A Study of the Style and Content of the Poems of Thomas Merton

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A STUDY OF THE STYLE AND CONTENT
OF THE POEMS OF THOMAS MERTON

BY

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Nightingales, Anangke, a sunset or the meanest flower
Were formerly the potentialities of poetry,
But now what have they to do with one another
With Dionysus or with me?

---------

Microscopic anatomy of ephemerides,
Power-house stacks, girder-ribs, provide a crude base;
But man is what he eats, and they are not bred
Flesh of our flesh, being unrelated
Experimentally, fused in no emotive furnace.
Ronald Bottrall

The problem of the modern poet in his struggle to forge a
new and more immediate vehicle for the expression of his poetry
is admirably stated in these lines from Ronald Bottrall's The
Thyrsus Retipped which were used as the epigraph of a book of
modern poetry. ¹ When in recent times poets began to tire of the
rut into which poetry had settled, they began to cast about for
new forms, new ideas, new conventions with which to express their
feelings. What to do? For when dead conventions

squeak and gibber in the streets, there
are just three ways of reckoning with them.
Poets may set the conventions going with the
detachment of a phonograph, and even absent
themselves, to all intents and purposes,
entirely. Or they may exercise creative

¹ F. R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry, Chatto and
energy, as we have seen, upon dead forms and empty shells, and bring about a metamorphosis. Or, finally, they may rise up in revolt, repudiate the old coinage altogether, and more or less definitely set themselves tomminting new.2

The most influential of the modern poets have taken the path of experiment and revolt against the old conventions of poetry. Amy Lowell, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, W. H. Auden and their followers did not cast off entirely

Nightingales, anangke, a sunset or the meanest flower and take up the realistic and vulgar

Microscopic anatomy of ephemerides, Power-house stacks, girder-ribs,

but they have created for themselves a difficult and complex medium for the expression of the poetry which they find in these new materials. In order to understand the poetry of Thomas Merton, one must study and appreciate this new medium.

A short study of the spirit and technique of modern poetry, and a cursory glance at the poems of Thomas Merton will be necessary, therefore, before we begin a more systematic and particular study of his work.

2 John Livingston Lowes, Convention and Revolt in Poetry, Houghton and Mifflin, Boston and New York, 1919, 142.
The poems published by Thomas Merton in two volumes, A Man in the Divided Sea and Figures for an Apocalypse, fall into two rather distinct classifications: those written before his entrance into the Trappists or written about his life in the world, and those written on Trappist life or religious subjects after his entrance into Our Lady of Gethsemani. This division strikes much deeper than the subject matter of his poetry. A number of critics have pointed out a definite progression from the pessimistic and almost cynical indignation with which the poet viewed the world before his entrance into religion to the serenity and Christ-like compassion with which he looks over the cloister walls at the same world. This division is also noticeable in the style of his poetry. His early poems are those of a man who is experimenting with various styles and techniques; his later work is that of a more mature and confident craftsman and disciplined artist.

The object of this thesis, therefore, will be to show that with Thomas Merton's later poems there has been a definite change in his poetry. His style improves -- several faults of diction and structure have been eliminated. Among

3 Thomas Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, New Directions, Norfolk, Conn., 1946.
4 --------------, Figures for an Apocalypse, New Directions, Norfolk, Conn., 1947.
these faults are the excessive and almost grotesque use of simile, the so-called "atomic conceit," a weak and artificial characterization, and the merely flashy and facile use of language. The intellectual and emotional content of his poetry becomes more profound and meaningful -- no longer does he rest content with the pillorying and denunciation of the decadence of modern civilization, but takes an approach which is at the same time Christian and personal; salvation comes through the renunciation of the world and the following of a life of contemplation. His message becomes more personal and, consequently, more vivid and intense. Our method of procedure, therefore, will follow these two main divisions of Thomas Merton's work and will discuss each one -- early poems and later -- according to its contrasting or similar style and content. This discussion of the style and content of Merton's poetry will be preceded by a short survey of the principles of modern poetry and a summary of the early criticism of Merton's work.
CHAPTER II

MODERN CRITICISM AND THE CRITICS OF THOMAS MERTON

Modern poetry was born in a reaction against the exhausted style of the poets of the Nineteenth Century. It began with a natural assumption that, since poetry "had become false through its addiction to conventional manners and subjects, it must again become true to its own nature, rid itself of what did not really belong to it and become purer than before."\(^1\) This led in the first place to poetry's liberation from the restraints of conventional meter. Poetry came to be written almost entirely in a verse form which is known as "free verse." Clement Wood defines free verse negatively:

The essence of free verse, technically, is a verse more regular in rhythm than prose, that does not have a definite accent pattern (so many accents to the line) or a definite metric pattern, with such variations and alterations and interweavings of metric feet as metric prosody and use permits.\(^2\)


The best that we can do is to define what free verse is not. "If the product is not meter, accent verse, or prose, it is free verse. This at least limits our terrain." Its proponents feel that meter and rhythm are not as important to their poetry as the freedom which they gain for the expression of their thoughts and feelings in the precise form that it occurs to them. Conventional verse, they say, hampers them in the expression of the exact idea or emotion. "Its advocates hold...that the use of any and every formalized ornamentation to that extent alters, warps, and dilutes the original flow of poetic inspiration: the actual thing the poet wished to say." The muse is set free, therefore, and allowed to sing to her own personal measure rather than to follow some set form of rhythm and meter.

