GRIEF TRANSFIGURED:
Merton's Elegy on His Brother
by **Patrick F. O'Connell**

"For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943" is among the most familiar of Thomas Merton's poems, due in large part to its appearance in *The* Seven Storey Mountain, which has undoubtedly been read by tens of thousands more people than any of his books of verse (including *Thirty* Poems, in which the elegy for John Paul Merton first appeared, four years earlier).[1] Its climactic placement at the conclusion of Part III of the autobiography gives the poem particular prominence and is quite effective structurally, making it part of a frame which links the book's opening description of Merton's birth in the midst of World War I to the tragedy of his brother's death during the Second World War, a personal experience of the hatred and discord which characterize the world he has "abandoned" to enter the monastery.

Though the poem makes an important contribution to the overall pattern of the autobiography, the question remains how good a piece of literature it is in its own right. It has been called "the outstanding poem"[2] of Merton's two early collections, "one of his finest" lyrics,[3] but has received very little sustained critical analysis.4 It was apparently written quickly, within a day or two after Merton received word of his brother's

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1. The poem appears on p. 404 of The Seven Storey Mountain (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), and on p. 7 of Thiny Poems (New York: New Directions, 1944). It is also found in Selected Poems (New York: New Directions, 1959; expanded edition 1967) pp 12-13 and in The collected poems (New York:New Directions, 1977), pp. 35-36.

2. Sister Therffe Lentfoehr, Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Menon (New York: New Directions, 1979), p. 9.

Anthony T. Padovano, The Human Journey: Thomas Menon, Symbol of a Century (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1982), p. 114.

4. Sheila M. Hempstead provides little more than a paraphrase of the poem in "Bells in Thomas Merton's Early Poetry 1940-46 "The Merton Annual 2(1989), pp. 284-285. Philip M. Stark notes some points of comparison with an elegy of Catullus in "Two Poems to a Dead Brother: Catullus and Thomas Menon," Classical Bulletin 38 (April 1962), pp. 81-83. Padovano makes some sensitive comments on the poem, but mistakenly presumes it was written after Merton had learned the circumstances of his brother's death at sea (The Human Journey, pp. 114-115)

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disappearance.[5] While severe emotional stress and turmoil might serve as a forge for art created under pressure, Wordsworth's famous description of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility" suggests that a certain degree of detachment and affective distance from one's subject is often an artistic advantage: grief, in particular, would seem to be especially resistant to coherent articulation. We might wonder to what degree the generally positive response to Merton's poem reflects human sympathy rather than aesthetic appreciation, especially as the diction may at times appear flat and cliched (e.g., line 8: ". . . your poor body, lost and dead"), and the form rather static and repetitive, apparently relying more on parallelism than on thematic development. Is the author really in control of his material, or is the poem more a raw transcription of feeling than a well-crafted work of art?

In fact, I believe a careful reading reveals "For My Brother" to be a very fine poem, more subtle, more dynamic and more unified than a first impression might indicate. The fiftieth anniversary of John Paul's death and of the poem which commemorates it provide a good opportunity to reexamine and reevaluate a work which has perhaps been too well known to be known well.

When he wrote the poem, during Easter Week, 1943, Merton had been chanting the Divine Office for almost a year and a half, and the influence of the psalms' typically parallel verse form is evident in the balance of his own lines. He begins:

> Sweet brother, if I do not sleep
> My eyes are flowers for your tomb;
> And if I cannot eat my bread,
> My fasts shall live like willows where you died.
> If in the heat I find no water for my thirst,
> My thirst shall turn to springs for you, poor traveler. (II.1-6)

The first two couplets link the speaker's reaction to the news of his brother's apparent death-his inability to sleep or eat—with the fact that the unknown location of the body makes traditional emblems of mourning impossible: as no flowers can be placed on the grave, no memorial tree planted to mark the site of death, the manifestations of the poet's sorrow must function as surrogate tributes. The images are striking, though the specific points of correspondence are not immediately clear: if there is some visual resemblance between open eyes and flowers, the same cannot be said of fasts and willows, but significantly the second comparison is expressed not as metaphor but as simile—both fasts and willows are said to "live," a reminder that trees, and flowers as well, are grown in graveyards as symbols of life springing forth from the midst of death: in what sense fasts (or sleepless nights) can carry the same meaning remains for the moment obscure, however.

