

Three Early Unpublished Poems

By Thomas Merton

This issue of The Merton Seasonal continues the publication of a group of early poems by Thomas Merton that have not previously appeared in print. All come from files in the Columbia University Library – the first from the Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr collection of Merton materials and the other two from the Mark Van Doren file. (See The Merton Seasonal, 25.1 [Spring 2000] 6-8 and 25.2 [Summer 2000] 5-8 for other poems in the group.) The first and third examples below were apparently written after Merton entered the monastery; the second may date either from the premonastic or the early monastic period.

FRAGMENT

When we are alone
 Within the inner wood
 Beyond the trackless ways
 In elemental sleep

Though evening towns begin to burn
 As copper as chrysanthemums
 And the far cities flower
 Twined in a map of incandescent wires
 No voice from those abounding lights
 Reddens the darkness of our rendezvous.

No radio has arrows that can find us
 Winged after us with aimless jealousy into the night our screen.

In the night of my penniless Genesis
 The worlds are all too old:
 And cities that enchanted me
 Die like the clouds, the children of the sea.

For no one finds us any more, Beloved,
 Cradled in the sounding night, the new creation
 That you have made for us alone.

*Columbia – Merton File; “not censored.” written in pencil in upper right corner
 8 Twined] emended from twined 17 followed by two x'd out lines: Cradled in the cloud, the new
 creation / That you have made for us alone.*

POEM

Thief and gambler, in the mind's Algiers,
 Bicker for a division, in a veil of shade.
 Stillness explodes into a cloud of battlecocks.
 Knife, with a bright tooth, bites the hiding heart.
 Death caws, like copper, in the throat,
 And the dry gambler's dying like a daw.

The thief's a flying shadow:
 Slants up the wall with pockets full of coin,
 And, in the wide sky, disappears.

But where the sun bullbellows in the mind's Sahara,
 His money shines on the waterless earth;
 And in his sky of thoughts, his old desires
 Fly back as black as carrion birds,
 And gradual death begins to ring,
 Like gongs, the sunstruck canyon's quiet stones,

Until the nameless traveler learns in terror
 His lidless eyes are open targets –
 Where sudden night flings in her quiet spear.

He hears ring shut the clangorous gates of day,
 And sees eternity hang open like a pit.

Meanwhile, the distant kites become companions,
 Loving him for what was once his flesh.

*Columbia – Van Doren File (encl. in 11/7/45 letter); fair copy: cream paper
 9 disappears] emended from dissapears*

PASTORAL

Earth's amniotic atmosphere
 (Wherein winged clouds arch over us)
 Cleaves to the turning globe like flesh
 To feed and light and cover us.

Above the building stands the flesh,
 Blue, translucent and electric,
 Wherein birds fly and glide and sing,
 Beasts move, trees grow: all geocentric.

Air mantles us and binds us in
 And carries words about the bone
 (If air is flesh, then earth is bone;
 And neither, thus, will live alone.)

Coordinating earth and air,
 We line the ground, and plant the seeds,
 And tend the plants, and graze the beasts;
 And wander with them here and there
 With sounds and gesture, words and prayer.

*Columbia – Van Doren File; cream paper; “1942” written on folder
 1 amniotic] emended from amniatic*