Modern poets and critics, for the most part, have understood that with the demand for a greater freedom of expression has come the responsibility of preventing the degradation of verse into emotional prose set in lines of arbitrary length. "It must make up by a deeper sincerity and importance, or a more pleasing emotional appeal in some other way...Shelley said of heroic blank verse that it was no shelter for mediocrity. This

3 Ibid., 170.
4 Ibid., 171.
is even truer of free verse," says Mr. Wood. The poet who used this medium had to avoid prosiness at all costs. Prosiness is lethal to free verse, since the helps which are found in the regular ebb and flow of the conventional meter are lacking in free verse. The poem must stand upon the intrinsic loftiness and significance of its own poetry.

However, in the attempt to escape the time-worn conventions of their predecessors, the modern has established his own schema of conventions. "Experimental poetry endeavors to widen the racial experience, or to alter it, or to get away from it, by establishing abnormal conventions," says Yvor Winters in his essay on poetic conventions. Something of the difficulties faced by the experimental poet who uses the patternless form of free verse is shown very well by Danald Stauffer:

In liberating verse from the tyranny of a pattern, experimenters do not so much give their product freedom and power as they destroy its opportunities to show its own freedom and power by rebellion within a fixed pattern. They seek liberty and achieve license. The organizing "unit" of free verse is the

5 Ibid., 171.
line. If lines are determined by divisions of thought, then they function merely as marks of punctuation; if they do not strictly follow logical divisions, then what keeps the division of lines from being mere whimsy? 7

The defender of free verse, however, will stoutly maintain (and with no little reason) that "in place of the pattern of regular rhythm, free verse substitutes a broader and more general pattern that is known as cadence." 8 This demands that the division by lines by something more than arbitrary, since "every strophe must consume about the same amount of time in the reading; the swing and balance must, in each case, be the same. 9

This revolt from convention has passed into the structural development of poetry also. Yvor Winters lists seven new directions in structural methods without claiming to have exhausted the list. The foundations of this new direction in structural method are the convention that poetry must be purified from the prosaic elements of the conventional poet and dedicated to a higher and more sublime mission. "There is of course a poetry which is purer than some other poetry because it deals more

9 Ibid., 138.
exclusively with what are thought to be poetical states of mind. \(^\text{10}\) But Bowra goes on to say that

the modern conception of purity is not quite this. It has advanced from where Symbolism stopped and aims at a poetry which is pure in the sense that it gives a special kind of thrill which is regarded as the essential function of poetry and distinguishes it from anything else. Of course all great or real poets from Homer to Hardy provoke this thrill, but not perhaps so consciously or so deliberately as modern taste demands. \(^\text{11}\)

A quick look at Professor Winters' analysis will be valuable to us in our study of modern poets in general and will be particularly useful in the analysis of Thomas Merton's verse later in this thesis.

The first method of structural development is what Winters calls the method of repetition. "The method of repetition is essentially the same today as it has always been, if we confine our attention to the short poem." \(^\text{12}\) But the modern poet has not been content to confine himself to the short poem, as he goes on to say: "Of recent years there has been a tendency to extend it to longer forms, with unfortunate results." \(^\text{13}\) This

\(^{10}\) Bowra, 4.
\(^{11}\) Ibid., 4.
\(^{12}\) Winters, 31.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 31.
method Winters describes as "a restatement in successive stanzas of a single theme, the terms, or images, being altered in each restatement." The extension of this method of repetition to longer poems results in a style which is both lax and diffuse. Walt Whitman's poetry offers many examples of this method of development.

The second method of structural development is the logical method. This is certainly not a method to which the modern can lay claim as peculiarly their own, since it was "exploited, mastered, and frequently debauched by the English Metaphysical School, for example, though it was not invariably employed by them." "By THE LOGICAL METHOD Of composition, I mean simply explicitly rational progression from one detail to another: the poem has a clearly evident expository structure." The moderns have made a rather radical extension of the meaning of "rational" in the logical method of composition. "By stretching our category a trifle we may include under this heading poems implicitly rational, provided the implications of rationality are at all points clear." This method is not to be confused with the pseudo-logical or qualitative progression which is non-rational.
and is considered later under another heading.

The third method can be passed over rather quickly with the comment that "Narrative achieves coherence largely through a feeling that the events of a sequence are necessary parts of a causative chain, or plausible interferences with a natural causative chain."  

