

## Three Unpublished Poems

By **Thomas Merton**

*This issue of The Merton Seasonal completes the publication of a group of mainly early poems by Thomas Merton that have not previously appeared in print. All come from files in the Columbia University Library. (See The Merton Seasonal, 25.1 [Spring 2000] 6-8, 25.2 [Summer 2000] 5-8 and 25.3 [Fall 2000] 7-9 for other poems in the group.) The first poem is included in two versions, as the version apparently written earlier is interesting in its own right and the source of the lines published as "Sacred Heart 2 (A Fragment-)" in Early Poems (1971). All the poems were evidently written at Gethsemani.*

### SACRED HEART

(earlier [?] version)

Knowing it was our pride You cursed at Babel, Father,  
How can my soul complain,  
Demand an esperanto or a gift of tongues  
To understand my punishment?

For when I try to build You in the Sisters' jigsaws  
And make You come out even, with a face of flowers,  
My heart is deader than the sheep in the design,  
My mind is stuffy with their artificial wool –  
For all these holy fervors,  
Sung in the long light-operas of St John Eudes,  
Build me a thousand barricades,  
And there I die, abandoned, in a sing-sing of affections.

O pictures hard as calculus,  
The pious virgins drink your looks, their natural milk,  
To me inscrutable as Roman numbers –  
You play to them, upon the altars of their decorated love,  
Artistic visions, full of virtue and romance,  
Paying them with glorious and easy halos  
While I lie grinding in my sins.

But I will not cry out against Your mercies grim as stone,  
The hard half-nelson sent me by Your love, the chancery that holds me  
In a life-long head-lock.  
O flaming Heart! I find You in this wring-neck fight

And in the darkness where I wrestle:  
 For in these bitter wars Your peace speaks plain:  
 Yet in that other peace, so full of honeysuckle, I never hear Your voice:  
 Their ways are none of my business.

## 2.

Both my pride and Your mercy  
 Compel the papers in this pocket to proclaim me alien  
 Here in the Eden where Your loyal children  
 Rejoice with faces gay as oranges  
 In the familiar mansions of their humble strength.  
 But I am glad to have to look for You outside the wall  
 Where, by the cruel rain's indomitable lances  
 Language lies murdered in the naked night.

And when comparisons and useless questions,  
 Weaker than the lights of human habitations,  
 Have one by one gone out,  
 When the last line of all communication with the rest of men  
 Lie wrecked and severed,  
 Then will I know the way into Holy Anthony's Thebaid:  
 For that is where You'd have me solitary,  
 Living, in prayer and expectation, in the cell of Your choice: –  
 Not in the fancied Subiacos of the picture-book  
 Nor in the white tombs of another, sillier opera;  
 The brother of the first.  
 You do not hide me in the desert like a buried treasure,  
 Leaving behind a pack of diagrams,  
 Maps and a file of documents for all our friends.

Geography comes to an end,  
 Compass has lost all earthly north,  
 Horizons have no meaning  
 Nor roads an explanation:  
 I cannot even hope for any special borealis  
 To rouse my darkness with a brief "Hurray"!  
 The night is only varied by the flesh-creep of a devil's scuffle,  
 Or by his distant, muffled bark.

O flaming Heart,  
 Unseen and unimagined in this wilderness,  
 You, You alone are real, and here I've found You.  
 Here will I love and praise You in a tongueless death,

Until my white, devoted bones,  
 Long bleached and polished by the winds of this Sahara,  
 Relive at Your command,  
 Rise and unfold the flowers of their everlasting spring.

And then, perhaps, I'll meet those wimpled travellers,  
 And we will spell and recognize our mutual riddles,  
 And see that we were answering the self-same questions,  
 Riding in the same night,  
 Loving the same Love,  
 Led by the same Mercy,  
 Arriving at the same Heaven.

Columbia – Van Doren File (encl. in 1945 letter from Robert Lax) manila paper with authorial corrections (II. 50-55 = CP 24 II. 1-6; II. 58-65 = CP 24 II. 7-14)

29 this] *preceded by x'd out my* 30 Here] *preceded by x'd out* Even in 33 am glad]  
*interlined in ink above cancelled* rejoice 40 Lie . . . severed,] *followed by x'd out line* Then  
 will You lead me into Holy Anthony's Thebaid 43 choice: -] choice. {*changes made in pencil*}  
 44 Subiacos] *added in margin in pen to replace cancelled windows* 46 first] *preceded by x'd*  
*out other*

### SACRED HEART

(later [?] version)

When I remember Babel, and the broken tower,  
 And know the meaning of that curse,  
 And view, in my high heart, those builders' visages,  
 How can my pride demand an esperanto  
 To ask an explanation of my punishment?

O pictures hard as calculus!  
 The pious children drink your looks, their natural milk,  
 To me as hard to swallow as a logarithm –  
 You play to them upon the altars of their decorated love,  
 Artistic visions, full of virtue and romance,  
 Paying their way to You with glorious and easy halos  
 While I lie grinding in my sins.

Lock me and bind me and save me from the Sisters' jig-saws,  
 I cannot make You come out even, with that face of flowers:  
 My will is deader than the sheep in the design,  
 My faith is stifled by their artificial wool,  
 And all these courteous fervors,  
 The holy arias of St John Eudes,  
 Rack me and kill me in a Sing-sing of affections,  
 Break me and slay me in a pile of cushions.

