive sounds. Escape seems much more problematic at the end of this section that at its beginning, and the illusory quality of the speaker's initial hope would be particularly evident to any reader in 1941, when the poem was written, since Paris had in fact been occupied by the army of the Third Reich since June of 1940,[39] a fact of which the dreamer is apparently ignorant at this stage of his journey.

But full awareness of the war and its consequences emerges in the long central section of the poem that now follows:

> Cities that stood, by day, as gay as lancers
> Are lost, in the night, like old men dying.
> At a point where polished rails branch off forever
> The steels lament, like crazy ladies.
> We wake, and weep the deaths of the cathedrals
> That we have never seen,
> Because we hear the jugulars of the country
> Fly in the wind, and vanish with a cry.[40] (ll. 10-17).

The true state of affairs has now become evident. The stance of courage and devil-may-care insouciance of the cities in daylight evokes a bygone era, a chivalric pose that cannot be sustained, and certainly is not sustaining. In the face of the darkness of war and of enemy ideology the cities which had appeared to be powerful defenders prove to be moribund. They shrivel up like old

men and are lost – lost to the invading enemy but also representing lost hopes, lost convictions, a loss of direction that encompasses the speaker as well. The single straight path to Paris of the previous section proves to have been an optical illusion, for now the tracks split, and which if any direction leads to safety has become unclear, and as they are said to "branch off forever" the choice of direction is definitive, irrevocable. The clean clear sound of the violin string is replaced by the screeching of wheels against rails like the keening of "crazy ladies," counterparts to the dying old men which the cities have become, perhaps a reminder of women who have lost lover or spouse or child to the horrors of war. The harsh sound is said to "wake" the speaker, though whether from or within the dream is unclear and perhaps immaterial. Certainly the nightmarish succession of violent images continues and increases in intensity. The deaths of the unseen cathedrals (because passed in the darkness?) suggests the destruction of faith, or at least of the signs of faith, a persecution in which a religious and even cultural legacy is desecrated by a new barbarism. This causal connection between main and subordinate clause here suggests that destroying the cathedrals is equivalent to ripping out "the jugulars of the country," the very lifeblood of the nation which is carried away by the wind with a cry of anguish that echoes the lament of the rails themselves. This grotesque image suggests that the attack is that of a savage beast, going for the jugular, rather than of human beings.

The remainder of the poem then turns its attention to other passengers on the train, who are also awakened by the wild sounds:

> At once the diplomats start up, as white as bread,
> Buckle the careless cases of their minds
> That just fell open in the sleeper:...(ll. 18-20)[41]

The implication is that the diplomats have slept through their appointed time, have lost their opportunities to avert war. They too are on the train, not in control of its movements but carried along like everyone else, drawn inevitably to whatever destruction awaits at the end of the journey. They are said to be "white as bread," pale with fear, but perhaps also, in a kind of counter-eucharistic image, able to provide no real sustenance. Their very minds are described as being like unsecured briefcases that have "fallen open" in the sleeping cars (have they been talking in their sleep?) and are

now "Buckle[d]" too late, after their secrets have been exposed. They are depicted as reading the truth of their mutual fates in one another's expressions:

> For, by the rockets of imaginary sieges
> They see to read big, terrible print,
> Each in the other's face,...(ll. 21-23)

That the light by which they perceive the facts of the situation is said to be cast by "the rockets of imaginary sieges" is a puzzling declaration: why would the sieges be described as "imaginary"? The answer would seem to lie in the diplomats' complete misperception of the nature of the current war. Expecting that it would be conducted through interminable trench warfare like the 1914-1918 war, which would give them ample time to engage in various diplomatic maneuvers, they were totally unprepared for the actual blitzkrieg which bypassed the "impregnable" Maginot Line and captured Paris in a matter of weeks. The jugulars of the country have been ripped out yet they are still thinking in terms of long sieges. But if the sieges are imaginary, so must the rockets be (unlike the "curious lights" mentioned earlier which must refer to burning cities), so in fact the message they read on one another's faces must also be in their imaginations, a projection of their own fears. They have resigned themselves to their supposedly inevitable fate and play out their predetermined roles like characters in a B-movie melodrama (appropriately taking place on the Orient Express).

The tragedy of the first part of the poem has modulated into a kind of almost buffoonish cloak-and-dagger parody, as the final lines suggest. They are reading the "big, terrible print"

> That spells the undecoded names
> Of the assassins they will recognise too late:
> The ones that seem to be secret police,
> Now all in place, all armed, in the obvious ambush. (ll. 24-27)

The whole final section of the poem is a satiric depiction of the inadequacies of politicians, who project themselves as victims of inevitable forces, powerless to prevent their own doom when in fact the scenario is a product of their own imaginations – though no less true for all that, as it becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Their passivity and inadequacy will lead to their own de-

struction, but what they think they see in one another's faces is really within themselves. They are responsible for their own failure to work to prevent war. They have slept when they should have been awake, and now the consequences are suffered not merely by themselves but by the entire country. They come across as totally self-absorbed and oblivious to the larger ramifications of their actions, or their failure to act. Whereas "we" wake to mourn the deaths of the cathedrals, they are totally fixated on what is to happen to themselves. This lack of a broader vision and sense of responsibility serves as evidence of why diplomatic efforts to avert war were unsuccessful. Because of their failure of vision and failure of imagination, they have doomed not merely themselves but the country. Whether they will actually be assassinated by the secret police or whether this is simply a figment of their overheated imaginations, they have failed to prevent a catastrophe that extends far beyond the outcome of their own individual dramas.

* * * * * * *

The French setting of the previous two poems continues in "Dirge for a Town in France" (*MDS* #25),[42] which takes an elegiac approach to the war, and probably incorporates reminiscences from Merton's own memories of his early years in southern France. It might initially seem that this poem has no connection with the war, which is never explicitly mentioned, but to write a poem with this title in 1941 unrelated to the crisis France was enduring would be as unlikely as writing a poem entitled "Dirge for a Town in Iraq" in 2006 that is not concerned with the current situation there.

The opening section of the poem presents an interesting pattern:

> Up among the stucco pears, the iron vines,
> Mute as their watered roses, their mimosas,
> The wives gaze down among the traceries
> Of balconies: the one-time finery
> Of iron, suburban balconies. (ll. 1-5)

The human figures of the wives in the central line are surrounded on both sides by two lines of description: they are embedded in their environment, removed from contact with the street below. The opening pair of lines contrast the elaborate artificiality of the house décor, the "stucco pears" and "iron vines" of line 1, which have the appearance of organic growth and vitality, but only the

appearance, with the actual living, cared-for ("watered") flowers of line 2. Yet the point of contact between plants and people is their shared muteness: the "wives" are also alive, vital amid the faux vegetation that surrounds them, but they are unable to communicate that vitality – domesticated, like their flowers, kept isolated and apart on their once elegant but now increasingly shabby balconies. The scene has a static quality as the women "gaze" with a fixed stare at some unspecified object, "down" at the street from which they are removed. No overt destruction is depicted, but rather a certain impression of sterility is conveyed that suggests limited resources to resist forces of disorder. Even the repeated references to "iron," usually connoting firmness and strength, here seem more constricting then protective.

The following section, likewise five lines, provides a contrasting description:

> Down in the shadowy doors,
> Men fold their arms,
> And hearken after the departing day
> That somewhere sings more softly
> Than merry-go-rounds in distant fairs. (ll. 6-10)

The scene shifts to the street below and the focus from "the wives" to "Men" (not defined by their domestic relationships), who are less enclosed by their surroundings, but also stand in isolation, half-hidden in the doorways, in neither domestic nor public space, with folded arms that suggest inactivity, perhaps even a sense of withdrawal from action and a resignation to the present situation. But whereas no indication of the women's inner lives was provided (as yet), the men "hearken after the departing day" as though hoping for some message, some revelatory insight. There is a tension between "hearken," which is usually associated with a newly present source of information, and "departing," which suggests the information is soon to be no longer available, a sense reinforced by the phrasing "hearken after" rather than the more usual "hearken to." What is departing is both the light of day, source of illumination, and the faint sounds of music with which it is identified, barely perceptible music that emphasizes the difference between here and "somewhere" else, with no indication of where that "somewhere" might be. The sound is compared to that of "merry-go-rounds in distant fairs": the initial basis for the com-

parison is quantitative, the degree of sound volume, but the focus will shift to the vehicle of the comparison itself, the carousel which is the image of childish innocence and joy, and the fair that is the occasion of celebration, of community festivity. The analogy is an attractive one, implicitly contrasted to the evident grimness of the present, but it is more equivocal than it initially appears: certainly "softly" is not a descriptor that would be appropriate to carousel music up close, where it would sound loud and rather garish. This incongruity raises the question whether the distance, in time as well as space, has the effect of romanticizing the music, whether the longing for a bygone era, nostalgia for childhood innocence, leads to a distorted perception.

