

SUNKEN ISLANDS:

Two and One-Fifth Unpublished Merton Poems

--by **Patrick F. O'Connell**

On March 27, 1957, New Directions published *The Strange Islands*, Thomas Merton's first book of verse since 1949. Originally to be called *The Tower of Babel and Other Poems*, after the verse drama which eventually became its central section, the volume had been planned as early as July, 1955, but was delayed for various reasons, chiefly so that too many new Merton books would not appear at the same time. In the process, the collection expanded from a group of ten poems (plus the play) to a total of twenty-one poems, as Merton continued to send new pieces through late September 1956, shortly before the work was finally set in type. In two cases, however, poems originally intended for this volume did not appear, and in a third instance, material included in the original typescript of a poem was omitted in the published version. This article will provide texts of these hitherto lost pieces, along with some consideration of the circumstances responsible for their disappearance. The three cases will be examined in the order in which the poems were written.

As he mentions in the Preface to *The Strange Islands*, Merton wrote "Elias--Variations on a Theme" for the New York Carmelite nuns during the Christmas season of 1954. This poem was undoubtedly included in the group sent by Merton to his literary agent, Naomi Burton of Curtis Brown Ltd., on July 20, 1955, to complete, as he wrote, the volume which was to begin with "The Tower of Babel," already sent five days earlier. On July 27, Miss Burton sent all this material to a typist to prepare a clean copy for the publisher. The result was a fifty-five page typescript, in which the verse-play occupied the first thirty-eight pages, and the shorter poems the remainder. The carbon of this typescript served as a setting copy for all of these poems but one. "Elias" had been sent by Miss Burton to *Thought* for separate publication, and appeared in that magazine in June, 1956. Though other poems for this volume had also been previously published, only "Elias" was set from a printed version, perhaps because, as Miss Burton wrote to Merton on July 29, 1956, *Thought* provided a huge number of offprints. "Elias" must originally have occupied pp. 48-51 of typescript, which are missing in the setting copy now at Harvard University's Houghton Library: the length of the poem as printed in *Thought* corresponds to four typed pages, and there is no indication of any other material which would have been included in the original version of the collection.

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However, during the same week that Merton sent the poem to Naomi Burton, he also sent a copy of "Elias" to his friend Sister Therese Lentfoehr. This copy, now at the Merton Center at Columbia University, is inscribed at the top of the first page, "To Sister Therese--with all blessings in Christ, July 16, 1955." This version, though, consists of five typed pages: the first, second, fourth and fifth are substantially identical in text to the poem as published in *Thought* and in *The Strange Islands*. The third page, which comes between line 97 ("Or alone forever") and line 98 ("Where do so many waters come from on an empty hill?") of the published version, reads as follows:

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

The seed, then, contains society
 Within its own loneliness.
 The stone has a sterile power
 To destroy cities, when hurled upon a prophet.

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Last night when the busting winds
 Buffeted the planets and the sun
 The sea came down. The world was bullied and drowned.
 Cities and churches fell. Such force
 The clouds of winter have when they come out and speak.
 Well, this is my argument, of evening and of night,
 Of finding myself hurled, here, in the high wood
 Without a stone or a light
 A corner under a cliff, or any cover
 When the whole world is run over.
 Dynamite and traffic and huge
 Wars are born in a forest valley
 Ruining the timber and the gorge.

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

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

Here where in the summertime no waters
 Covered the shale, and where October
 Filled the creek with leaves and ruins
 Now voluble streams, sent on their perfect
 Mission, announce the fate of December.¹

There are two possible conclusions to draw from this evidence. Either Merton decided, between July 16 and July 20, to revise his poem by simply eliminating one entire page of text and leaving the remainder completely unchanged, or the middle page of the poem was inadvertently lost, either by Merton himself in sending it to Curtis Brown, at the literary agency itself, or by the typist. The only change which would have had to be made is to head the final section "IV" rather than "VI," a "correction" which could easily have been made under the assumption that Merton had accidentally transposed the characters. The probabilities would seem to be heavily weighted in favor of the second alternative: the poem as published is lacking one-fifth of its lines, those at its very center. Internal evidence points to the same conclusion: the line from the published version "Creek that is now wet and clean of all ruins," toward the end of the second-last variation, refers back to the unpublished "October / Filled the creek with leaves and ruins" at the opening of the same variation; the reference to the bird which "sings on top of the forgotten / Storm" near the beginning of the final variation seems intended to recall the storm of the original fourth variation, which has, unquestionably, been forgotten.