The third pair of lines seems to extend the parallelism, balancing hunger with thirst. But while the grammatical structure remains the same, the argument of the poem shifts to a new plane here. The focus is no longer on John Paul's body but on his spirit, described as a "poor traveller" whose journey has not ended with his death. This change is reinforced by the more intrinsic connection between thirst and springs than that between the previous images, but the very aptness of this analogy may distract attention from the boldness of the assertion being made here. As with the two preceding clauses, this third couplet (written, tellingly as a

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5. Sister Therese notes that the manuscript version of the poem is dated April 28,1943 (Words and Silence, p. 9). In The Seven Storey Mountain (p. 402), Merton writes that his brother was reported missing on April 17 and that he was informed ten days later, on Easter Tuesday, which would have been April 27. (He mentions on the previous page that Easter that year was "as late as it could possibly be—the twenty-fifth of April.")

separate sentence) is expressed in conditional form, not to indicate doubt as to whether the speaker will do as he says, but implying a cause-effect relationship between his actions ("if this") and their consequences for his brother ("then that"). Such contentions cause little difficulty so long as they remain on the level of images, as in the first two cases, where the offerings are figurative, comparable to the wreaths and posies of numerous other elegies. But the final instance, while continuing to depend on metaphor (a dead person has no use for literal springs, which cannot in any case be provided by another's thirst), implies that the speaker's sacrifice is to have some substantial effect on his brother—not merely honor for his corpse (for which words may be at least as meaningful as material objects) but refreshment and sustenance for his soul. The validity of such a radical claim remains problematic at this point: congruency of image is hardly sufficient basis for maintaining that actions of the living can benefit the dead. The reader may be inclined to wonder if this is not an example of wishful thinking, and even if the speaker himself is fully aware of how the terms of the discussion have altered.

The change of focus and of tone in the second verse paragraph casts further doubt on the speaker's ability to fulfill his resolutions. Statement is replaced by question, and the elder brother's initial confidence that he can somehow continue to provide for his younger brother gives way to an anguished awareness of the gulf which distance, uncertainty and death have formed between them:

> Where, in what desolate and smoky country,
> Lies your poor body, lost and dead?
> And in what landscape of disaster
> Has your unhappy spirit lost its road? (II. 7-10)

Once again, despite the formal parallelism between the two sets of lines, there is a progression from physical to spiritual concerns. The first question, with its repeated, rephrased interrogatives, suggests that the speaker can no longer sustain the pose of equanimity conveyed by the earlier mention of "where you died" (I. 4), though the flat monosyllables of the second line are indicative of an effort to hold grief in check by treating death in as matter-of-fact a way as possible. But these apparently banal adjectives also serve another function: "poor body" echoes the earlier apostrophe, "poor traveller" (I. 6), and "lost" looks ahead to the spirit which has "lost its road" in the second question. An analogy is being developed between the situation of John Paul's body, "missing in action," and the much more significant destiny of his spirit, presented as a sort of Dantesque pilgrim which has lost its way in a "landscape of disaster," the "drear wilderness" of the opening canto of the Divine Comedy, here symbolizing the moral confusion which has resulted in the war and thus in John Paul's death. The speaker's concern for the location of his brother's body becomes at this point little more than a reflection of his deeper concern for the condition of his soul, which will occupy his complete attention for the remainder of the poem. Recognizing his inability to "find" his brother, yet still filled with anxious care for his welfare, the speaker now invites the "poor traveller" to come to him; but the results of this strategy will turn out to be no more satisfactory than his earlier efforts:

> Come, in my labor find a resting place
> And in my sorrow lay your head,
> Or rather take my life and blood
> And buy yourself a better bed—
> Or take my breath and take my death
> And buy yourself a better rest. (II.11-16)

The fan that the three couplets here are presented as alternatives, each discarded in favor of the next, suggests that the speaker is well aware that none of these proposals can be effectively realized. As in the third segment of the opening stanza, there is a correspondence between "my labor" and "a resting place," but no indication how one can be meaningfully connected to the other, while the two following clauses seem to express little more than the speaker's regret that he had not died in his brother's place, or a profession that he would willingly give his very life's blood, the last breath in his body, to rescue his brother's "unhappy spirit." As an expression of subjective devotion and loyalty, these lines are moving and impressive, but as a presentation of a realistic option, they appear incoherent and meaningless. The repetitive pattern, the heavily stressed, strongly monosyllabic tetrameters of the last four lines, the internal rhyme of line 15, all suggest a sort of incantation, an effort to transform reality by intensity of will. Were the poem to conclude here, it would have failed, except as a crystallization of deep emotion.