This question hovers unarticulated in the background of the brief section that follows, two pairs of parallel lines that focus on natural phenomena that do not prompt the music, or the recollection:

> O, it is not those first, faint stars
> Whose fair light, falling, whispers in the river;
> And it is not the dusty wind,
> Waving the waterskirts of the shy-talking fountain, ...(ll. 11-14)

These are the most lyric, "musical" lines of the poem, with the alliteration of "first," "faint," "fair," "falling," "fountain" and of "whispers," "wind," "Waving" and "waterskirts," as well as the assonance of "whispers" and "river" and the movement from monosyllables to trochaic disyllables (associated with the "falling" light) to trisyllabic dactyls (associated with the movement of the water in the fountain). But this music is explicitly distinguished from the sounds of the carousel: the "*fair* light" of the stars recalls, yet is specifically dissociated from, the "distant *fairs*" that the men "hearken after." The earlier synaesthesia of light and sound is gently reprised here in the "whispers" of starlight in the river, the reflection of celestial light, with its own quiet message, that goes unnoticed in the men's concentration on discerning some revelation from what is distant and disappearing. Likewise when the "dusty wind" causes the spray of the fountain, in a particularly effective image, to undulate like skirts, and is itself presumably purified by its contact with the water, the fountain is described as "shy-talking," also communicating a disregarded message in the quiet sound of the water falling back into its basin.

The first line of the following verse paragraph completes the meaning of lines 11-14, and if joined with them would preserve the five-line stanzaic structure, but its removal to the following section reflects the separation of the starlight and fountain and their "music" from that of the carousel:

> That wakes the wooden horses' orchestra,
> The fifing goldfinch, and the phony flute,
> And the steam robins and electric nightingales
> That blurred the ding of cymbals,
> That other time, when childhood turned and turned
> As grave as sculpture in a zodiac. (ll. 15-20)

The main emphasis here is on the "unnatural" elements of the music of the carousel: the "phony flute" is the most obvious "false note" here, but all the birds are artificial and the songs are mechanical. Like the "stucco pears" and "iron vines" of the opening line, they are simulacra, imitations of genuine life, as are the "wooden horses."[43] The music is not truly revelatory, not to be depended on; consequently the "hearkening" of the men is misdirected, no solution to their present situation. Previously, the sound of the merry-go-round had "blurred the ding of cymbals," perhaps coming from a nearby band shell, but associated with military music, so that obscuring the sounds of clashing cymbals could be taken to represent a failure to attend to a more aggressive music with its suggestions of approaching conflict, a failure of perception being "echoed" by a preoccupation with the same source of sound now, a culpable failure in the name of an ersatz innocence to recognize artifice and to become aware of more ominous background sounds which its music "blurred."

The specification of "That other time" sounds vague and prosaic, but actually does refer to a different, contrasting period, a time before the present death-in-life has become apparent, a time of (illusory) carefree existence. Yet even then the children on the merry-go-round appear anything but merry themselves. The individual children are assimilated into the personified abstraction of "childhood" and are described as "grave" – not only serious, but suggesting the demeanor of the tomb. The revolving of the carousel is compared to the revolution of the constellations, the cyclic pattern which elsewhere in Merton's verse serves as an image of order and cosmic harmony, but here the "zodiac" suggests a kind of futility, a return to the starting point, a fatalistic, deter-

minist attitude very different from the impression made by the stars reflected in the river in the previous section. The sculpture, images from pagan mythology that remain static and lifeless even while moving, convey an impression of ominousness rather than of innocent joy, wonder and vitality: the façade of celebration, of festivity masks a kind of hopelessness.

The artificiality characteristic of the remembered fair of the past is even more evident in the town of the present, to which the speaker now returns:

> And yet the mystery comes on
> Spontaneous as the street-lights, in the plane trees:
> The trees, whose paint falls off in flakes,
> Elaborate as the arches
> Of a deserted opera! (ll. 21-25)

The "mystery" of these recollections that arrive at dusk is compared to the street-lights which seem to come on automatically, with no human intervention, but this is of course an illusion – they are pre-set, far from "Spontaneous." In fact, as the last three lines of this segment graphically indicate, the whole scene is comparable to an elaborate stage set in which the trees are reduced to props, and dilapidated ones at that, forming a canopy or archway over a stage. The nostalgic "song" of the departing day is ultimately as empty of reality as the faded grandiosity of a deserted opera house, once filled with theatrical, hyper-emotional music. The implication is that the whole recollection of the fair and its carousel is a self-indulgent, self-deceptive construct, a hearkening back to a supposed time of innocence that never really existed, at least in the form given it by these memories. It is a comforting evasion of present responsibility by indulgence in cheap nostalgia for an imaginary idyllic paradise, a retreat into "tradition" that does not empower or inspire responsible action now. It is of a piece with the gesture of the folded arms and the loitering in the shadowy doorways.

As the poem begins to draw to its conclusion, the figures and images of the opening lines recur, in the same order, responding to the arrival of the night:

> The roses and mimosas in the windows
> Adore the night they breathe, not understanding;
> The women dream of bread and chocolate

In their aquariums
Of traceries, and lace, and cherubim; . . . (ll. 26-30)

Whereas the wives and the flowers were initially aligned with one another, here their responses diverge. The flowers show a genuine spontaneity (unlike the street-lamps) and acceptance, a natural alternative, with supernatural overtones, to the inadequate human attitudes. The darkness is not feared or shunned but accepted and worshipped. The flowers and the night air form an interconnected whole. Initially the connotations of "not understanding" might seem to be negative, a failure to recognize that the present situation is not "adorable"; but the workings of a discriminating mind, an analytic approach to reality, are not necessarily a plus. There is no need on the part of flowers to "understand" – they act appropriately without having to think. Their intuitive, holistic, synthetic approach, an apophatic inspiration – in-breathing – of the night, is more authentic and more life-giving than a reductive rationalism could ever be. The women, on the other hand, "dream" of a return to normalcy, to everyday, ordinary life as it used to be, symbolized by food: bread and chocolate, necessity and modest luxury. The evident lack of these items is the first indication, still oblique but clear enough, that a wartime situation is being described. They are described as being in "aquariums," an image of enclosure and containment, which makes it impossible for them to "breathe" the night as the flowers do. The framework of the aquariums is made of traceries (repeated from line 3), lace (evidently the intricacy of the ironwork on the balconies) and cherubim – apparently further decorative adornment on the houses, plasterwork putti, artificial angels to go with the artificial fruit mentioned earlier. But cherubim are the angelic order associated most specifically with the adoration of God, so that the genuine adoration of the flowers is juxtaposed with artificial images of adoration. Thus the women are isolated from authentic, life-giving interchange with their world, able neither to breathe nor to adore.

The third and final response to the night's arrival is described in the final verse paragraph:

But the men die, down in the shadowy doors,
The way their thoughts die in their eyes,
To see those sad and funny children
Run down the colonnade of trees

Where the carnival doesn't exist:
Those children, who are lost too soon,
With fading laughter, on the road along the river:
Gone, like the slowing cavalcade, the homeward horses. (ll. 31-38)

It is unclear whether the reference to the men's deaths is intended to be taken literally – there is no indication of fighting, and they are still located in the same doorways, so they may have simply given up, surrendered to despair and resigned themselves to death. This reading is supported by the link with "The way their thoughts die" – the light in their eyes is extinguished not by sudden violence but by the loss of something to live for. This "death" is said to be caused by a vision of the children looking for the phantom carnival, presumably not actual children in the present but their own younger selves, their memories of themselves. They are letting go of the comforting fantasies of their own past embodied in the fair and the carousel – the effort to grasp at a sustaining vision is finally seen to be futile, and they have nothing it put in its place. The children are perceived as sad because they are pursuing an illusion, and funny because they are not yet aware of the gap between anticipation and result; they will discover nothing at the end of the colonnade of trees, already described as a stage set with flaking paint. They are "lost too soon" because their innocence, the capacity of children to experience communion with creation, to develop a revelatory awareness, is frustrated by the adult world. Their laughter is "fading" into the distance, but also fading away to be replaced by the attitude "grave as sculpture" described earlier. Ironically they are running "along the river," where the first stars whisper, an alternative source of meaning, but one they are apparently oblivious to in their preoccupation with reaching the carnival, an inadequate "liturgy" that cannot meet their deepest yearnings. In the final line, the "slowing cavalcade" suggests that the merry-go-round is coming to a stop and the horses are heading "home," not into the town but away from it, receding into the distance with the entire ephemeral vision they represented.

The question remains: what does all this have to do with World War II? What is obliquely suggested is that the foundations on which the town and its inhabitants built their identity, symbolized by the fair and its carousel, were inadequate to sustain them when the time of crisis arrived: the women dream of normalcy while the men despair at the loss of the vision that proved to be no

more than a fantasy. The apparently joyful and carefree music of the past is replaced by, or transformed into, a dirge, a funeral song. Since there is no mention in the poem of occupying troops, the town in question is probably in Vichy France, the puppet regime established by the Germans in the south, where Merton himself had lived. Thus the focus on the town's memories may be intended more specifically to parallel Vichy's appeal to past tradition as its sustaining force, a nostalgia for past glories as inadequate as the yearning for "distant fairs," which likewise have disappeared and were insubstantial to begin with.[44] The poem critiques a false appeal to past innocence that is no substitute for a mature willingness to endure the testing of the present situation. It is finally a portrait of the superficiality of the town's moral and spiritual resources as revealed by the crisis of war and military defeat.