In taking up the method of development which he calls "pseudo-reference," Winters begins his analysis of modern theories and practice. Pseudo-reference and qualitative progression are based on a reversal of what has always been held as a more or less fundamental conception of poetry: "Every line or passage of good poetry, every good poetic phrase, communicates a certain quality of feeling as well as a certain paraphraseable content." Winters summarized this process of reversal:

Suppose that we imagine the reversal of this formula, retaining in our language coherence of feeling, but as far as possible reducing rational coherence. The reduction may be accomplished in either of two ways: (1) we may retain the syntactic forms and much of the vocabulary

19 Ibid., 36.
20 Ibid., 40.
of rational coherence, thus aiming to exploit the feeling of rational coherence in its absence or at least in excess of its presence; or (2) we may abandon all pretense of rational coherence.21

The first of these methods is called pseudo-reference; the second, qualitative progression.

In this thesis there will be only time enough to mention the various forms this pseudo-reference takes in modern poetry, since most of them are self-evident in their very statement:

1. Grammatical coherence in excess of, or in the absence of rational coherence.22
2. Transference of Values from one field of experience to another and unrelated field.23
3. Reference to a non-existent plot.24
4. Explicit Reference to a non-existent symbolic value.25
5. Implicit Reference to a non-existent symbolic value.26
6. Explicit Reference to a non-existent or obscure principle of motivation.27
7. Reference to a purely private symbolic value.28
Professor Winters' evaluation of this pseudo-referent poetry is caustic:

This kind of writing is not a "new kind of poetry," as it has been called perennially since Verlaine discovered it in Rimbaud. It is the old kind of poetry with half of the meaning removed. Its strangeness comes from its thinness. Indubitable genius has been expended upon poetry of this type, and much of the poetry so written will more than likely have a long life, and quite justly, but the nature of the poetry should be recognized: it can do us no good to be the dupes of men who do not understand themselves.29

The professor wishes to call things by their right names.

The term **qualitative progression** Professor Winters borrows from Mr. Kenneth Burke's volume of criticism, *Counter-statement*. "This method arises from the same attitudes as the last, and it resembles the last except that it makes no attempt whatever at a rational progression."30 This defection from the attempt at a rational progression is a thing that Winters especially deplores. The **Cantos** of Ezra Pound are offered as the perfect example of this form. "Mr. Pound proceeds from image to image wholly through the coherence of feeling: his sole principle of unity is mood, a mood which is carefully

29 Ibid., 56.
30 Ibid., 57.
established and varied."31 Winters comments: "The loveliness of such poetry appears to me indubitable, but it is merely a blur of revery: its tenuity becomes apparent if one compares it, for example, with the poetry of Paul Valery...which achieves its effects...along with precision, depth of meaning."32 An example of this genre of composition is the so-called stream-of-consciousness convention of contemporary poets and novelists.

"Two or more methods may be used in formal arrangements. In Marvell's To His Coy Mistress, for example, the progression from stanza to stanza is logical, but within each stanza the progression is repetitive."33 This is what Winters calls the Alternation of Method: his sixth method of development.

A quite usual method of development is the Double Mood. "A short poem or passage may be composed of alternating passages of two distinct and more or less opposed types of feeling, or of two types combined and without discernable alternation."34 This method usually takes the form of an ironic comment on the feeling of the passage to which it is opposed.

The above methods of development will enable us to more
quickly and clearly form a judgment of the structure of Merton's poetry. While they do not exhaust the possibilities of structure they are the most comprehensive and most logical system available to the critic today. With reference to the diction of modern poetry in general, a detailed critical system has not been worked out as yet. Consequently, for the purposes of this thesis, the writer must attempt at least a rudimentary analysis of his own experience.

The poet who uses this medium of free verse, must, therefore, at all costs avoid prosiness and staleness of expression. Whereas, in conventional meters a prosy or trite line will often enough be tolerated because it is carried along by the movement of the entire poem which movement has been set up by the regular beat of the rhythm and meter and bolstered up by the use of rhyme, in free verse such metrical help is almost entirely lacking. Consequently, the poetry must depend upon something intrinsic to the line itself -- its inherent emotion and poetical intensity. The poet may resort to a startling juxtaposition of image-packed sounds and modifiers, for "the simple and direct statement of an emotion is in itself seldom poetic. It rises only after some process of selecting and combining elements has created in the mind of the reader something vivid and fresh."35 What is true of conventional poetry in this respect

35 Stauffer, 67.
is especially true of free verse. As Stauffer says: "We seem to be approaching the consideration of metaphor in poetry. And, indeed, in actual practice metaphor is principally used to create the intensity that poetry cannot dispense with."\(^{36}\) This quest for a vivid and fresh expression leads some of the modern poets to an excessive use of simile and to a wracking and torturing of modifier-noun combinations. This is intended to secure a compression and richness of meaning. Apart from all such grammatical devices of compression, intensity in poetry may be created by structures and expressions that seem to be impulsive and unlabored. "Spontaneous expression seems more passionate than careful second thoughts. And language may be manipulated to give the illusion of first fine careless raptures."\(^{37}\)