This conclusion may seem somewhat less likely in that Merton was sent the proofs of the poem before it appeared in *Thought*, but his proofreading was obviously hasty: the proofs were sent by Miss Burton on May 14, 1956, and returned by Merton with a letter dated May 17; on June 1 a hurried airmail letter from Miss Burton notes that a "correction" added to the proofs has caused the affected lines to make no sense: "Where the woods are cut down the punished/ Trailer stands alone and becomes" (ll. 82-83) had been altered to "Where the woods are cut down the punished/ The trailer stands alone and becomes". Merton wrote back on June 5 that he had been "asleep, astounded, or in a coma" and that the original reading was the correct one. One can perhaps accept this explanation as well for a failure to notice that 48 lines of the poem had disappeared, but it should be remembered that "Elias" had been written almost a year and a half earlier, and that in mid-1956, Merton had many other things on his mind besides an old poem.

One of the other things he had on his mind was a new poem. On May 2, 1956, Merton sent two more poems to Naomi Burton. One was "Wisdom," published in *The Strange Islands*; the other is entitled "The Sting of Conscience" and subtitled "(Letter to Graham Greene)." It was inspired by a reading of Greene's novel *The Quiet American*, and is probably the most "confessional" poem Merton had yet written:

You have written, Greene, in your last book
 The reasons why I so hate milk.
 You have diagnosed the war in my own gut
 Against the innocence, yes, against the dead mother
 Who became, some twenty years ago,
 My famous refuge.

¹ Sister Therese Lentfoehr quotes some fourteen lines of this material, which she calls part of a "first draft," in her book *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1979): pp. 31-32.

This one place that claims to know peace,
 This is the very den
 Where most damage is planned and done.
 Oh, there are quiet ones among us
 And I live with the quietest of all.
 Here we are, victims, making all the trouble
 Loving the pity and the ignorance
 With which the light stands firm
 On our most righteous candlestick.

And now your book has come
 To plague the hapless conscience of the just
 While war boils in my own hard-praying heart.
 Not out of charity,
 Rather out of idleness do we refuse to hate.

O, if I were less desperately meek
 And could win back some malice, once again
 And tell the people what I mean
 I would perhaps hate them less
 For having so loved me.

I know: the decision is fatally made.
 I shall never return. I cannot reach again
 Those dear bad shores, to which prolific life
 Is not altogether alien.
 I cannot see again
 The world of lively, prodigal sin!

Yet look, Greene! See Christ there,
 Not in this innocent building,
 But there, there, walking up and down,
 Walking in the smoke and not in our fresh air,
 But there, there, right in the middle
 Of the God-hating sinners!

But here I stand, with my glass in my hand
 And drink the pasteurized beatitudes
 And fight the damned Ohio in my blood!

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Tell me, at last, Greene, if you can
 Tell me what can come of this?
 Will I yet be redeemed, and will I
 Break silence after all with such a cry
 As I have always been afraid of?
 Will I so scandalize these innocents
 As to be thrown clean out of the wide-eyed dairies
 And land in heaven with a millstone round my neck?

Merton was very enthused about this poem, finding the same sort of well-meaning but culpable blindness in the monastery as Greene found in his American in Southeast Asia, and rebelling especially against his own conventionally pious image. The entire poem vividly foreshadows the turn toward the world which Merton would make in the last decade of his life, and is particularly prophetic in its connection, through Greene, with Vietnam. In the accompanying letter, Merton jokes that perhaps Miss Burton might think the poem should not be published in

the book, since if anyone should get its point he himself might be sent to Alcatraz for un-American activities (this in May, 1956!), but he thinks it should perhaps be published precisely for this reason. He was right about one thing: Naomi Burton did not like the poem, did not like Graham Greene, and was adamantly opposed to its being published.

The correspondence about the poem continued through the summer, and resulted in a temporary strain between Merton and his agent. On June 4, Merton, obviously defensive, admits he's projecting his troubles onto his mother, America, the monastery and the Church, but still maintains it is a good poem. On August 10 he offhandedly mentions that he plans to include it in a batch being sent to the censor, even though he says he does not plan to publish it unless he can find some obscure polyglot magazine in the depths of Switzerland which no one would ever read. Three days later Miss Burton writes back that she can see no point to having the poem censored if it is not going to be published, and adds that she does not think he is using sound judgment and hopes he will follow her advice. On August 24 he responds that he will go along with her, admits the poem is "neurotic," but still insists it is good, and represents something unpleasant but real which he had not been able to face before. He expresses a hope that it might be published *some day* -- but until now the poem has remained buried in the Curtis Brown collection of Merton material presently housed at Friedsam Library of St. Bonaventure University.