* * * * * * *

In the piece simply entitled "Poem"[45] and beginning "Light plays like a radio . . ." (*EP* #5),[46] perhaps Merton's most bleak and apparently hopeless war poem, natural images usually symbolic of a sacramental vision are co-opted by and identified with forces of disintegration and destruction, with no countermovement, no promise of eventual reversal and restoration. Except for a single parenthetical line, the poem could be read simply as a description of a particularly violent storm, but it is actually a grim fantasia on the etymology of *blitzkrieg*, in which invasion of the German army is imaged as a seemingly irresistible force of nature, obliterating all before it. But a careful reading of the poem makes clear that the despairing perspective of the poem is not to be identified as Merton's own but as that of the poem's morally compromised speaker.

The opening lines provide an ominous prelude to the storm's arrival:

> Light plays like a radio in the iron tree;
> Green farms fear the night behind me
> Where lightnings race across the western world. (ll. 1-3)[47]

The enigmatic simile of the first line is perhaps best interpreted as a variation of the synaesthetic linking of light and sound in "Dirge for a Town in France." Here light, which in a religious context is traditionally identified with spiritual illumination, even with the

divine Logos (see John 1:1-9), is likened to a mechanical instrument for providing information, but not revelation.[48] Likewise the "iron tree" in which the light plays is a profoundly ambiguous image: it is unclear if "tree" is to be taken literally and "iron" figuratively, or whether it refers to an iron structure (a radio tower, perhaps?) that resembles a tree. Iron is a symbol of strength, but as with the "iron vines" in "Dirge" it seems to exclude actual life and the capacity for growth. It may be a deceptive image of power and security, particularly when it is recalled that lightning is attracted to iron. It seems to contrast with the "Green farms" of the following line, representing fertility and vitality, but personified as threatened by the approach of night with its lightning storms. While there is nothing in these lines that definitely indicates the storm is to be interpreted allegorically, the description of the "lightnings rac[ing] across the western world" carries at least a suggestion of something more portentous than a simple, even if severe, meteorological event. We also note that the speaker is positioned in the midst of the landscape, between the green farms and the approaching darkness. He is not a detached, omniscient observer but a participant in the unfolding drama, a fact that will increase in significance as the poem develops.

The non-realistic dimension of the description becomes more apparent in the second verse paragraph:

> Life, like a woman in the moving wheat,
> Runs from the staring sky
> That bends upon the earth like a reflector. (ll. 4-6)

The allegorical figure of Life[49] is depicted as trying to evade detection by "the staring sky," a hostile, threatening image. Wheat frequently carries sacramental, eucharistic connotations in Merton's poetry, but here seems to offer no shelter or protection. The image of the sky "That bends upon the earth like a reflector" suggests low-hanging storm clouds completely enclosing the earth, a claustrophobic image of an impenetrable barrier blocking access to the heavens beyond it. On a more symbolic level it hints that the sky and its attendant phenomena are a reflection of what is happening on the earth itself, that the weather is a symbolic representation of earthly events – which proves to be precisely the meaning assigned to the storm in the next section of the poem:

> The last column of sun
> Is enfiladed in the battle-colored woods.
> Rain fills the valley with a noise of tractors,
> (For the tanks are come), ... (ll. 7-10)

In the first three lines here the weather is being described in terms of war, but in the fourth, the only "literal" statement in the entire poem, it is evident that in fact the reverse is the case. The setting sun is envisioned as in full retreat like a thin column of troops spread out across the entire horizon of woods, "battle-colored" either from the gunsmoke gray of the twilight or the bloody red of the sunset, or both. The imagery then shifts incongruously from military to agricultural as the sound of the rain is likened to that of tractors, suggesting that the heavy downfall is leveling the wheat stalks. But it is at this point that the veil of natural imagery is momentarily pulled aside and the actual situation is briefly indicated: the sound is not in fact that of heavy rain nor of tractors but of tanks. What is being described is not simply the arrival of a thunderstorm, a natural event, but of an army of "storm troopers," of "lightning war," a most unnatural event. This sudden, startling shift of perspective comes as a shock to the reader who had up to this point assumed that an actual storm was being described. The effect of using this figurative language to describe a military invasion is deeply problematic: is it meant to imply that the war is just as inevitable, just as much a force of nature as a storm itself, that it can no more be evaded or resisted than severe weather? What implications does this analogy carry, and what does its use reveal about the speaker and his own attitude toward what is taking place? These are issues that will become more urgent as the poem continues.

The consequences of the "storm" are evident in the next verse paragraph:

> Until the land lies murdered in my naked windows
> And the whole horizon's compass
> Thrashes with the winds, like harvesters
> Pulling down my million acre prairie. (ll. 11-14)

Here what would be metaphorical in the figurative frame, the "murder" of the land by the storm, is a factual description in the literal frame, the invasion of tanks and troops. Wherever one looks, in any direction, there is total devastation; not a single field but

the entire land has undergone this bitter, destructive harvest. The speaker here emerges as a kind of collective personality, not a particular individual but the embodiment of the entire populace to whom the "million acre prairie" belongs. His "naked windows," on the figurative plane perhaps referring to shutters being ripped away by the force of the storm, suggests on the literal level that he is forced to confront the full dimensions of the catastrophe.

In the following section, he emerges from shelter to view the effects of the storm:

> At last, when restless doors fall still,
> And let me out to trample the wet light,
> I breathe in anguish
> Cold and hunger on the watersmelling sky. (ll. 15-18)

Light has returned, but it is now "wet light," prostrate, vanquished, trodden underfoot even by the speaker. The aftereffects of the storm are described both as interior anguish – mental and spiritual destitution – and exterior deprivation: cold and hunger. But all are "breathe[d] in": the very air itself has been affected, and the "watersmelling sky" still perceives the consequences of the storm and senses that the severe weather could reactivate itself on short notice should the occasion arise. Here is the natural analogy to military occupation: the storm has completed its work but ongoing oppressive conditions now dominate the land. The speaker's response is to dig in the earth – not for planting and sowing of seeds but for burial:

> Earth turns up with a dark flash, where my spade
> Digs the lovely stranger's grave;
> And poppies show like blood.
> The woman I saw fleeing through the bended wheat:
> I know I'll find her dead. (ll. 19-23)[50]

The "dark flash" from the ground, the glint of light reflected from the spade, or a spark where it strikes rock, is an echo of the lightning in the darkness of the night before – not evidence of vitality, not genuine light. The flowers, which should be signs of life, are imaged as the blood the earth itself has shed. This is the context for the speaker's act of digging the grave for the "lovely stranger," the personification of Life seen running through the wheat earlier in the poem. But the speaker's behavior here is in fact quite strange.

He digs the grave first, then goes to look for the woman. This is not the normal sequence of activity. The speaker had remained a passive observer up until this point, had made no effort to shelter the "stranger" at the time of crisis, and now digs the grave before finding a body. Does this say something about the speaker's attitude and character? Is there a kind of acquiescence in what has happened, a presumption of irreversible defeat? Is the fact that "Life" was a stranger to him part of the problem here? The very awkwardness of the syntax in the final two lines seems to reflect an uneasy attempt to justify his action (and lack of action) – first the identification, grammatically suspended, then the complete sentence, which is not simply a factual statement but a claim based on no concrete evidence. It is as though he is being questioned about his premature action of grave-digging, and responds by defending himself with an unsubstantiated assurance. He finally appears as spokesman for a kind of defeatist mentality that presumes the worst and acts on this presumption.

The conclusion of the poem casts doubt on the reliability of the description that preceded it – the presentation of the invasion as storm makes it appear to be an inevitable and irresistible force of nature, but it is the outcome that makes it advantageous and self-justifying to regard it as such, since there is no way to deal with a storm but to let it happen. The poem is finally less about the enemy than about the speaker and his perceptions, his justification for his own impotence and ineffectiveness. The storm imagery is evidence of a failure of imagination, an acquiescence to the rhetorical framework of the enemy. The poem is deeply disturbing not just because of the invasion but because of the response to and interpretation of the invasion. It can be considered as Merton's reflection on the predominant French reaction to the Fall of France: we "know" that Life itself has died, and all that's left for us to do is to dig the grave and bury her. All vestiges of hope have been abandoned. It is a victory not just of German arms but more profoundly of the German "vision," the force of blitzkrieg "rac[ing] across the western world."

* * * * * * *

"The Pride of the Dead" (*MDS* #17)[51] begins with a kind of oblique presentation of the *"sic transit gloria mundi"* topos: powerful leaders and warriors of the past now appear as pathetic, insubstantial shadows of their former selves:

> The doors are down before the ancient tombs
> And wind dies in the empty gate.
> The paper souls of famous generals
> Complain, as dry as leaves, among the stones of Thebes. (ll. 1-4)

The setting is identified as the famously fought-over seven-gated city of Oedipus,[52] contested by his sons Eteocles and Polyneices, as related in Sophocles' *Antigone* and elsewhere. The greatest heroes of the generation preceding the Trojan War, the "Seven against Thebes," fought there, but the specifics are not emphasized in this poem: the city is presented more as a representative of antique fame, now gone. The celebrated gateways that in their day would have been closely guarded to protect the city's wealth are now "empty" – with no glory and wealth to protect. Likewise the doors of the tombs have fallen open and allow the wraiths of the ancient heroes to emerge in the hushed stillness of the windless day. Theirs are "paper souls," two-dimensional, insubstantial shadows of their former selves: worldly power and reputation were not equivalent to spiritual maturation, and even their complaints are now as nearly imperceptible as the rustling of dry leaves.