But of course the poem does not end here. The apparently futile desire to give his life for his brother, as well as the recollection of his own mortality, triggers in the speaker a reminder that what he is powerless to do has in fact already been done by another:

> When all the men of war are shot
> And flags have fallen into dust,
> Your cross and mine shall tell men still
> Christ died on each, for both of us. (II. 17-20)

Here the transient and ephemeral is contrasted with the permanent: even when not only this but all wars are over, when flags not merely lie on the ground but have physically disintegrated along with the political entities they represent, the crosses marking the brothers' graves will "still" testify to the redemptive power of Christ's death. Here an alternative figure to the ineffectual speaker is introduced: it is Christ who provides the assistance the speaker hoped to give but could not. The speaker was in a sense attempting, unsuccessfully, to take on the role of his brother's redeemer. At this point we may notice that the images used by the speaker earlier in the poem to refer to himself can properly be associated with Christ. Thus the repeated "my thirst/ My thirst" (11.5-6) echoes Christ's cry on the cross, "I thirst" (Jn.19:28); "in my sorrows lay your head" (I. 12) recalls the figure of the Beloved Disciple resting his head on the Lord's breast at the Last Supper (Jn. 13:23); the words "take my life and blood" (I. 13) recall the words of eucharistic institution, "Take and eat, this is my body; take and drink, this is my blood" (Cf. Mt.26:26-28; Mk. 14: 22-24), and "take my breath and take my death" recalls the crucified Christ breathing forth his last breath to redeem humanity (Lk. 23:46; Jn. 19:30); even the line, "Come, in my labor find a resting place" (1.11) is a confused reminiscence of Christ's words, "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt.11 :28): the confusion points precisely to the speaker's problem—he too, as one who labors, is as much in need of redemption, of rest, as his brother. He cannot substitute for Christ, but must accept Christ's willingness to die for him also. A new sort of parallelism thus emerges in the final line here, as both the speaker and his brother are recipients of the same saving grace.

But in what sense can it be said that "Christ died on each" cross, as though they were not symbols of the same event? The implication seems to be that Christ identifies himself not merely with the human condition in general but with each person's unique experience of that condition. This is certainly the insight articulated in the opening lines of the final verse paragraph, the thematic center of the entire poem:

> For in the wreckage of your April Christ lies slain,
> And Christ weeps in the ruins of my spring: (II. 21-22)

Here is a moment of epiphany—an existential awareness of the mystery of mutual compassion at the heart of the Christian doctrine of salvation. (Notice how the chiastic pattern of stressed long vowels [a/i/i/a]—the last three in successive monosyllables—at the end of l. 21 slows the pace of the verse and draws attention to the importance of what is being said.) John Paul's death during the season of the Passion becomes a vivid emblem of the truth that Jesus has taken upon himself the suffering and death of everyone who is "in Christ." But the presence of Jesus in these sufferings transforms them, incorporates them into his own redemptive suffering. Wherever he maybe,John Paul is not alone: he is united with his Savior, "crucified with Christ" (Gal.2:20). For the Christian, death is the definitive participation in the Passion, the passage through death to newness of life.

