

## Thomas Merton's Projected Anthology of Religious Poetry

By Patrick F. O'Connell

During the summer of 1941, having finished his first year teaching English at St. Bonaventure College, Thomas Merton was busy about many things: he was working on his novel, *Journal of My Escape from the Nazis*, writing numerous poems, keeping two versions of his journal, reading Dante, Lorca and Graham Greene, teaching a summer school bibliography course, spending two weeks working at Catherine de Hueck's Friendship House in Harlem, worrying about the war, thinking about the Trappists.<sup>1</sup> In the midst of all this activity he also managed to find time for another project, one that reflected his own deepening interest, as writer and reader, in religious verse.

On July 27, he records in his journal:

I think of making an Anthology of Poems, Religious or nearly Religious. So far I have got Donne's "Hymn to Christ at the Author's Last Going into Germany," "At the Round Earth's Imagin'd Corners," "Nocturnal on Saint Lucy's Day," "What If This Present were the World's Last Night?," and Herbert's "Aaron" and Vaughan's "The Seed Growing Secretly" and Hopkins' "Felix Randal." Also I think Hopkins' "Leaden and Golden Echo" – "Bugler's First Communion," "Candle Indoors," "Wreck of the *Deutschland*" and despair poems. Then Blake's "How Sweet I Roamed," "Little Girl Lost," "Auguries of Innocence," "Mental Traveler," "Holy Thursday" (Innocence), a lot more Vaughan (e.g., "Night"), plenty Traherne – Southwell's "Burning Babe." In all maybe 150 poems – or half that – 75 would be a better number (RM 380-81).

Occasional additional comments in the journal confirm that work on the anthology continued through the following month. On August 4, a week after his first mention of poets to be included, he remarks, "Concerning the anthology my thought at present is: not so much Traherne. He can be a lot vaguer than the other metaphysicals" (RM 381). Then on August 21, he writes, "I sure don't want Francis Thompson [author of *The Hound of Heaven*] in my anthology" (RM 386). Ten days later, the project is approaching completion; he notes, "All that has to be done to the anthology is add ten or fifteen more poems of Donne, Blake, Vaughan, Hopkins and one or two others: all easy. Then Introduction – and notes, how elaborate? Or maybe no notes. What I think of now is the whole 'Wreck of the *Deutschland*'

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which is Hopkins' best poem, and his own favorite, too, I think, and some good poem, anyway!" (RM 388).

This is the last explicit mention of the anthology in the journal for three months,<sup>2</sup> but an unpublished letter of November 10 to Mark Van Doren confirms that the project was indeed completed (at least as far as collecting the poems was concerned). Merton writes to his former teacher:

I was up here all summer except for a month or so, during which time I got up an anthology of poems of religious experience, from Metaphysical poets, Hopkins, Blake etc etc, and it makes a rather unusual book, because it is more selective than the other anthologies of religious verse I have seen. I don't know very well how to go about getting rid of this either; tentatively I am sending it to the man at Atlantic Monthly Books in Boston who seemed slightly interested: that is, at least he didn't give a flat "No" as soon as I mentioned the idea.<sup>3</sup>

In the event, the editor's "slight interest" did not lead to an offer of publication. On December 2, as Merton is making preparations to leave St. Bonaventure for the Abbey of Gethsemani, he writes in his journal: "As for things that have been totally forgotten, or become absurd: questions of the publication of anything I have ever written – books or poems or anything – yesterday the anthology came back from Boston" (RM 468).

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However, like his own books and poems, the anthology project proved not to "have been totally forgotten" by Merton after his entrance into the monastery. Four years later, some time after the appearance of his first book, *Thirty Poems*, Merton wrote to his publisher James Laughlin that among "the things I sent you last week" was "a religious anthology." He adds, "I would like to work up something of the kind, if more than what I sent were needed, or if what is there could be polished up. The selection is not all I would have it: I would like to get things having a more direct bearing on religious *experience* – although most of these already do have that. What do you think of including something not English – like poems of St. John of the Cross for instance, (Spanish – his language is something like Gongora but what he says: terrific.)"<sup>4</sup> Laughlin was enthusiastic about the project. On January 12, 1946 he replied:

Let us by all means go ahead with the anthology as you suggest. Perhaps your volume might be called *The New Directions Book of Christian Poetry*. . . . I would like to see you include a few things at least from most of the languages in which such poems have been written. I am pretty sure we can get friends who know those languages to submit suggestions to you and translations for you to pass on. The bulk of it, of course, should be in the English stuff, but I'm sure the translations from the other sources will add dimension and colour. . . . Do not worry about the amount of work involved in terms of time. There is no terrible hurry about this at all. You can take your time and make it as good as it can be. If any of the poems you choose are in copyright (Hopkins would be) we will arrange to pay for the permissions out of your royalties. I assume that you wish the royalties to go to the Monastery as is being done with your poems. It would be a straight 10% and I believe such a book would earn a lot of money over the years. Please let me know what books or what line of books you want me to request for you from the Harvard library. I shall write today to my old professor at Harvard (G. B. Weston) for

suggestions about Italian books. I think Nabokoff [*sic*] will help us find a couple of Russian poems and translate them. For the German there are half a dozen friends who can be queried (*TMJL* 6-7).

Though suggested by Merton himself, this expansion of the project to include foreign-language poets, at least on the scale envisioned by Laughlin, made Merton uneasy about becoming involved in a more demanding and time-consuming undertaking than he was willing or able to take on. On August 17, 1946, he wrote to Laughlin, "The anthology business needs some discussion, because as I see it, it is almost a moral impossibility for me to handle the whole thing out here. I could make a partial selection, and let somebody else do the rest: if you like, I'd go over the whole thing when it was complete, but it seems that the business of mailing books back and forth would get into great complexities" (*TMJL* 11).

This attempt to shift the primary responsibility away from himself apparently led instead to a shift in the focus of the proposed volume from poems on Christian religious experience to a collection of specifically Catholic religious poetry. On April 15, 1947, Laughlin reminded Merton, "And don't forget the anthology either. What about a little short anthology – say 160 pages – to go in The New Classics series at [\$]1.50 – the *New Directions Book of Catholic Verse*? I think that would have quite a public and be most useful" (*TMJL* 17). However this proposal would have entailed a radical reshaping of the collection, since many of the poets that were at the heart of the original anthology, including most of the seventeenth-century Metaphysicals as well as Blake and others, were not Catholic and would therefore have to be omitted. Merton's response again betrays his nervousness about committing himself to an overly ambitious venture that would absorb limited time already filled with numerous other writing projects. On June 28, 1948 he writes to Laughlin, "I was thinking about that anthology and it seems to me that the only way I can possibly do it is to forget about any attempt at covering the whole field and taking just the poems that I know and like and can easily get hold of. How would it be to print one or two St. John of the X in Spanish and one or two others in Latin and a couple in Middle English and so on, and the bulk in English in which they were written? And include modern writers like [Robert] Lowell?" (*TMJL* 37). Again on August 4, he adds: "For my own part I am ready for anything – except perhaps that anthology, which still frightens me" (*TMJL* 40).

Laughlin was apparently willing to take on the main burden of assembling the anthology in its new guise, with Merton in an advisory role. On November 18, 1948, Laughlin writes, "I have had several nice letters back from those Catholic poets, whose names you gave me. I had written to them, suggesting that they send in one or two poems which might be suitable for the Catholic anthology, and they have done so. I will assemble all this material before I bother you with it" (*TMJL* 44). Four days later, Merton replies, "I'll ask Lax to make some suggestions about the anthology – but please don't ask me about it until it is all lined up and ready for the preface. . . ." (*TMJL* 45). More than a year later, the project is still in development, though there is little indication of much progress. On January 7, 1950, in his last published reference to the anthology, Merton writes, "Bob Lax wrote a swell poem about Our Lady which ought to go in any anthology under the sun but especially the one you are planning" (*TMJL* 65). It has by this time, at least for Merton, become Laughlin's rather than Merton's anthology, and as the publisher also had numerous other projects in which he was evidently more interested, no anthology of religious verse, Catholic or otherwise, ever appeared under the New Directions imprint.