The open doors of the tombs permit a glance at the gravesites within:

> The jars of gravel that was one time corn,
> The wineskins that the mourners left them,
> They know will all be dry forever,
> These tired emperors, stitched up for good,
> As black as leather. (ll. 5-9)

The provisions left in the tombs have long since disappeared, and the bodies have likewise dried up and turned "black as leather." The dead are here described not just as "generals" but as "emperors," presumably having become rulers through successful military conquest, but they are "tired" emperors, worn out by their labors but unlikely to be refreshed by this sleep. Up to this point in the poem, then, the focus is on the ultimate emptiness and insignificance of past military and imperial glory, which cannot be sustained by grain or wine or any other material substance.

The thematic switch in the longer central section of the poem comes as a surprise, then. Their obsolescence has suggested no relevance or relatedness between these dead figures and contemporary people or situations, but now a representative "emperor"

figure, no longer just complaining but commanding, orders that they be recalled by the playing of a dirge:

> So we are startled by the leaf-speech of some skinny Alexander:
> "Strike from the harpstrings of the rain
> Bars of a dirge.
> Pacify the ancient dead
> For fear they be allowed to love the thin, salt smell of life,
> And drift across the rims of graves
> Like smoke across a crater,
> And loiter in your windless squares,
> And scare the living, hiding in the rubble of the ruined
> treasuries." (ll. 10-18)

The demand is not for a literal musical performance, since it is to be played on "the harpstrings of the rain," but rather to be remembered and honored, not dismissed as of no present significance. The Alexander figure calls not for a paean or an ode, a commemoration of their mighty deeds, but for a dirge, a song of mourning that could "Pacify the ancient dead," allow them to find rest and peace. The alternative is that they will be drawn to "the thin, salt smell of life," perhaps a metonymy for sweat, or blood, trying to find sustenance from what is still alive. They would emerge from their graves like smoke from a volcano, perhaps a harbinger of more violent eruptions still to come, to "loiter in your windless squares," a description recalling the dying wind in the gates of Thebes. Suddenly there is a point of similarity, rather than of contrast, that is confirmed by the description of the people in the following line, "hiding in the rubble of the ruined treasuries." The present is now revealed as a time of war, of destruction; the phrase "ruined treasuries" perhaps recalls the so-called Mycenaean treasury discovered by Schliemann, one of the great archeological finds of the ancient Greek world, but here refers to its contemporary equivalent, modern bank buildings[53] now reduced to rubble comparable to the stones of ruined Thebes. Thus the singing of a dirge for the conquerors of the past becomes a way of reminding oneself that the current conflict is part of a long pattern of violence and inhumanity; it becomes a mourning song not only for the past but for the present, a warning, an object lesson of the insubstantiality of human ambition.

In the final section of the poem, the single voice swells into a chorus:

> The paper souls of emperors,
> Frisk on the stones as sharp as leaves, and sing:
> "Draw back upon our night some windless morning,
> And hang it like a shroud upon your burning country,
> And strike us, from the tinny harpstrings of the rain
> Bars of a dirge." (ll. 19-24)

The first two lines here are a restatement of lines 3-4, but now the paper souls sing rather than complain: a kind of jauntiness, a grotesque playfulness has emerged. They call upon their modern listeners to pull back the morning like a curtain to reveal the night behind it, to face the darkness that is the true state of affairs that must be recognized and accepted. The windless morning can then be transformed from a curtain into a shroud, its white light no longer a sign of life and hope but useful only as a symbol of death, now the death of "your burning country," sharing the fate of Troy and other sacked cities. The recurrence of the command for a dirge to conclude the poem now becomes a call for a mourning song for the destroyed country of the present rather than the dead of the past – or rather the two are united. The dirge is no longer a way to keep the dead pacified but to recognize the triumph of the dead, of death itself. The dead return to walk the earth because their "way," the way of power through destruction, has returned to the earth. They are familiar with what is happening, so they belong on the scene. The "pride" of the dead at first seems to refer to their demand for attention, a desire to be commemorated, not left in oblivion, but by the end of the poem it seems to suggest that they take satisfaction in having no illusions: they see the actual state of affairs, the darkness that is true reality. Yet as "paper souls" their viewpoint is necessarily two-dimensional, lacking any depth; their claim that the "windless morning" is only a façade, surface drapery to be pulled away, is in fact a temptation to despair, to accept as normative the world of "our night," a world of destruction and war in which only the dead could take pride.

* * * * * * *

At 79 lines more than double the length of any of the other war poems, "The Bombarded City" (*MDS* #18)[54] is also the only poem of this group that explicitly mentions the effects of war in its title.[55]

But the content of the poem itself is far from the realistic description that the reader might be led to expect. It is rather a quasi-surreal phantasmagoria of shifting images in which the obliterated city is imagined as a kind of ghost town, a place of taboo which is to be left uninhabited. The voice of the poem is monitory, issuing repeated warnings to avoid the site, though the reason behind the warning only becomes evident in the later sections of the poem.

The opening verse paragraph makes immediately clear that what is being depicted is not a realistic cityscape but a symbolic transmutation of the scene into a psychic terrain:

> Now let no man abide
> In the lunar wood
> The place of blood.
> Let no man abide here,
> Not even in a dream,
> Not in the lunar forest of this undersea. (ll. 1-6)

The rhythms of the warning have a kind of hypnotic power, with their slant rhymes concluding the first three lines, the variant of the first line in the fourth (with only the reference to space at the end of the line 4 replacing the reference to time at the beginning of line 1), and the repetition of "Not" to open the last two lines. Obviously the same site cannot simultaneously be "lunar," "wood" and "undersea" – especially when it is a city that is ostensibly being described. The "logic" of the poem, as with others in the group, is that of a nightmare. Yet each of the terms has its own appropriateness: the craters of the bombed city might well recall the pocked surface of the moon, and the devastation suggests the acts of a madman, in the grip of lunacy. The forest represents a pre-civilized, even pre-human world from which cities emerged over the course of history, and back toward which the world at war seems to be tending; as "the place of blood" the wood is associated with elemental savagery, of beasts or of pagan rites like those of the druids. Finally it has been, as it were, submerged totally in violence, inundated by death, a shipwreck which has apparently left no survivors.[56]

The speaker expresses a kind of primal terror, a sense of the uncanny, from which no one is exempt:

Oh you who can a living shadow show
Grieving in the broken street,
Fear, fear the drowners,
Fear the dead!
But if you swagger like the warring Leader
Fear far more
What curse rides down the starlit air,
Curse of the little children killed!
Curse of the little children killed! (ll. 7-15)[57]

There seems to be a kind of atavistic "survivor's guilt" at work here, in which the very fact of being alive in a place that death pervades makes one an intruder, a profaner trespassing on sacred, forbidden ground. Even to walk the streets grieving does not exempt one from the fear, not of death, but of the dead – the guilt of being alive when others no less deserving of life have been deprived of theirs. The experience is one of being haunted by the dead, by the memory of the dead. But what the consequences of this haunting actually are, and how this relates to the speaker's urgent command to leave the place, is as yet unclear. Of course those who were actually responsible for these deaths, for the killing even of innocent children, should be more fearful in proportion as their guilt is greater, but the working out of the "curse" remains mysterious. The speaker then repeats lines slightly revised from the opening section as a kind of refrain: "Then let no living man, or dead, abide / In this lunar wood, / No, not even in a dream" (ll. 16-18). The added specification of "no living man, or dead" is odd here, unless the two categories correspond to the two groups addressed in the previous section, and "dead" refers not to physical death but to the kind of moral deadness that characterizes the swaggering followers of the "warring Leader" who call down upon themselves the curses of the dead children.

The physical description of the ruined houses maintains the surreal tone of the previous lines:

For when the houses lean along the night
Like broken tombs,
And shout, with silent windows,
Naked and windy as the mouths of masks,
They still pour down
(As conch-shells, from their curling sleep, the sea)
The air raid's perished roar. (ll. 19-25)

The parenthetical comparison here bears a complex relationship to the rest of the verse paragraph: it makes clear the basic point, that the "perished roar" of the air raid can be "heard" echoing from the houses in the same way that the sea can be "heard" in a shell; but there is a delicate beauty in the interposed line, in which the double alliteration of "conch-shells" and "curling sleep" and the final assonance of "sleep" and "sea" is the antithesis of the alliteration and rhyme of "pour" with "perished roar"; and yet the juxtaposition of the sound of the bombardment and the sound of the sea reinforces the earlier references to "this undersea" and its "drowners."