The following line is perhaps even more remarkable. The figure of the weeping Christ recalls the scene in John's Gospel where Jesus greets Martha and Mary after the death of their brother Lazarus, and weeps at his friend's death (Jn.11 :35). But the speaker is identified here not merely with the sisters but with Jesus himself, who makes the speaker's tears his own. But if Christ has united himself with the speaker, then an extraordinary transfiguration happens to the entire poem. All those earlier efforts to assist his brother which were futile and worthless in and of themselves are retrospectively validated if they are performed "in Christ": vigils and fasts can be signs of life springing from death, as they look forward to the dawn of resurrection, the messianic banquet; the speaker's thirst, united with Christ's thirst on the cross, can refresh the pilgrim spirit. (There may even be a play on the meaning of "spring" in l. 22, referring not only to the season, parallel with "April" of the previous line, but to the "springs" of l. 6, with Christ's tears bringing water to the otherwise dry "ruins.") No longer perceived as substituting for Christ's actions but as participating in them, the image of giving one's life for another are invested with authentic redemptive power. Jesus takes the inadequate gifts of the speaker and makes them effective by making them his own.

Such a change is exemplified in the final lines of the poem, in which Christ's tears, signs of the grief he shares with the speaker, are also emblems of the salvation he brings to the poet's brother. In the first of two climactic parallel clauses, the "poor traveller" of the opening stanza is enriched with the gift of Christ:

> The money of Whose tears shall fall
> Into your weak and friendless hand,
> And buy you back to your own land: (II. 23-25)

The exile is now enabled to buy not merely "a better bed . . . a better rest" which the speaker had offered earlier ((II. 14, 16), but a return to his true land. The "weak and friendless" wanderer is ransomed from the power of death, redeemed from otherwise inevitable and perpetual alienation. He has been "bought with a price" (I Cor. 6:20), which Christ has paid, but to which the speaker's own pain also contributes because it is shared with Christ.

Already in these lines the impact of the words is enhanced by the patterns of sound: not only the end rhyme of "hand" and "land," prepared for by the slant rhyme "friend-" but the alliteration of "buy" and "back," which is linked by slant rhyme to "weak" in the previous line. This "music" is even more pronounced in the final three lines of the poem, appropriately enough when the image is that of bells:

> The silence of Whose tears shall fall
> Like bells upon your alien tomb.
> Hear them and come: they call you home. (II. 26-28)

The sibilance of the opening words (five "s" sounds in the first six words) gives way to the slant rhyme of "fall" and "bells" (prepared for by the unstressed "shall"), which is related to the stressed long first syllables of "silence" and "alien" (themselves further connected by the "-en" in their final syllables). The final line is even more effective: not only is there a chiastic pattern of alliteration (h/c/c/h) in the stressed monosyllables, but each of these words picks up a rhyme from the previous lines: "Here" is linked with "tears," "call" with "fall" and the whole complex of "vowel + l" words, and most impressively "come" and "home" with "tomb," which creates a pattern of slant rhyme for alternate stressed syllables (both internal and end rhyme), which rings changes on the "o + m" combination, concluding with a satisfying long "o", so that "home" is both linked with and contrasted to "tomb," with "come" mediating between the two. This superb aural patterning is put to the service of the sense of these lines: it is not fanciful, I believe, to hear a double set of bell-sounds here, one the lighter note of fall/ bells/ call and their less obvious echoes, the other the deeper, more measured tolling of tomb/ come/ home which concludes the poem.

The paradox of this final image is, of course, that the silent tears of Christ have the effect of bells, not the death-knell of a funeral but a joyful peal which calls its listeners to a celebration. It is an image of sorrow transmuted into joy, and recalls again the scene at the tomb of Lazarus, when Christ's tears are followed by the words, "Lazarus, come forth" (Jn. 11:43), and the dead man returns to life: for in these final lines the apparent parallelism conceals one last progression, but in this case it is a reversion from the spirit to the body, a return to the "tomb" of the opening couplet. The concluding note is an eschatological one, suggesting that the summons of Christ's love encompasses not just the spirit but ultimately even the body in the tomb, which is described as "alien" not only because it is in a foreign land but because it is not the body's final destination.

With this foreshadowing of the final resurrection, when brother will be reunited with brother in their common "home," the poem is complete. In it, Merton has managed to give form not only to his sorrow but to his faith. Written as an immediate response to his loss, the elegy records the process of coming to terms with the tragedy and reaches a genuine acceptance, made possible by the Paschal mystery which the poet had just celebrated. Because emotion has been shaped by artistry, "For My Brother . . ." is a work of great power and beauty. After half a century, it still communicates a spirit of profound trust and hope, and no doubt will continue to do so for attentive future readers as well.