But I will not cry out against Your mercies, grim as stone,  
 The hard half-nelson sent me by Your love, the chancery that holds me  
 In a life-long headlock.  
 O Flaming Heart! My fight is Your Epiphany:  
 You Whom I die because I cannot find  
 I[n] somebody else's vision,  
 Look, how I have and hold You in my wring-neck wrestle,  
 And in the darkness where we battle:  
 For in this bitter war Your peace speaks plain,  
 And, fighting, I possess it:  
 Though in that pictured peace, so full of honeysuckle, I never hear Your voice. –  
 Their ways are none of my business.

## 2.

Both my pride and Your mercy  
 Mean that the papers in my pocket must proclaim me alien,  
 Here in the Eden where Your loyal children,  
 Smile as innocent as oranges and lemons,  
 In their untroubled cradle-custom, safer than a greenhouse.  
 But I am glad to look for You,  
 (That is, to die with You) outside the camp,  
 Where, by the cruel storm's indomitable lances,  
 Language lies murdered in the naked night.

Geography comes to an end:  
 The idiot compass knows no earthly north,  
 Horizons lose their character  
 And roads their destinations:  
 (And here it can become a sin  
 To think some special borealis  
 Will rouse my darkness with a quick "Hurray!")  
 But when comparisons and useless questions,  
 Weaker than the lights of human habitations,  
 Have, one by one, gone out,

Then, in the night, I'll own You, Christ,  
 Now not a picture, but a Person,  
 Now not a notion, but my God, my Life!

Columbia – Van Doren File (encl. in 11/7/45 letter) yellowed paper – carbon

13 Sisters'] *preceded by x'd out illegible word*      15 will] *preceded by x'd out mind*    26 In] n  
 missing    38 look] *preceded by x'd out illegible word*

{UNTITLED}

It is the night of the wicked epiphany.  
 The minds from which all music must recoil  
 Tremble in steel.

The wet air smelled of blood and cake  
 And engineers were digging in the smoke  
 Before the birth of antichrist:  
 Whose mother laid him in a treasury.

Pylons bent their lances  
 Reverend buildings split open  
 And knelt down upon the massed bandits  
 And live wires shot the unwise with the fire of their own false gospel.

Until a century lay broken  
 Many kings went out  
 And killed themselves behind their own grandstands.  
 Great swine fell from the battleships  
 And drowned among pearls.

When death came boiling through our broken teeth,  
 O Christ, in that hour without issue,  
 And breath lay crushed between walls,

Our laughter conquered their treachery  
 For we were still innocent.  
 Our dead tongues had made prayers out of their hell  
 Our broken hands wrung songs out of the hide of blasphemy.

Like sparrows, like the killed children of Bethlehem,  
 We slipped their snare and left them condemned,

Went down to fetch our lights, our chariots  
 And find our own new wars at the Antipodes,  
 More patient that the Sun.

We have gone down and come out the other side  
 Where the light is, not bloodsmelling night, nor see  
 Nine stars shining like the eyes of the dead men  
 Whose hopes have rusted with their swords.

Columbia – Merton File    manila paper with authorial corrections

1 It . . . epiphany.] *transposed by an arrow in ink from after l. 3*    3 steel] *preceded by beautiful cancelled in ink*    7 mother] *followed by wrapped him in the skins of soldiers cancelled in ink*  
 8 laid . . . treasury.] *preceded by And cancelled in ink, all as a separate line, and followed by cancelled verse paragraph: Tall pylons bent their [x'd out illegible] / All the intelligences saints had slain / Began the tightest experience of all / Twisting the wires' well-ravelled warning / Bomb. And thought came back like waves off that explosion.*    12 fire] *interlined in ink above cancelled juice*    13 broken] *interlined in ink above cancelled bleeding like a clock followed by two cancelled lines: All people were cut apart into camps / Betrayed by rivers of electric light.* 15 behind] *followed by x'd out the grandstan*    20 between] *interlined in ink below cancelled among*  
 21 laughter] *followed by x'd out still*    24 Our broken hands] *added in margin in ink before x'd out And followed by Wrung {W typed over w and not realtered}*    27 fetch] *interlined in ink above cancelled get*    28 And find] *interlined in ink in margin below cancelled Now we prepare interlined in pencil in margin before cancelled And are preparing*    28 wars] *interlined in pencil to replace cancelled song*    30 down] *preceded by x'd out below*    31 not] *interlined in ink to replace cancelled know no*

### A LEGEND

They wanted to find Him  
 Their own way.  
 They were willing  
 To let Him help:  
 They were willing  
 To let anyone help;  
 But they were not willing  
 (Not at all willing)  
 To let anyone  
 Push them around.

Oh, they'd let them  
 Push them around

At the jute mills  
And in the armies  
And in the subway;  
But they wouldn't  
Let anyone push them  
Around under the pretext  
Of helping them.

And so a lot of people  
Particularly the professional  
Helpers of man,  
Got to hate them.

There was nothing  
They could do about it:  
They were used to being hated;  
It was where the whole  
Trouble began.

But they wanted  
To find Him  
In their  
Own way:  
They wouldn't take anybody  
Else's word  
As final:  
They would grope,  
But they would find Him;  
And gropingly  
They did.

Columbia – Van Doren File; typing paper – carbon; “1958” on folder