The passerby is warned once again not to linger, in fact not to pay attention to this impression:

> But do not look aside at what you hear.
> Fear where you tread,
> And be aware of danger growing like a nightshade
> Through the openings of the stone.
> But mostly fear the forum,
> Where, in the midst, an arch and pediment,
> Space out, in honor of the guilty Warlord,
> A starlit area
> Much like the white geometry of peace: ... (ll. 26-34)

Again the effect is carried largely by the repetition of sound, the repetition in successive lines of "hear," "Fear," "where," "aware"; of "growing," "openings," "stone"; the consonance of "fear" and "forum"; the seductive but specious attraction of the regular iambic pentameter line that closes the section. Here there is a glimmering of what is to be feared in the ruins of the destroyed city. The journey to the center of the city, to the forum, is a journey to a monument, which cannot be that of the Leader who has attacked this place, but must be of some previous ruler of the city itself, who had made some conquest of his own commemorated on this triumphal arch.[58] There is thus a suggestion of a cycle of violence, of a perpetuating of the killing in which each generation finds its justification in the atrocities of the enemies of a previous generation. What is to be feared from the dead, then, is the summons to avenge their deaths, to do to others what they have done to you. This space around the monument resembles "the white geometry of peace," but it is a peace of the victor, a peace of conquest and

capitulation, a peace that lasts only until the subjugated have regathered their strength enough to renew the conflict. This is the danger growing through the stones like the poisonous nightshade; it is the appeal of the forum, the recollection of past glory confronted with present devastation, that is most to be feared, the seductive appeal of a "peace" whose terms are dictated by one's own side.

The long section that follows declares that even after the enemy leader is dead the "claims" of the dead will still not be satisfied:

> O dread that silent place!
> For even when field flowers shall spring
> Out of the Leader's lips, and open eyes,
> And even while the quiet root
> Shall ravel his murdering brain,
> Let no one, even on that holiday,
> Forget the never-sleeping curse.
> And even when the grass grows in his groin,
> And golden-rod works in his rib,
> And in his teeth the ragweed grins,
> As furious as ambition's diligence:
> And when, in wind,
> His greedy belly waves, kneedeep in weeds,
> O dread the childish voices even then,
> Still scratching near him like a leaf,
> And fear the following feet
> That are laid down like little blades,
> Nor face the curses of the innocent
> That mew behind you like a silver hinge. (ll. 35-53)

This description of the Leader's ultimate capitulation to nature[59] is filled with verbal music, such as the alliteration of "grass grows . . . groin," or the combined alliteration and assonance of "when, in wind, / His greedy belly waves, kneedeep in weeds." It is reassurance that a conqueror's triumph is never permanent, that "all flesh is grass" (Is. 40:6), that "all is vanity" (Eccl. 1:2). But even this is not enough to satisfy the "curses of the innocent," the obsessive call to avenge the death of innocents by the death of other innocents.

As the following section suggests, such an attitude cannot bring genuine peace but only a dream of peace, the illusion of peace:

> For even in the dream of peace
> All men will flee the weedy street,
> The forum fallen down,
> The cursed arenas full of blood,
> Hearing the wind creep in the crannied stone:
> Oh, no man can remain,
> Hearing those souls weep in the hollow ruin. (ll. 54-60)

This section seems to look into the future, after another round of violence has destroyed the forum and filled the arenas with blood and yet not brought peace and rest to the dead. The bombarded city has become a necropolis, a city of the dead, a city haunted by death, controlled by death, demanding a death for a death:

> For there no life is possible,
> Because the eyes of soldiers, blind, destroyed,
> Lurk like Medusas of despair,
> Lay for the living in the lunar door,
> Ready to stare outside
> And freeze the little leaping nerves
> Behind the emperor's sight. (ll. 61-67)

The blind stares of the soldiers paralyze the emperor's[60] ability to see clearly, to base policy on something other than the vindicating the honor of his own troops. Likewise the voices of the dead children have a similar effect:

> And there no life is possible
> Because a weeping childvoice, thin
> Unbodied as the sky,
> Rings like an echo in the empty window:
> And thence its sound
> Flies out to feel, with fingers sharp as scalpels,
> The little bones inside the politician's ear. (ll. 68-74)

The parallelism between these two culminating verse paragraphs makes the theme of the poem clear. Whether it be an emperor's obligation to his maimed troops or a politician's[61] responsibility to his country's dead children, the rationalization is the same: a justification, when justification is required or desired, for taking

vengeance in the name of justice. The poem ends where it began, with the same warning, but now the reasons for that originally enigmatic warning have become evident. Even in the early days of the war, Merton, much like Simone Weil in her essay on the *Iliad* that he would read many years later,[62] had the wisdom to challenge the prevailing notion that suffering death can serve as a justification for inflicting death.

> Oh let no man abide
> In the lunar wood,
> The place of blood.
> Let no man abide there, no,
> Not even in a dream. (ll. 75-79)

* * * * * * *

"Lent in a Year of War," the opening poem of *Thirty Poems*,[63] puts war in an eschatological context. It begins with brief character sketches of its two contrasted but ultimately allied figures. The first is the authority figure, whose identity consists of empty external show:

> One of you is a major, made of cord and catskin,
> But never dreams his eyes may come to life and thread
> The needle light of famine in a waterglass. (ll. 1-3)[64]

The major is a figure of blustering self-importance without substance, Merton's version of the "hollow man" of T.S. Eliot's poem.[65] He is not merely clothed in but "made of" cord and catskin – the cord presumably suggestive of military braid but also used to tie together a stuffed figure like the Guy Fawkes effigy in "The Hollow Men," while "catskin," derived in one of its meanings from the "quatreskin," four rows of ermine used to trim the finery of British aristocrats, might also bring to mind a cat whose nine lives are all spent, so that only the skin remains, an outward façade bereft of inner vitality. He is utterly oblivious to the possibility of moving beyond the death-in-life of his present state, in particular the possibility of regaining the capacity to perceive reality. Merton's evocative and extraordinarily compact image of the "needle-light" can be understood in two complementary ways: the light seems to be identified both with the thread which passes through the needle's eye and with the needle itself. Thus to "thread the needle-light of famine" would be to see clearly enough to allow light to

be passed through a needle's eye, a reminder of the verse in the Gospel associating the passage of the camel through a needle's eye with a rich man's salvation (Mk. 10:25),[66] the light in this case being the light "of famine," a recognition of the suffering of innocent victims of war, an awareness that is a necessary preliminary to passing through the needle's eye himself, renouncing his privileged status and identifying with the starvation endured by those displaced by the war. But this same light would then penetrate his own eye as well, enlightening him to the truth of others' pain, and so function as a "needle-light," a sharp, piercing, painful wounding that would also heal. Such a transformation is made available "in a water-glass," an image of the Lenten fast, which has the power to renew life and vision through a vicarious participation in the physical and spiritual hungers of others. But of course this is presented as what could happen, not what does happen: the possibility of such a conversion doesn't even occur to the major, whose eyes remain blind and lifeless, oblivious to the suffering inflicted by the war as he is oblivious to Lenten asceticism and its potential consequences.

The second figure is less pretentious, a representative of the common man:

> One of you is the paper Jack of Sprites
> And will not cast his sentinel voice
> Spiraling up the dark ears of the wind
> Where the prisoner's yell is lost. (ll. 4-7)

Flimsy, two-dimensional, perhaps to be associated with the Jack in a deck of cards[67] as well as with mythical spirits that have little physical substantiality, he is a less imposing figure than the major; while on one level they may represent different levels of the military hierarchy, the identification of the second figure as a "Jack of sprites" suggests that the pair may also be intended to represent different dimensions of the human person – the major the physical, reduced and distorted to the biblical *sarx*, "the flesh," and Jack the spiritual, the soul shrunk from spirit to sprite. What they share is an abdication of responsibility. While the major won't see, Jack won't speak; he rejects the role of "sentinel" who could speak out on behalf of the prisoner whose own voice is lost "in the dark ears of the wind." Neither the pompous officer nor the ordinary sen-

try is willing to recognize the needs of or assume personal responsibility for victims of the war.