Now with this preliminary ground cleared and some general directions of modern poetry indicated, let us turn to our author. When John Frederick Nims reviewed Thomas Merton's second volume of verse, *A Man in the Divided Seas*, for the *Saturday Review of Literature*, he accounted for the poet's sudden rise to prominence with these words:

> With Merton, modernity breaks at last into

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 67.
\(^{37}\) Ibid., 75.
the innocuous parterres of that tradition
the ordinary tradition of Catholic
Literature 38: the fine music of Stevens,
the tricks and questings of Joyce and the
surrealists may now be accepted, under
the aegis of Merton's piety, even by
writers consecrated to dullness and con­
vention. Therefore, his mild but genuine
talent is of importance; like his favorite
saint, he is a precursor, a voice crying
in what has been too long a wilderness.39

There is in Merton the "fine music of Stevens" and the
"tricks and questings of Joyce and the surrealists," but
Merton is not significant because with him "modernity breaks
at last into the innocuous parterres" of that Catholic tradition
which John Frederick Nims seems to hold in such bad repute.
With Merton modernity in poetry rises at last to its full signi-
ficance and takes its place in the glorious intellectual and
cultural tradition of Christianity. Christ, the Catholic Church,
and the whole Christian tradition break into the plain of that
wilderness which has been so strikingly presented to the readers
of Thomas Stearns Eliot's Waste Land. Thomas Merton's poetry
has attracted the considerable appreciation that it enjoys today
precisely because he is a poet whose style is modern while his
philosophy of life is both eternal and Christian. In the

38 Brackets mine.
39 John Frederick Nims, "Poet of Genuine Talent:" a review of
A Man in the Divided Sea, Saturday Review of Literature,
XXIX (1946), 36.
wilderness of Freud, Joyce, and Marx he is an exceptional figure today. It would be misleading, however, to say that his success is due to his piety. As a matter of fact, he broke into print under the sponsorship of New Directions, a publisher of the most liberal tendencies. New Directions published his first three volumes of verse. The New Yorker, The Saturday Review of Literature, Time Magazine, and View, have praised his work highly. The reviewer of his third volume, Figures for an Apocalypse, Howard Griffin, says:

So arresting are these poems that I was driven back to investigate the earlier work of Thomas Merton, a book called "A Man in the Divided Sea" -- and that in itself is good evidence of the effect of his writing.40

Thomas Merton's accomplishment is not that he carried modernity into the banal wastelands of conservatism, but that he took the best in modern technique, wrote in the language and in the style of the moderns, but with a blend of high art and truth and fiction that is seldom found in the writings of these times. Robert Lowell's complaint in Commonweal that "unfortunately, Merton's work has attracted almost no attentive criticism; the poet would appear to be more phenomenal than

the poetry," 41 is no longer to the point, for no less than fourteen articles and reviews have appeared since Lowell wrote in 1945. Sister Julie's review in America is a two and a half page criticism of the poet's own work. 42 In 1948, Mr. Frank J. Wiess, a member of the English faculty of John Carroll University, published a detailed and critical study of A Man in the Divided Sea. 43

Critical opinion is unanimous in praising both the accomplishment and the promise of the young Trappist poet and author, but there is a certain amount of reserve in evidence when the critics speak of his early work. Robert Lowell observes in his review of Merton's first volume, Thirty Poems:

He is... as far as my experience goes, easily the most promising of our American Catholic poets, and, possibly, the most consequential Catholic poet to write in English since the death of Francis Thompson. 44

Sister Julie goes much farther than Lowell in praising his

42 Sister Julie, "'New Directions' presents a Catholic Poet," America, LXXIII (1945), 316.
44 Lowell, 240.
early work:

He has given us a small book of poems which, acceptable in their modernity to the most sophisticated taste, epitomize the primary doctrines of faith and manifest the beauty of the Christian spirit. It is quite a paradox that in this volume the New Directions Press...should be pointing out the new direction our world must take: back to the ancient Faith.45

Father Alban Lynch, reviewing the same poems for the magazine Sign, says:

Mr. Merton speaks knowingly to his time. A cosmopolitan background, extreme sensitivity, and careful craftsmanship set him apart from the general run of Catholic poets, who are, as always, enriched with the sayable, but, too frequently, say it shoddily.46

With the publication of A Man in the Divided Sea, we have evidence of more discerning criticism. Will Lissner comments: "that he is a poet of striking power, haunting beauty, and extraordinary promise, as his admirers say, should be obvious to anyone who reads the two books of his that have appeared."47 Frank J. Wiess in the Carroll Quarterly writes in the course of a detailed prospectus of Merton's early