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Although the anthology project was stillborn, materials from its original 1941 conception have survived. In fact, two overlapping but distinct collections of anthology texts have remained extant but virtually unnoticed for over a half-century. When Merton mailed his pre-monastic journals to Mark Van Doren in December 1941, he evidently sent as well a sheaf of typed poems intended for the projected anthology. Van Doren wrote to St. Bonaventure President Fr. Thomas Plassman sometime in late 1943 or early 1944, offering to donate the material Merton left with him to the St. Bonaventure Library, and on January 6, 1944 Fr. Plassman had replied, agreeing to “accept the revelations that Tom Merton left behind.”<sup>5</sup> On January 15, Fr. Irenaeus Herscher, the St. Bonaventure librarian, wrote to Van Doren, acknowledging receipt of two volumes of handwritten journals, some additional typewritten pages of journal, and “One loose-leaf notebook containing materials for an anthology of poetry.”<sup>6</sup>

This notebook, or rather the loose-leaf pages it contained, remains part of the Merton collection at the Friedsam Memorial Library at St. Bonaventure University. It consists of seventy-one pages of typed material, numbered in pencil, containing fifty-one poems, five of which are included twice, in both ribbon and carbon copies. Six of the poems are anonymous, one dating from the Elizabethan era (second half of the sixteenth century), the others from the medieval period. The rest are written by fourteen identified poets: eight by George Herbert, six by Robert Southwell, five each by William Blake and Richard Crashaw, four each by Fulke Greville and Henry Vaughan, three by Robert Herrick, two each by Henry Constable, Henry King and Coventry Patmore,<sup>7</sup> one each by Emily Brontë, Robert Fayfax, John Lydgate, and Alice Meynell. Of the identified authors, all but four wrote before 1700 (only Blake, Brontë, Meynell and Patmore are more recent); counting the anonymous poems, forty-five of the fifty-one poems date from the seventeenth century or earlier.

It is evident, however, that this group of poems could not have comprised the complete anthology. There are no poems included by John Donne or Gerard Manley Hopkins, two of the authors prominently mentioned by Merton in his initial journal entry on the anthology. In fact only two of the poems named in that July 27, 1941 discussion (Blake’s “Holy Thursday” and Southwell’s “Burning Babe”) are found in this collection. The pagination is clearly not by Merton, as in two cases of poems by Crashaw the pages are out of order: the four pages of “A Hymn to the Name and Honor of the Admirable Saint Teresa” are numbered in reverse order (pp. 9-12), while the two pages of “Lauda Sion Salvatorem, the Hymn for the Bl. Sacrament” are actually separated by two other poems! (pp. 18, 21); in addition, the five duplicate copies of poems are all separated from their originals and given their own pagination. Of the remaining forty-six poems, all but four are carbon rather than ribbon copies. The evidence strongly suggests, then, that this group of poems sent by Merton to Van Doren represents an incomplete and somewhat disarranged state of the anthology text.

A second version of the anthology is now part of the collection at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University. It includes ninety-six poems, only one of which, “The Lament for Our Lady of Walshingham” (sixteenth-century) which opens the collection, is anonymous; the rest are by twenty-two different poets: twelve by William Blake; eleven by George Herbert; ten by John Donne; nine by Henry Vaughan; eight by Richard Crashaw; seven by Gerard Manley Hopkins; six each by Robert Southwell and Thomas Traherne; four by Robert Herrick; three each by Andrew Marvell and John Milton; two each by Henry Constable, Fulke Greville, Henry King, Francis Quarles and William Wordsworth; one each by R. W. Dixon, Phineas Fletcher, Sidney Godolphin, William Habington, Sir

Walter Raleigh and Francis Thompson.<sup>8</sup> Poems from before 1700 still predominate: only five of the poets (Blake, Dixon, Hopkins, Thompson and Wordsworth) wrote after 1700 and seventy-four of the ninety-six poems date from the seventeenth century or earlier. (See Appendix I below for the complete contents of the Merton Center anthology.)