The pair is given the opportunity to defend their inactivity, and in the process reveal, in an ironic inversion of Matthew 25, that the hungry and the imprisoned that they ignored is none other than Christ himself:

> "What if it was our thumbs put out the sun
> When the Lance and Cross made their mistake?
> You'll never rob us our Eden of drumskin shelters,
> You, with the bite of John the Baptist's halter,
> Getting away in the basket of Paul,
> Loving the answer of death, the mother of Lent!" (ll. 8-13)

Their self-justification begins with a willingness to admit the result of their activity but a refusal to grant it any significance, an aggressive stance that continues throughout their speech. Even granted that it was they who brought about the eclipse of the sun at the time of the crucifixion (like fingers extinguishing a candle), their response is, "So what . . .?" They separate this plunge into darkness from the "mistake" of the crucifixion itself – an error attributed not to human agents but to the inanimate instruments of Christ's death, thereby excluding any culpability for themselves or anyone else. They cling to a myth of innocence, a presumptuous claim to remain in an unfallen world that is theirs by right, so that they rebuff as robbery any attempt to deprive them of it; but tellingly it is "our Eden of drumskin shelters," paradise as a military camp in which they describe themselves as living inside of drums, unable to see or to hear anything other than the rhythms of battle. They liken their critic successively to John the Baptist and to Paul, ominous, even threatening comparisons given that the first lost his head for speaking truth to power (see Mk. 6:14-29) and the second had to flee for his life from political authorities in Damascus (see Acts 9:23-25, 2 Cor. 11:32-33), and of course was eventually martyred himself. It is particularly noteworthy that they speak of the Baptist's "halter," though in the gospel it is not John but Judas with whom the hangman's noose is associated[68] – they project onto John the identity of betrayer which properly belongs to themselves. Alternatively, the halter could be identified with reins used to restrain and control wild behavior (such as Herod's in taking his brother's wife), its "bite" the prick of the

harness bit. In any case, John's bold speech contrasts with Jack's refusal to raise his "sentinel voice," while Paul's blindness and recovery of vision is the antithesis of the major's lifeless eyes. But according to them, it is really their accuser who is "Loving the answer of death, the mother of Lent." It is true that the death of Christ gives birth to Lent, to the period of fasting and mortification, a death to self that is a sharing in the paschal mystery as Paul tells the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:19-20). Death is indeed "the answer" in that Christ's death is the source of redemption. But the speakers' meaning is rather that to observe Lent, to acknowledge the need for repentance and a change of heart, is to wallow in a cult of death, an obsession with death, with perhaps even the threatening implication that in acting like the Baptist and Paul the speaker is courting death, so that to kill him would simply be to give him what he is asking for. In fact this attempt to deflect criticism of their own action, or inaction, is a desperate effort to deny their own guilt, to conceal that it is actually they who are in love with death, in league with death. Their argument is a tissue of accusations and self-justifications that inadvertently reveals a desperate effort to lay claim to a specious innocence, an evasion of responsibility for the suffering of others that extends from Calvary to the latest atrocity of total war.

The final lines of the poem suggest the ultimate futility of such a strategy:

> Thus, in the evening of their sinless murders,
> Jack and the Major, sifting the stars for a sign
> See the north-south horizon parting like a string! (ll. 14-16)

The oxymoronic "sinless murders" is of course not an expression of objective fact but of subjective rationalization, a refusal to acknowledge the evil of the killing they have participated in. In looking for a sign in the stars they seem to accept the determinism of astrology that relieves them of the burden of personal freedom, a preference for fate rather than faith. But the sign they do see as they face (presumably) toward the east, is the unraveling of the horizon, the separation of the sky and the earth, the apocalyptic moment of judgement when all their evasions will be definitively revealed. Their worldview itself is about to unravel, and their closed system of unconvincing rationalizations about to be exposed.

Thus this poem undermines the kind of blasé attitude that is always ready to shift the blame to someone else. Lent, especially Lent in a year of war, is a time to prepare to meet the Lord who identifies with "the least of these," victims of violence and oppression throughout history. It is an opportunity, missed by Jack and the Major, for profound repentance, for recognizing and confessing that I am responsible for Christ's death, that I am responsible for war, that by my own sinfulness I have contributed to an environment where others suffer. I can ignore the needs of others or take responsibility for them and act on their behalf; I can speak out like the Baptist and Paul or defend my own callous disregard like Jack and the Major. "Wars and rumors of war" are the sign that they overlooked, a recapitulation of Christ's sufferings that can and should function as a call to conversion and compassion.

* * * * * * *

Along with comments in his journals and his autobiography, and his posthumous novel *My Argument with the Gestapo*, which they resemble in many respects, this group of premonastic poems on the early stages of World War II furnishes significant insights into Merton's political and spiritual attitudes in the years between his baptism and his entrance into monastic life. They are not of course "typical" war poetry such as came out of the previous world war, written by, or as if by, participants, whether in a patriotic mode associated with Rupert Brooke or John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" or from the grittier, more disillusioned perspective of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and other combatants.[69] The only military voices heard in Merton's poems are the dead airmen alluding to Tacitus and the semi-allegorical figures of Jack and the Major, discoursing of Biblical events; the only descriptions of battle are couched in the metaphorical terms of "Light plays like a radio . . ." or the surreal phantasmagoria of "The Bombarded City." The various non-realistic frames Merton uses – dream, myth, parody, ghost story, archetypal symbols and the rest[70] – are not only appropriate for someone viewing the war from thousands of miles away,[71] but they provide effective vehicles for probing the psychological, moral and spiritual dimensions of the war, which were Merton's principal concerns. As his prose writings of the period also make clear, Merton viewed the war not simply as a struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, but as a sign of the loss of moral and religious clarity and conviction in Western

"Christian" society as a whole.[72] These poems, then, are not descriptions of actual warfare, of which Merton had no first-hand knowledge, but of the ways that this war, and all wars, are both revelation and consequence of ethical and spiritual failure: a recognition of personal moral responsibility for social disintegration ("The Dark Morning"); an awareness of the absence of adequate communal values ("Dirge for a Town in France"); a critique of political policies devoid of ethical concern ("Iphigenia: Politics," "The Night Train," "The Bombarded City"); above all an indictment of the hollowness of a conventional Christian rhetoric not incarnated in Christian action ("Poem 1939," "The Philosophers," "Two British Airmen," "Lent in a Year of War").

An attentive reading of these poems as a group makes evident both their consistency of perspective and the considerable variety of ways Merton takes to articulate that perspective in effective, coherent, aesthetically satisfying literary forms. Considering these poems together also provides a context for reading the most powerful and most personal of the war poems, "For My Brother, Reported Missing in Action," with its plangent question, "And in what landscape of disaster / Has your unhappy spirit lost its road?" (ll. 9-10), and shows that this was not the first time that the poet had visited and surveyed such landscapes—nor would it be the last.

Notes

1. "For My Brother, Reported Missing in Action, 1943," in Thomas Merton, *Thirty Poems* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1944), [pp. 7-8], and Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 35-36; for a discussion, see Patrick F. O'Connell, "Grief Transfigured: Merton's Elegy on His Brother," *The Merton Seasonal*, 18:1 (Winter, 1993), pp. 10-15.

2. For Merton's writings on war and peace see Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995); for an overview of the material see the articles "Hiroshima"; "Holocaust"; "Just War, Theory of"; "Nonviolence"; "Peace"; "Vietnam"; "War" in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), pp. 205-206, 206-207, 235-37, 330-33, 354-55, 508-10, 516-19.

3. Thomas Merton, *A Man in the Divided Sea* (New York: New Directions, 1946).

4. Thomas Merton, *Early Poems: 1940-1942* (Lexington, KY: Anvil Press, 1971).

5. "Fable for a War" (*Collected Poems*, pp. 712-713), which despite its title is in fact a pre-war poem, and one that Merton did not see fit to include in any of his published volumes, will not be discussed. In his autobiography, Merton comments, "In November 1938, I acquired a sudden facility for rough, raw Skeltonic verses—and that lasted about a month, and died. They were not much, but one of them took a prize which it did not deserve" (Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948], p. 235). The poem, which won Columbia's Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer Award, was "Fable for a War," which according to this chronology would therefore have been written before the end of 1938, in the aftermath of the Munich Pact (signed September 29), and in any case was published in June, 1939, more than two months before the outbreak of hostilities, both in *Columbia Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), pp. 60-61, and in *The New York Times*, on Sunday, June 18, 1939, in an article entitled "2 Columbia Poets Named for Awards" (36). "Fable" consists of five six-line stanzas that are indeed "rough" and "raw" if not exactly "Skeltonic"; in *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), Michael Mott describes it as "a propaganda poem" and adds, "It is hard to say what kind of promise this shows" (pp. 128-129).

6. *Man in the Divided Sea*, 16; *Collected Poems*, pp. 61-62.

7. The third line in the first stanza is a tetrameter.

8. Henry Vaughan, *Complete Poetry*, ed. French Fogle (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1964), p. 231.

9. See J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 344-345 (which includes mention of the term "swan road" for "sea").

10. This notion, from which the expression "swan song" arises, was known at least as far back as the time of Pliny the Elder, who refutes it in the tenth book of his *Historia Naturalis*, c. 32; see Pliny, *Natural History*, 10 vols., trans, H. A. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938-44), 3.333.

11. *Thirty Poems*, p. [2]; *Man in the Divided Sea*, p. 116; *Collected Poems*, p. 29.

12. In Merton's own copy of *A Man in the Divided Sea*, which also includes a slightly revised and reordered text of *Thirty Poems* as an appendix, now at the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, beneath each poem its date is written. See also Ross Labrie, "The Ordering of Thomas Merton's Early Poems," *Resources for American Literary Study* 8 (1979), 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 (presumably based on this copy of *A Man in the Divided Sea* for the first two).

13. An earlier version of the poem, found in the Van Doren File at Columbia University, reads "dark" for "black" in line 1.

14. *Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 3.

15. See Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp. 34-35.

16. The idea that moral responsibility for the war is shared by all sinners is found in Merton's journal as early as September 30, 1939: "The whole world is filled with the blood and anger and violence and lust our sins and self-will have brought upon us, my own sins as much as anybody else's: Hitler, Stalin are not alone responsible. I am too, and everybody is, insofar as he has been violent and lustful and proud and greedy and ambitious" (Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995], p. 31; see also p. 186 [April 1940]; Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969], pp. 76-77, p. 119; *Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 248, p. 250).