45 Sister Julie, 316.
poetry:

It is not amiss to say that in his matter Merton has much of the reach and suggestive-ness of Francis Thompson, but that in his manner he reminds one at times of Gerard Hopkins and T. S. Eliot. Yet the debt is not too large; at least it is soon acquitted. In Merton there is not just a newness but a venturesomeness of expression born of a determination to escape phrasing that is unavailing and impotent. 48

Lastly, Sister Madeleva in her review of his third volume, Figures for an Apocalypse, remarks that Merton's poems stand in the "temporal center of our century and will perhaps mean for this period what the three small first books of Francis Thompson, published between 1893 and 1897, have come to mean for its beginning." 49 Then, she goes on to say:

Immediately, other comparisons spring to mind: with Hopkins, with Eliot, with the disciples of these. Merton moves easily in the same intellectual orbit and in a rarer spiritual world. Other essentials being equal -- as they are,

48 Wiess, 5.
and more -- this in itself underwrites his future as a poet. 50

We shall return to these reviews later in our discussion of the style and content of the poems of Thomas Merton. It would be a serious error to believe that all of the criticism of the poems is as benign and favorable as those quoted above, but the above remarks serve to point up the importance this poet has assumed in literary circles.

With these preliminary discussions of modern poetry in general and of the critical reaction to Merton's poetry as a whole in mind, we are ready to take up Merton's verse in detail according to content and style. Chapter Three is a treatment of the content of his poems and Chapter Four will consider their style.

50 Ibid., 102.
In the second part of his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Thomas Merton has written a chapter which he calls "The Waters of Contradiction." It is into these waters that we plunge when we take up the reading of Merton's early poetry. In these early poems the waters are sometimes, sweet, more often very, very bitter. Those who have noted the change Merton's poetry underwent with his entrance into Gethsemani take different points of view, but do not disagree about the qualities of his early work.

John Frederick Nims feels that Merton's poetry is of two well-defined sorts.

The more secular early work is made up, at its best, of etudes which readers of poetry will recognize as in the manner of Wallace Stevens. Here is a pastel and dreamy world—rather thin and bloodless, with only the images alive, pinwheeling off in all directions.

Frank J. Wiess frowns on this interpretation of the poet's early work. He takes a poem which Nims would certainly feel

---

2 Nims, *31*. 

23
is "pastel and dreamy," and asks:

Is the myth of Ariadne pale? Is it moony in either poet or reader to enter the world of old Greece and relive Ariadne's one high moment? Is she bloodless as Theseus (with even his ship come alive) returns from the maze?

To relive Ariadne's one high moment would be a stirring experience indeed. The question is whether or not Merton's poem has re-created that moment for us:

Like a thought through the mind
Ariadne moves to the window.
Arrows of light, in every direction,
Leap from the armor of the black-eyed captain.
Arrows of light
Resound within her like the strings of a guitar.

One finds it hard to disagree with Mr. Nims. The poem is very superficial and shallow in its emotional intensity though the images are well drawn.

Mr. Wiess agrees with Mr. Nims that

Readers of A Man in the Divided Sea have a singular opportunity for comparing the depth of his earlier phemes with that of his later ones. The poetry of Merton in a turbulent world is not hard to separate from the poetry he is producing as a Trappist monk in the more tranquil world of Our Lady of Gethsemani

3 Wiess, 5.
4 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 13.
Monastery in Kentucky. This is not to declare his early work insignificant, for much of it is marked by the same vividness of phrase and energy of thought which excite a reader of the later poems. 5

The majority of the early poems are exposes of the emptiness and vanity of modern life somewhat after the manner of T. S. Eliot. A classification of forty-seven of his secular poems indicates his interest in contemporary social and political questions: twenty-one poems are concerned with the poet's criticism of his milieu. In "Dirge" he contemplates the passing of empires and mighty cities, the powers of this world, and mourns that the glory of Christ is obscured:

What speeches do the birds make
With their beaks, to the desolate dead?
And yet we love these carsick amphitheatres,
Nor hear our Messenger come home from hell
With hands shot full of blood. 6

And in "The Pride of the Dead" we find the same attitude:

One reads of "the paper souls of famous generals" and of "tired emperors, stitched up for good, as black as leather" and of "the leaf-speech of some skinny Alexander." 7

His observations of the world of barter and of gain led him to

5 Wiess, 4.
6 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 27.
7 Wiess, 7.
write in "The Dreaming Trader:"

Blacker and whiter than the pages of his ledger
The dreaming trader turns to stone
Because he hears the wind's voice sing this song:
"You shall set sail from the steps of the Exchange
And not be seen until the word returns: 'Lost with all hands.'
You shall set sail from the steps of the Sub-Treasury
And pass Grand Central at the fall of night
And never be heard of again."8

He is not aloof or insensible to the evils which are vexing American society. His early years in France, England, and the United States gave him ample opportunity to observe and study the frustration and discontent of the people around him. In his early works he is the successor of the author of "The Waste Land."