Neither collection includes an Introduction, despite Merton's mention of his intention to write one in his August 31, 1941 journal entry. Whether he composed an Introduction which has subsequently been lost, or whether he sent the anthology to Atlantic Monthly Press without an Introduction but with a promise to write one if it was accepted for publication, cannot be known; but it seems more likely that the Introduction would have been preserved with the text of the anthology had one been written. There are no notes to any of the poems either, except a few handwritten glosses of obsolete words in the anonymous medieval poems found only in the St. Bonaventure collection.

The two collections have thirty-seven poems in common. In every case, the typed texts are identical, the Merton Center copy being the original and the St. Bonaventure copy the carbon. While it is possible that the Merton Center collection represents a version that includes poems added after Merton entered Gethsemani, it is more probable that it was brought by Merton in this form when he came to the monastery, and it is likely that it is the copy sent to Atlantic Monthly Press in 1941 and to James Laughlin in early 1945.<sup>9</sup> The St. Bonaventure copy originally sent to Van Doren would thus be an incomplete collection of carbons (thirty-seven poems) and of rejected poems; of these latter fourteen, five are present in both ribbon and carbon, four only in ribbon copy, and five only in carbon copy. Whether the ribbon copies of this last group had been brought as part of the later collection to Gethsemani and later discarded or whether they had simply been lost at St. Bonaventure, or at Gethsemani, it is of course impossible to know.<sup>10</sup> (See Appendix II below for a list of poems found only in the St. Bonaventure collection.)

There is one piece of evidence that the St. Bonaventure collection does represent an earlier stage of the text, rather than simply a shuffling together of left-over materials. A page of notes on St. Benedict from c. 1951, now in the St. Bonaventure Merton collection, was typed on what was evidently considered a piece of scrap paper; on its reverse side is typed a list of poems by nine poets that corresponds exactly to the contents of part of the St. Bonaventure collection: four of the poets on the list (Brontë, Lydgate, Meynell, Patmore) are not found in the Merton Center collection; for two others (Constable, King) the poems in the two collections are identical; but for the remaining three poets (Blake, Herrick, Vaughan), for whom the Merton Center collection includes more poems than the St. Bonaventure collection, only the poems in the latter collection are listed, which strongly suggests that it represents (though in an incomplete state) a distinct earlier phase in the development of the anthology.

Though this project was one that never reached fruition, it does provide evidence of Merton's early and ongoing interest in the relationship between literature and spirituality, and his belief in the capacity of poetry to convey religious experience, something he consistently attempted to do in his own verse. It testifies to his interest not only in well-known religious poets such as Southwell, Donne, Herbert, Vaughan and Hopkins but in more obscure figures like the Calvinist Greville and the Catholics Constable and Habington, and it reveals his willingness to stretch the definition of religious verse to include poems not overtly religious by Blake as well as Brontë (in the earlier collection) and Wordsworth. By furnishing concrete documentation of favorite Christian poets and poems, the contents of the anthology, in both its versions, cast some light on direct and indirect influences on

Merton's own writing and so can give some insight into his own early development as a religious poet and as a religious person.

## Appendix I Merton Center Anthology

The following is the table of contents of the version of the projected anthology of religious poetry now at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University. Authors of each of the poems are taken from the typescript with the exception of "On News," for which name of the author, Thomas Traherne, is not provided. Poems followed by an asterisk are also found in the St. Bonaventure anthology typescript.

Anonymous	"The Lament for Our Lady of Walshingham"
Robert Southwell	"The Burning Babe"*
Henry Constable	"To Saint Katherine"*
John Donne	"At the round earth's imagin'd corners"
John Donne	"A Hymn to Christ, at the Author's Last Going into Germany"
John Donne	"Good Friday 1613 Riding Westward"
Robert Herrick	"The Bell-Man"*
Henry King	"The Labyrinth"*
Henry King	"The Anniverse. An Elegy"*
William Habington	"Nox Nocti Indicat Scientiam"
George Herbert	"Aaron"
George Herbert	"Vanity"*
George Herbert	"Divinity"*
Sidney Godolphin	"Lord When the Wise Men Came from Far"
Francis Quarles	"Zaccheus"
Henry Vaughan	"White Sunday"*
Henry Vaughan	"The Pilgrimage"*
Richard Crashaw	"Lauda Sion Salvatorem, the Hymn for the Bl. Sacrament"*
Richard Crashaw	"To the Noblest and Best of Ladies, The Countess of Denbeigh"
Andrew Marvell	"On a Drop of Dew"
Andrew Marvell	"Bermudas"
William Blake	"The Little Girl Lost"
William Blake	"The Little Girl Found"
William Blake	"Holy Thursday"*
William Blake	"Holy Thursday II"*
William Blake	from "The Book of Thel"*: Thel's Motto; I; IV
Richard Watson Dixon	"Dream"
Francis Thompson	"The Kingdom of God" ["In no strange land"]
Gerard Manley Hopkins	"Felix Randall"
Gerard Manley Hopkins	"No worst, there is none"