17. *Early Poems*, p. 1; *Collected Poems*, p. 3.

18. An earlier version of the poem reads "spring rains."

19. The poem was originally entitled "The Aestheticians."

20. See Genesis 30:14-16, and John Donne's poem, "Go and catch a falling star, / Get with child a mandrake root,..." (John Donne, *Complete Poetry*, ed. John T. Shawcross [Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1967], p. 90).

21. Emily Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), p. 216; in his journal entry for March 18, 1941, Merton writes, "The first insult of the day...was when I found the letter from *New Yorker* saying a poem containing a parody on 'Beauty is truth etc....' was a parody of Emily Dickinson and their readers would mostly be unfamiliar with that poem 'of hers' so they couldn't use it. I never read a line of Emily Dickinson" (*Run to the Mountain*, p. 322). If this last statement is literally true then there is a remarkable coincidence of phrasing; it may rather be an overstatement in reaction to the failure to recognize the more central parody of Keats. An earlier version of the poem, found both in the Fitzgerald File at St. Bonaventure University and in the Van Doren File at Columbia University, reads "in the neighbor room," even closer to Dickinson's "adjoining room."

22. John Keats, *Poetical Works*, ed. H. W. Garrod (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 210.

23. The published text reads "breed" here, as in line 11, but an earlier version of the poem, found both in the Fitzgerald File at St. Bonaventure University and in the Van Doren File at Columbia, reads "bleed", a superior reading in the context; the repetition of "breed" is evidently a mistranscription, though it is also found in a March, 1941 letter to Robert Lax (*When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax*, ed. Arthur W. Biddle [Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001], p. 72).

24. In *Thomas Merton: Monk and Artist* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), Victor A. Kramer suggests that Merton's decision to open the volume of *Early Poems* with this piece "indicates his fondness for it" (p. 39); in George Kilcourse's opinion, "Such parody is difficult to suppose as the work of a promising poet" (George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993], p. 58); Mott concurs that it "is not a strong poem, whatever it is" (*Seven Mountains*, p. 170). No previous commentator has considered how the parody relates to the thematic point of the poem.

25. *Early Poems*, pp. 2-3; *Collected Poems*, pp. 4-5.

26. The germ of the poem is found in a journal entry for October 6, 1939, at the conclusion of a discussion of empty gestures that substitute for genuine charity: "In the war—yesterday the Germans buried, with military honors, three unknown English airmen brought down in a fight over the Teuterborg Forest. A substitute for charity: it got some outlet in the pomp and bugles and speeches of a stupid military funeral. And by the way—Bill Hemmings who sat in the back row at Oakham, next to me, when we read Tacitus, and who was my studymate one term—we read of the battles in the Teuterborg Forest: he wrote two years ago he was in the R.A.F. Was he one of these men?" (*Run to the Mountain*, p. 44). Merton apparently read of the men in an article from *The New York Times* of October 6, 1939, dated the previous day from Osnabrueck, with the headline "Nazis Honor 3 Britons / Killed in Air Battle" and subtitled "Eulogy is Delivered and Full / Military Rites Observed" (p. 10). The article notes that the airmen's plane had been shot down the previous week over "Teutoburg forest" and that the bodies were burned beyond recognition; they were buried in the Cloister Cemetery in coffins covered with the Union Jack, and eulogized both by a German officer and by a military chaplain wearing decorations from the last war. Excerpts from both addresses are given; the chaplain is quoted as saying, "In the flower of their life these three airmen passed away obedient to their military duty. For us it will be a duty and an honor to care for their graves in this cemetery. May they rest here in peace in God's holy earth!" Merton's spelling "Teuterborg" is also found in the subtitle of a draft

version of the poem at Columbia University, which reads "(Buried in the Teuterborg Forest, 1939)," as well as in the subtitle in a draft typescript otherwise identical to the printed version in the New Directions Files at Harvard University, and in the typescript of *Early Poems* made by Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr in the summer of 1968, which suggests that the spelling was altered late in the process of preparing the edition of *Early Poems*.

27. In the battle, which took place in September, 9 A.D., three Roman legions, upwards of 18,000 men, under the command of Publius Quinctilius Varus, were ambushed by Germanic forces led by Arminius, a former Roman ally, and almost completely wiped out. For an imaginative reconstruction of the battle, along with a thorough discussion of its social and political context and consequences and a summary of recent archeological discoveries at the battle site, see Peter S. Wells, *The Battle That Stopped Rome: Emperor Augustus, Arminius, and the Slaughter of the Legions in the Teutoburg Forest* (New York: Norton, 2003). Kalkriese, the actual battle site, discovered in 1987, is located between the Ems and Weser Rivers near Osnabrück in northwest Germany; it is in fact some twenty miles north of the area near Detmold that was given the name Teutoberger Wald in the seventeenth century (after the rediscovery of the *Annals* of Tacitus, source of the name) and that features an outsized statue of Arminius which is a major tourist attraction (see Wells, p. 35). A more technical discussion of the archeological evidence for the battle site is found in Wolfgang Schlüter, "The Battle of the Teutoburg Forest: Archeological Research at Kalkriese near Osnabrück," in J.D. Creighton and R.J.A. Wilson, eds., *Roman Germany: Studies in Cultural Interaction, Journal of Roman Archaeology*, Supplementary Series 32 (1999), pp. 125-159.

28. In the draft version of this poem at Columbia, first-person plural forms have been altered to third-person plural: the typewritten "We knew the battle" in l. 5 has been altered in pencil to "They knew this forest" and "Our grave was in this forest" in l. 8 is likewise altered in pencil to "Their grave was in this dark earth". In the Harvard draft, which appears to be later than the Columbia draft because it incorporates some of the latter's penciled revisions in its typed text, the first-person plural forms have been restored.

29. Tacitus, writing almost a century after the event, does not describe the battle itself but the visit in 15 A.D. of the Roman commander Germanicus to the battlefield, where he buried the remains of the slain legionaries (see Wells, pp. 42-43, and Tacitus, *Annals*, 1:60-62, in Tacitus, *The Histories and The Annals*, 3 vols., trans. Clifford H. Moore and John Jackson, Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University

Press, 1931], 2:347, 349). The catastrophe is also discussed by the historians Velleius Paterculus (a contemporary who may have known both Varus and Arminius), Dio Cassius (early second century) and Lucius Annaeus Florus (mid-second century) (see Wells, pp. 38-42).

30. In *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1978), George Woodcock calls this poem "an oddly Housmanesque little elegy" (p. 35), perhaps thinking of the conversation between the dead farmer and his living friend in "Is my team plowing," or the shades gathered around the newly dead young man at the conclusion of "To an Athlete Dying Young" (see A. E. Housman, *Collected Poems* [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965], pp. 42-43, 32-33); given Merton's disparaging comments about Housman during this period (see *Run to the Mountain*, p. 437 [October 11, 1941]), any echoes are probably not deliberate. Mott call it "a fine poem despite all the echoes of other poems by other poets" and considers it "the first poem that would continue to mean something to" Merton (*Seven Mountains*, p. 146).

31. *Thirty Poems*, pp. [8-9]; *Man in the Divided Sea*, pp. 128-129; *Collected Poems*, pp. 36-37.

32. A working draft of this poem at Columbia University that is clearly a source for the final version reads "turns to statues" in line 2, which may possibly be the correct reading – i.e. fancy turns its attention to statues in the room.

33. See Euripides, *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, trans. W. S. Merwin and George E. Dimock, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

34. In the draft version "chairs" in l. 14 is preceded by x'd out "statues" and the final version of l. 16 is added in pencil above cancelled "Or smiles, Agamemnon slew his charming daughter". The draft version also interlines "swords" in pencil above cancelled "knives" in l. 15, an alteration that was not used in the final version, perhaps because of the more metaphorical "swordlight" two lines earlier.

35. In the original reading of the draft version, this claim is made by Agamemnon himself; the first-person plural forms and the consequent choric effect are part of a penciled rewriting of the final eleven lines of the poem.

36. George Woodcock considers this poem, along with Merton's elegy on Lorca, as the "best of the poems...from the pre-monastic days," and identifies Iphigenia as "the truth which politicians kill, in this way creating a future holding terrors as fearful as the vengeance that finally awaited Agamemnon" (*Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet*, p. 37).

37. *Thirty Poems*, pp. [3-4]; *Man in the Divided Sea*, pp. 118-119; *Collected Poems*, pp. 30-31.

38. In a journal entry for October 30, 1939, Merton includes "bathysphere" among the words "of out of the way and uninteresting things, expressing our interesting civilization" (*Run to the Mountain* pp. 74, 75).

39. For initial comments on the fall of France from July 1940, which begin, "I wish I had something I could write down about the war, and make sense. I wish I knew something I could say about France," see *Run to the Mountain*, pp. 235-236.

40. Both *Thirty Poems* and *A Man in the Divided Sea* read "head" in l. 16; Merton's copy of *A Man in the Divided Sea* emends to "hear"; the correct reading is found in *Collected Poems*.