C. M. Bowra explains the spirit of this poetry of frustration and disorder:

It is possible to interpret The Waste Land in different ways and to apply quotations from it to many kinds of situations. But the spirit which inspires it, the dominating thought which holds it together, the tone and temper of its poetry, are the product of a spirit which is profoundly dissatisfied with existing conditions and, in judging them by high standards, finds them pathetically wanting.9

8 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 39.
The "Waste Land" is a desert because its inhabitants are spiritually bankrupt. In the "world of the Unreal City," of "crowds of people walking around in a ring," of "dirty and depressing aridity."

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.11

This feeling of terrible futility returns with greater force later in "The Waste Land."

Who are those hooded hordes swarming
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
Ringed by the flat horizon only
What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal 12

Merton's most striking expression of the "Unreal City" is to be found in "Aubade--the City." The feeling of senile weakness pervades the entire poem, giving expression to Merton's condemnation of modern city-civilization.

10 Elizabeth Drew, Directions in Modern Poetry, Norton, New York, 1940, 44.
12 Ibid., 88.
Dawn is approaching the city and the clouds have gathered over the river; the windows of the buildings on the bank of the stream reflect the weak light of the tide and seem to resent the coming of day:

Now that the clouds have come like cattle
To the cold waters of the city's river,
All the windows turn their scandalized expression
Toward the tide's tin dazzle.

And question, with their weak-eyed stare,
The riotous sun. 13

The lifelessness and debility of the city and its inhabitants is forced upon our attention by the images which suggest cold and feebleness in these lines. It is morning and all is cold and inhospitable. The windows which should be warm with the light of life and humanity are closed tight and scandalized at the unseemly and unwelcomed color and heat of the sun.

But this city is not quiet, though it is dead. Somewhere or other its dead bones rattle:

From several places at a time
Cries of defiance,
As delicate as frost, as sharp as glass,
Rise from the porcelain buildings
And break in the blue sky. 14

13 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 48.
14 Ibid., 48.
There is the still life of the city-dweller. "Cries of defiance" tinkle in the early light. Even the resentment of Merton's city man is lacking in virility and full-bloodedness. There are no loud and lusty cries of the full-blooded man in his resentment. These cries are "as delicate as frost" which vanishes at the first glance of the sun; these cries are "sharp as glass" and tinkle about like porcelain breaking on the floor:

Then, falling swiftly from the air,
The fragments of this fragile indignation
Ring on the echoing streets
No louder than a shower of pins.15

Now, dawn is at hand and the sun is coming up out of the sea.
The winds stir and begin to blow:

But suddenly the bridges' choiring cables
Jangle gently in the wind
And play like quiet piano-strings.16

All nature is awakening and the sounds of the new-born day break the stillness of the night. The wind plucking the cables of the suspension bridge is calling the city to its business. But there is still no life in the city:

All down the faces of the buildings
Windows begin to close

15 Ibid., 48.
16 Ibid., 48.
Like figures in a long division.¹⁷

The awakening of the universe is greeted by the city-dweller without joy. He prefers to shut his windows and keep out the wind and the light. The windows close one after the other just as the figures go down, one under the other, when the small boy does his problem in long division. Life is shut out for another hour or so and the tenants turn over in their beds. On the other hand, there are those who have not slept:

Those whose eyes all night have simulated sleep,
Suddenly stare, from where they lie, like wolves,
Tied in the tangle of bedding,
And listen for the waking blood
To flood the apprehensive silence of their flesh.¹⁸

These people welcome day only as a relief from the terrors of the night. The new day will bring only more aimless wanderings and provide new fears for the succeeding night. They are too cowardly, too feeble to struggle for their happiness:

They fear the heart that now lies quenched may quicken,
And start to romp against the rib,
Soft and insistent as a secret bell.
They also fear the light will grow

¹⁷ Ibid., 48.
¹⁸ Ibid., 48.
Into the windows of their hiding places,
Like a tree
Of tropical flowers
And put them, one by one, to flight.
Then life will have to begin. 19

Then life will have to begin! The scorn of the poet is in these words. Life which is sought by all men is shunned and feared by the city-dweller of today!

The final stanza is a symbolic denunciation of the futility of so much of what the world calls business:

Pieces of paper, lying in the streets,
Will start up, in the twisting wind,
And fly like idiot birds before the face of the crowds,
And in the roaring buildings
Elevator doors will have begun
To clash like swords. 20

In this "Aubade" we find the same disappointment and disillusionment in regard to the great myth of human progress, which sprang up in the Age of Enlightenment, that is such a notable thing in the work of T. S. Eliot. Merton, however, is more contemplative, certainly less virulent, in his denunciation than is the poet of "The Waste Land." Yet he is not less intense

19 Ibid., 48.
20 Ibid., 48.
and moving in his condemnation. Merton is content with picturing the injustice itself in colorful and expressive imagery and leaves the interpretation of it to the reader. There is in this poem a felicity of phrasing and imagery which invariably fits the feeling. Yet, these strictures on life in the cities are as negative as are Eliot's. The problem is seen clearly, but the solution is nowhere to be found.