Gerard Manley Hopkins	“As kingfishers catch fire”
Gerard Manley Hopkins	“Henry Purcell”
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John Donne	“Hymn to God My God In My Sickness”
Phineas Fletcher	“Vast Ocean of Light, Whose Rays Surround”
Robert Herrick	“A Grace for a Child” [“Here a little child I stand”]
George Herbert	“Even-Song”*
George Herbert	“The Jewes”*
George Herbert	“Affliction”*
George Herbert	“The Forerunners”*
Thomas Traherne	“IV. But little did the infant dream”
Richard Crashaw	“In the Glorious Assumption of our Blessed Lady – The Hymn”*
Richard Crashaw	“The Hymn of the Church in Meditation of the Day of Judgement”*
Henry Vaughan	“They are all Gone into the World of Light”
Henry Vaughan	“Corruption”
Henry Vaughan	“Love, and Discipline”*
John Milton	“Lady that in the Prime of Earliest Youth”
William Blake	“Song” [“How sweet I roamed”]
William Blake	“Mock On, Mock On, Voltaire, Rousseau”
William Blake	“Night”
William Blake	“The Sick Rose”*
William Blake	“Auguries of Innocence”
Gerard Manley Hopkins	from “St. Winifred’s Well”
Gerard Manley Hopkins	“Carrion Comfort”
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William Wordsworth	“Resolution and Independence”
William Wordsworth	“Mutability” [“From low to high”]
William Blake	“The Little Black Boy”*
Thomas Traherne	“Wonder”
Thomas Traherne	“Eden”
Thomas Traherne	“The Enquiry”
Thomas Traherne	“The Salutation”
[Thomas Traherne]	“On News” [“News from a foreign country came”]
Gerard Manley Hopkins	“The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo”
William Blake	“I saw a Monk of Charlemaine”
Richard Crashaw	“Hymn in Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament” [“Adoro te”]
Henry Vaughan	“The Seed Growing Secretly”
Henry Vaughan	“Religion”
George Herbert	“The Odour”*

George Herbert	“Sinne”*
Robert Herrick	“Grace for a Child”* [“What God gives, and what we take”]
Robert Herrick	“To his Sweet Saviour”*
John Donne	“The Cross”
John Donne	“Batter my heart”
John Donne	“Nativity” [“Immensity cloystered in thy deare wombe”]
George Herbert	“Decay”
George Herbert	“Doom’s Day”
Francis Quarles	“A Good Night”
Henry Vaughan	“Cock-Crowing”
Henry Vaughan	“The Dawning”*
Richard Crashaw	“Charitas Nimia, or the Dear Bargain”
Richard Crashaw	“A Hymn to the Name and Honor of the Admirable Saint Teresa”*
Richard Crashaw	“An Apologie for the Foregoing . . .”*
Andrew Marvell	“A Dialogue Between the Soul and Body”
John Milton	“When Faith and Love”
John Milton	“When I consider how my light is spent”
Robert Southwell	“David’s Peccavi”*
Robert Southwell	“New Prince, New Pomp”*
Robert Southwell	“New Heaven, New War”*
Robert Southwell	“The Virgin Mary to Christ on the Cross”*
Robert Southwell	“At Home in Heaven”*
Henry Constable	“To St. Mary Magdalen”*
Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke	“Sion Lies Waste”*
Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke	“The earth with thunder torn, with fire blasted”*
Sir Walter Raleigh	“The Passionate Man’s Pilgrimage”
John Donne	“Thou has made me”
John Donne	“Spit in my face”
John Donne	“What if this present”

## Appendix II

### St. Bonaventure Anthology

The following is a list, arranged alphabetically by author, of poems included in the version of the anthology of religious verse in the Merton collection at Friedsam Memorial Library, St. Bonaventure University that are not found in the Merton Center version of the anthology. Ribbon copies of poems are marked (R); carbon copies are marked (C); poems found in both ribbon and carbon copies are marked (R/C).