41. An earlier version of the poem, found in the Van Doren File at Columbia University, includes an extra line following line 20: "And lock them under pillows:".

42. *Man in the Divided Sea*, pp. 46-47; *Collected Poems*, pp. 84-85.

43. George Kilcourse considers the carousel to be a wholly positive image, "a strong metaphor of childhood," an "archetype of fantasy and imagination," and suggests that the poet identifies "the child's imaginative life with the true or inner self"; though he quotes lines 11-20, he does not comment on the contrast between the natural sounds of the stars and fountain and the artificial noise—the "phony flute" etc.—of the carousel, nor does he consider that the children are part of the memory of the adult men standing "in the shadowy doors," so that the "stark contrast" between the "paradise consciousness" of the children and "the adult despair, or capitulation" is actually quite problematic (*Ace of Freedoms*, pp. 70-72).

44. See Merton's comments in his journal for October 26, 1940: "There is a fear, not that the war will end civilization, but that the reaction after the war will. Now everyone is keyed up to a great effort: but the fear is that, after all is over, everybody will fall down and die of a mortal lassitude and the sickness of disgust. Maybe everyone will just die of weariness and shame and hopelessness. That was what was frightening about France. As if they just gave up in disgust, willing to do nothing but die of *accidie*" (*Run to the Mountain*, p. 243).

45. In a draft version of this poem at Columbia University, the title "The Storm in the Afternoon" is written in pencil above cancelled "Poem"; in a second draft, the original typescript of which is in the New Directions Files at Harvard University and the carbon at Columbia, this new title is part of the typed text. It is unclear whether it was deliberately or inadvertently omitted in the published version.

46. *Early Poems*, pp. 4-5; *Collected Poems*, pp. 6-7.

47. Kilcourse sees the opening lines of this poem as an example of "writing [which] often labors as self-consciously poetic, even imitative,

or worse derivative of Donne, Hopkins, Eliot, and others whose metaphysical conceits Merton envied," though he does not specify how these lines bear out his critique (*Ace of Freedoms*, p. 56); Woodcock, in contrast, considers this "[o]ne of the best war pieces," and cites the opening lines as marked by "the kind of arresting cluster of sharp visual images that will later characterize Merton's poetry at its best" (*Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet*, p. 35).

48. In the Harvard draft the opening line reads "Light is more artificial than a radio, in the iron tree"—a clear indication that the comparison is intended to be a negative one.

49. The Harvard draft reads "like a lady" in line 4, with "lady" subsequently canceled and "population" interlined above in pencil.

50. In both drafts, line 21 (beginning "The poppies" rather than "And poppies") precedes line 19, which reads "And earth ... my shovel". In line 20 of the Harvard draft "stranger's" is cancelled and replaced in pencil by "summer's". A text of the two final lines identical to the printed version is cancelled in the Columbia draft and replaced in pencil by "The Summer I saw running through the bended and embattled corn: / I know I'll find her dead." The typed version of the Harvard draft is substantially identical with the revision of the first draft, but "summer I saw flying" is cancelled and replaced in pencil by "nations I saw flying" and in the following line "them" is written in pencil below cancelled "her". It is clear that the revisions of the Harvard draft tend toward a more overtly "political" reading than that found in the text printed in *Early Poems*. Whether the apparently earlier version of the poem was selected purposely or inadvertently as copy text for the published volume cannot be ascertained, but the alterations found in lines 1, 4 and 22 of the drafts have a certain literalistic stiffness that may make the poem's meaning clearer but do so at the expense of the quality of the verse.

51. *Man in the Divided Sea*, p. 33; *Collected Poems*, p. 75.

52. Two earlier versions of the poem are found in the Van Doren File at Columbia University, the first with authorial corrections in both pen and pencil, the second substantially a clean copy of the first with its ink corrections; in line 4 the first version initially read "stones."—"of Asia" is added in pen, then "Asia" cancelled and "Caucasus" added in ink, then cancelled in pencil and "Thebes:" written above; the second version reads "of Caucasus."

53. Line 18 of the first Columbia draft originally read "banks!" cancelled in pen and replaced by "factories!" interlined below, subsequently cancelled in pencil and "treasuries" added in pencil above; this is the one penciled alteration that is also found in the text of the second draft.

54. *Man in the Divided Sea*, pp. 34-36; *Collected Poems*, pp. 75-78.

55. See the descriptions of the bombing of England in the journal entries for October 27, 1940 and November 28, 1940 (*Run to the Mountain*, pp. 244-46, 264-65).

56. Ross Labrie comments on this stanza, "While lunar imagery is sometimes presented positively in Merton's poetry, here in this surrealistic setting it is sinister and frightening, particularly the 'lunar forest of the undersea,' an image that recalls Poe. Instead of illuminating the subconscious, however, as Poe would have done, Merton here uses the nightmarish scene to show the actual terror of war as greater by far than that of horrible fantasies about it that could grip the mind. Moreover, the imaginative image of the bony lunar light piercing the dark subconscious conveys an impression of death far more powerfully than would have been the case with an explanatory statement" (Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* [Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001], p. 157); see also the brief comments on the "syntactical experimentation" in the poem in Labrie's earlier book, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1979), p. 116.

57. In a typescript of the poem at Columbia University, line 11 reads "swagger / like the warring flier" with "/" added to make two lines and "warring" added in pencil after multiple cancellations including "warring leader" written in pen and cancelled in pencil. A second typescript, in the Van Doren File at Columbia, reads "But if you swagger / Like the warring flier or his leader" (two typed lines) for line 11 in the published version.

58. In the first Columbia typescript, lines 32-34 originally read: "Space out a starlit area / To imitate the white geometry of peace: / For the stone and fallen conqueror / The guilty statue overturned." The two final lines were then cancelled in pen and replaced by "In honor of the guilty winner"; then the three remaining lines were cancelled in pencil and replaced by the published lines 32-34, with the exception of "winner" rather than "Warlord" in line 32 and "To institute" rather than "Much like" in line 34. The second Columbia typescript likewise reads "winner" rather than "Warlord" in line 32.

59. Note the similar imagery in "Dirge for the Proud World," ll. 4-6, 13-14 (*Thirty Poems*, p.[18]; *Collected Poems*, pp. 49-50).

60. The second Columbia typescript reads "flier's" for "emperor's" in line 67.

61. The second Columbia typescript reads "airman's" rather than "politician's" in line 74. It is evident that in the earlier drafts there is more explicit attention to the role of the actual bomber; it appears that

Merton eventually decided to move away from a realistic to a more mythic set of images.

62. See "Pacifism and Resistance in Simone Weil," in Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 76-84.

63. *Thirty Poems*, p. [1]; *Man in the Divided Sea*, p. 113; *Collected Poems*, p. 27.

64. Labrie comments in *The Art of Thomas Merton* that "The army major in 'Lent in a Time of War' is largely a creation of sound.... The high-pitched 'i' and 'e' sounds intensify the feeling of acuteness appropriate to the crises of war and famine, while the image of the 'needle-light' works at the same effect visually" (p. 113); Labrie considers this "compact and tense" poem among the best in Merton's first volume (p. 112).

65. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), p. 56; the figure may also show the influence of Dylan Thomas: in his journal entry for February 9, 1941, Merton mentions that Thomas "gets some shattering effects by speaking of fleshly organisms being put together like things being carefully made of wood and string and sacking and so on" (*Run to the Mountain*, p. 306); see for example lines 10-12 of "When once the twilight locks no longer": "That globe itself of hair and bone / That, sewn to me by nerve and brain, / Had stringed my flask of matter to his rib"; and line 6 of "My hero bares his nerves": "And these poor nerves so wired to the skull" (Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems* [New York: New Directions, 1953], pp. 4, 11).

66. See also the tenth line of the fourth part of Dylan Thomas' "Altarwise by Owl-Light": "My camel's eyes will needle through the shroud." (*Collected Poems*, p. 82).

67. Merton may also be recalling Hopkins' reference to "This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond" in the penultimate line of "That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection" (Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, ed. W. H. Gardner [Baltimore: Penguin, 1953], p. 66). Dylan Thomas also uses the term in a number of poems: see *Collected Poems*, pp. 15, 76, 84.

68. Merton makes the connection in a journal entry from Gethsemani on Good Friday, 1941: "The world is hanging itself like Judas, with a halter" (*Run to the Mountain*, p. 348).

69. See Paul Fussell's classic discussion of the literature of World War I in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

70. These poems are thus sharply differentiated from the documentary style of the poetry on the Second World War Merton wrote in the 1960s, *Original Child Bomb* (*Collected Poems*, pp. 291-302), "Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces" (*Collected Poems*, pp. 345-49) and, to a somewhat lesser extent, "Epitaph for a Public Servant" (*Collected Poems*, pp. 703-11), though they show a remarkable affinity with such Vietnam-era poems as "The Great Men of Former Times" (*Collected Poems*, pp. 623-624) and "Fall '66" (*Collected Poems*, pp. 644-645).

71. It should be noted that these elements could be and were frequently incorporated into the predominantly realistic verse of the World War I poets, as Fussell points out and as Merton himself was no doubt aware.

72. See the article on *My Argument with the Gestapo* in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, pp. 311-314.