In "Aubade--Harlem," Merton again takes up the shadowy side of life. The poet looks at the tumble-down tenements of Harlem and sees them as cages in which the unfortunate Negroes are confined.

Across the cages of the keyless aviaries, The lines and wires, the gallows of the broken kites, Crucify, against the fearful light, The ragged dresses of the little children.21

This picture is then developed and contrasted with the luxury in the white sections of the city:

But in the cells and wards of whiter buildings, Where the glass dawn is brighter than knives of surgeons, Paler than alcohol or ether, Greyer than guns and shinier than knives, The white men's wives, like Pilate's, Cry in the peril of their frozen dreams.22

21 Ibid., 42.
22 Ibid., 42.
The contrast is forceful indeed, but there is a note of despair in the poem.

In most of the early poems we find this note sounded again and again. "The Dreaming Trader" promises nothing but destruction:

You shall set sail from the steps of the Sub-Treasury
And pass Grand Central at the fall of night
And founder in the dark Sargassos of your own intolerable dream
And never be heard of again.23

"The Oracle" bids:

"You girls with eyes of wicks of lights,
Shake me: I ring like a bank.
I shout like the assembly: 'Go, be presidents!'
You shall all marry rectangles!"

But you with eyes of drops of water,
Punch my brass eyes with your little fists;
I am a box, my voice is only electric.
So keep your pennies for the poor;
Sew, in your houses, and cry."24

We are treated to a veritable procession of pathetic figures in the "Fugitive" and in "Ash Wednesday."

Out in the green sun-dancing can a man half-Spaniard

23 Ibid., 33.
24 Ibid., 20.
Hiding, like a robber, from a coffee-drinking Judas,
Fears the newspaper owners
And the millionaires. 25

And:

The naked traveller,
Stretching, against the iron dawn, the bowstrings of his eyes,
Starves on the mad sierra. 26

No relief from these melancholy themes is in sight as we pass on to "Song," "Some Bloody Mutiny," "Crusoe," "Dirge," and "The Greek Women." The injustice and futility that the poet sees about him crushes him with a sense of almost unbearable helplessness. He can only cry out against it; he can offer almost nothing in way of remedy.

It is not until we come upon "The Peril" that we find any real spiritual consolation in the midst of our trials. In this poem, Merton takes up the theme that will recur again and again in his Trappist poetry: the coming of the Bridegroom:

But even as we wait, in hiding, for the unknown signal,
It is the Bridegroom comes like lightning where we never looked!
His eyes are angels, armed in smiles of fire.
His Word puts out the spark of every other sun

25 Ibid., 22.
26 Ibid., 23.
Faster than sunlight ever hid the cities
Of the fire-crowded universe.27

After looking over the early poems of Thomas Merton we are
forced to conclude that he has added nothing to T. S. Eliot's
early concept of the evils of society. In fact, if we are
looking for sources of Merton's view of society, we cannot es­
cape the obvious parallel with Eliot's "The Waste Land" and
"Gerontion."

In The Waste Land the poet illustrates
especially the break with tradition -- in
religion, in contacts with the soil, in
literary culture -- which is starving and
draining the world of its essential spiritual
nourishment. Man is isolated from everything
which gave him dignity and stability. He is
simply a unit in a crowd, no longer a living
part of a living organic social system. He
is "fear in a handful of dust;" he is

Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you.28

Thomas Merton's early poems add nothing to this conception of
modern civilization. Eliot in his early poems

provides no key, but the poetry is a creation,
brilliant and profound, of the prison. And
it is a prison doubly locked. For not only
can the poet find no escape in establishing
any sympathetic contact between himself and

27 Ibid., 50.
28 Elizabeth Drew, 44.
his environment, but he can find no escape from the disorder of his own spirit.²⁹

Likewise, Merton has no answer to the melancholy disillusionment of his view of the world. The parallelism extends even to the method of development of these themes. "Eliot gives no explicit criticism of the modern world."³⁰ The composition of the poem is a landscape of the soul. There is no development of a theme: that requires a finality and an answer to the problem. There is only an order of synthesis; there are only variations of the same problem. Moreover, it must be admitted that Eliot is more profound and more comprehensive in his synthesis. Merton rarely goes below the obvious evils of poverty, abuse of wealth, and abuse of power—and all this without Eliot's striking dramatic ability.