The third and final example of unpublished material is much less dramatic or traumatic, though it was occasioned by the beginning of a trip which proved to be both. On July 30, 1956, Merton sent three poems to Naomi Burton from Collegetown, Minnesota, where he had gone on July 22 to participate in a conference on psychiatry and religious life, and where he had his now famous, or notorious, encounter with Dr. Gregory Zilboorg. Two of the poems, "Whether There Is Enjoyment in Bitterness" and "In Silence," appear in *The Strange Islands*. The third, entitled "Thoughts in an Airliner," is evidently a revision of the manuscript poem "White Pastures," which Michael Mott (*The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 292) says was written on the plane to Minnesota, though the description of the latter as "something new, a free-form poem moving in space and time" and as "a beginning before Ginsburg and others, in this kind of poetry," does not apply to the version sent to Miss Burton:

New, pure pastures,
Blessed by the walking of no other feet but God's
Have no chimneys near them:
This is a soft land without fires
Or homes, or fences, or ways.

Who dwells in it? Silence (but for us)
Would live in these fields.

Who talks here? No one.
(But here we come, and tear
The clouds with our roar.
It is clear we are intruders,
Passengers who do not belong in this sky
And do not plan to stay here.)

But what shall we do
In this Elysium of upper air?
Shall we go out and play
Violins while we walk upon
These fair, soft pastures?
Shall we open to one another
Mysteries that suddenly flower in our elated lives?

Such things are very dangerous:
 Let no one think of them.
 Rather let us turn away,
 Let us not look out there,
 Let us do something earthly.

Here, at seven thousand feet,
 We'll eat the flesh of four-footed animals,
 Clean animals (there may be Jews aboard)
 Shrimps (permitted as fish)
 Ice cream to make the little ones
 Forget those heavenly clouds.

Nothing, surely, could be more urgent
 Than, by eating, to resume communion
 With the rejected elements below.
 Therefore, put in your mouth the foods of earth
 To guard the dull, reliable and distracting
 Contact with all that is trivial.

This poem evoked no complaints from Miss Burton or anyone else, and was scheduled to be the third poem in *The Strange Islands*, after "The Guns of Fort Knox" and before "Nocturne." It was evidently set in galleys, since the copy of the poem at Harvard has the notation "gal 6" pencilled in after the first verse of the final stanza. But the poem was cancelled, apparently by Merton, before the final printing of the volume. The only correspondence which might cast light on the reason for this decision is a letter of August 23 in which Naomi Burton mentions to Merton that someone has called her attention to the fact that orthodox Jews do not eat shellfish, which seems to contradict what is said in the second-last stanza of the poem. At this point, Merton's correspondence is sharply curtailed, and he does not advert to this problem in the few letters to Miss Burton for the remainder of the year. Galleys of *The Strange Islands* were sent to Merton on December 10 and returned within in ten days. At this time, perhaps because he recalled the comment in Miss Burton's August letter and was unable to revise the poem to his satisfaction on such short notice, or perhaps for some other unknown reason, Merton must have decided to omit the poem, which has remained unnoticed until now with *The Strange Islands* setting copy.

For the sake of completeness, one last instance of a poem for the volume which did not appear there -- but which did not quite sink out of sight -- should be mentioned. In late August, 1956, ten of the most recent poems, which had not yet been censored, were sent to Merton. In late September, these were returned to Miss Burton, along with three new poems, "Anatomy of Melancholy," "Exploits of a Machine Age," and "In the Shows of the Round Ox." The first two were incorporated into *The Strange Islands* (the last of the additional poems), but when Miss Burton sent all the poems to the publisher she suggested that the last be omitted, and on October 17 Robert MacGregor of New Directions wrote back agreeing with her recommendation. That Merton was not consulted in this decision is apparent from a letter to Miss Burton on December 29 where he comments that the proofs for the poetry book look good but wonders why one of the poems, "In the Shows of the Round Ox," was dropped. He asks if somebody (did he suspect who?) thought it was too crazy. But in this case, at least, the poem did not disappear: Merton sent it along to Robert Lax, who printed it in his little magazine *PAX*. Merton later included it in *Selected Poems* (1959) and in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963). From there it found its way into *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*. As for "The Sting of Conscience," "Thoughts in an Airliner," and the missing section of "Elias," though they did not appear in the 1957 volume or elsewhere, their fate would seem to qualify them to be called "strange islands" indeed.