Anonymous	“I saw him with flesh” (R/C)
Anonymous	“Quia Amore Languet” (R/C)
Anonymous	“The Wheat Flower” (R)



Anonymous	“Adam Lay I-bounden” (R)
Anonymous	“Regina Coeli” (R/C)
Anonymous	“Yet if His majesty, our sovereign Lord” (C)
Emily Brontë	“To a Bluebell” (R/C)
Robert Fayrfax	“Ay my dear! A my dear son!” (R)
Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke	“Man, Dream No More” (C)
Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke	“Eternal Truth, Almighty, Infinite” (C)
John Lydgate	“The Child Jesus to Mary the Rose” (R)
Alice Meynell	“Advent Meditation: “Rorate Caeli desuper . . .” (C)
Coventry Patmore	“The Accompaniments” III: “The Sentences” (R/C)
Coventry Patmore	“The Accompaniments” II: “Orpheus” (C)

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- 1 For Merton's various activities during this period see Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 375-407; subsequent references will be cited as “RM” parenthetically in the text.
  - 2 Merton does have a long, negative discussion of Coventry Patmore on September 26 (RM 410-11) which probably relates to the Anthology, as two poems by Patmore are included in the early version of the collection; see n. 7 below.
  - 3 Unpublished letter in the Van Doren collection at the Columbia University Library. The “man at Atlantic Monthly Books” is probably Chester Kerr, whom Merton had met in Boston the previous November after sending the publisher his novel *The Labyrinth* (see RM 260) and to whom he had also sent *Journal of My Escape from the Nazis* (see RM 380).
  - 4 Letter of 2 November 1945, in *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*, ed. David D. Cooper (New York: Norton, 1997) 5; subsequent references will be cited as “TMLL” parenthetically in the text.
  - 5 Unpublished letter in the Van Doren collection at the Columbia University Library.
  - 6 Unpublished letter in the Merton collection at the Friedsam Memorial Library, St. Bonaventure University.
  - 7 Both Patmore poems have “Emily Bronte” typed in as the author, then crossed out, with “Coventry Patmore The Angel in the House” written below in ink in the first case (“The Accompaniments” III: “The Sentences” [p. 66]) and simply “Patmore,” in the second (“The Accompaniments” II: “Orpheus” [p. 68]). In view of Merton's lengthy negative comments on Patmore in his journal entry of September 26, 1941 (RM 410-11) one might wonder if the two poems were originally included because of mistaken attribution.
  - 8 This poem (“The Kingdom of God” [“In No Strange Land”]) is included despite Merton's statement in his journal on August 21, 1941 that he didn't want Thompson in the anthology (RM 386).
  - 9 It should be noted, however, that the contents do not correspond exactly to the preliminary list found in the July 27, 1941 journal entry: Donne's “Nocturnal on Saint Lucy's Day,” Hopkins' “Bugler's First Communion,” “Candle Indoors” and “Wreck of the *Deutschland*,” Blake's “Mental Traveler” and Vaughan's “Night” are not included.
  - 10 An intriguing but of course completely hypothetical possibility is that Merton planned the collection to include a round hundred poems (cf. the original estimate of either one hundred fifty or seventy-five [RM 381]), and that four of the poems for which the ribbon copy has disappeared were intended at some point to be included in the collection. One of these poems, by the severely criticized Patmore, would perhaps be the most likely to have been omitted on purpose. It is even a possibility that Merton miscounted the total and intended all five of these poems to be included, since the two Blake “Holy Thursday” poems (part of the total of ninety-six) had been typed on the same page, so that one might have been overlooked in the count.