Eliot's later poetry offers some solution. Great literature is his hope for standards by which human conduct may be judged. C. M. Bowra's resume of Eliot's work indicates how this is to be arrived at:

It holds out little prospect of regeneration or revival, and the final obstacles to the new life demanded by the Thunder are in men themselves. At the same time it asserts certain

²⁹ Ibid., 46.
³⁰ Ibid., 47.
values and accepts these as valid in its implicit criticism of the modern world. Not only does it suggest that great literature provided standards by which behaviour can be judged, but through its use of words from the Buddha and St. Augustine and the Upanishads it claims validity for something like a religious outlook. Whatever Eliot's religious opinions may have been when he wrote it, he could not dispense with religion altogether, but uses it to support his views on some matters of fundamental importance.31

This is indeed a startling inversion of fundamental values that we find in Eliot. Religion is a support for his secular standards of conduct. Eternal values are sought for among the conflicting views of literature, not in religion which is the primary font of eternal verities. Bowra goes on to say:

In fact the poem The Waste Land displays a great uneasiness over the disparity between spiritual values and actual conduct and suggests that despite the mood of defeated acceptance in which it ends, the poet is not content to accept things as they are but wishes that some cure could be found for them and assumes that it can be found, if at all, in religion.32

It is in pointing out the validity of this assumption that the solution is to be found in religion that Merton makes his contribution to the world of letters.

"It was remarked above," says Frank J. Wiess, "that the

31 Bowra, 186.
32 Ibid., 187.
later poetry of Merton's alters noticeably in tone and Deach. It is to this poetry that we will now turn our attention. The poet's solution to the problems of his own life hinge upon his conversion to religion and more particularly to a form of religious life. In his Trappist poems he gives his solution to the problems of the modern world and surpasses Eliot and his contemporaries in the value of his message.

Here are heard all the full chords of Catholic response and experience for the plain reason that the lines are from the soul of a man who has found something priceless which he wants to share. Many of the earlier poems rest with high phrasing and graphic portraiture and keep to intriguing but not always soul-touching topics...Spiritual insight deepens, lyricism runs higher.

Wiess hastens to add that

For a critic to impute to Merton only withdrawal from the mundane and rapture in the spiritual is a gross misconception of the development of the poet's message.

Merton's withdrawal into the cloister has not resulted in a complete lack of feeling for the troubled world which he has left. On the contrary, his vision of the Uncreated Good that is God has clarified and deepened his perception of the evil

33 Wiess, 8.
34 Ibid., 8.
35 Ibid., 8.
which he so strongly condemned in his early poetry. To illustrate we may take these lines from "The Trappist Cemetery:"

You need not hear the momentary rumors of the road
Where cities pass and vanish in a single car
Filling the cut beside the mill
With roar and radio,
Hurling the air into the wayside branches
Leaving the leaves alive with panic. 36

The mystic has withdrawn from the world, but not forgotten it. Rather he wishes to extend to others the great vision he has seen in order that others may order their lives better. His part in the cleansing of the world is like that of his Trappist brethren who sleep in their graves:

Teach us, Cistercian Fathers, how to wear Silence, our humble armor.
Pray us a torrent of the seven spirits That are our wine and stamina:
Because your work is not yet done. 37

This work is the work of prayer and good example to the world. It will not be done until the last day:

Then will creation rise again like gold Clean, from the furnace of your litanies. 38

Professor Wiess summarizes Merton's spirit when he says

36 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 90.
37 Ibid., 90.
38 Ibid., 90.
Mystic notes bearing on the great face and stages of redemption thrill Christian readers and prompt will and action toward the ultimately Christian way of life. Though some may little note or care, he holds to the thought that it is of supreme importance still to follow after Christ.39

The pervading theme of the latter half of Merton's poetry is that man is capable of a wisdom alert in the love and service of God. In the development of this theme Merton has written poems about every phase of the Christian life: prayer and contemplation, the Sacraments, the Saints; and added something peculiarly his own: a confidence and a yearning for the coming of Christ into the hearts of men. This coming of Christ is figured under the symbol of the Coming of Christ in the Apocalypse of St. John the Evangelist. The Bridegroom of the Parables will come and remake the hearts of men:

But even as we wait, in hiding, for the unknown signal,
It is the Bridegroom comes like lightening
where we never looked!
His eyes are angels, armed in smiles of fire.
His Word puts out the spark of every other sun
Faster than sunlight ever hid the cities of the fire-crowded universe!
How shall I stand such light, being dim as my fear?40

39 Wiess, S.
40 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 50.
This spiritual coming of Christ is confused with the Joan­nine Coming in the poem "Figures for an Apocalypse" where Merton foreshortens the future to make the destruction of the world the imaginative event of tomorrow in order to emphasize the need of conversion and impress upon us the vanity of our trust in the temporalities: proud cities like New York, riches and the pride of power.

Come down, come down Beloved
And make the brazen waters burn beneath Thy feet.41

This is the prayer of the poet as he looks at the world and understands that the minds of men are sunk in confusion and fear.

For, from the beginning of the world,
How few of us have heard the silver of Thy creed
Or paid our hearts for hours of emptiness
With go&md of Thy belief?

The eyes that will not coin Thy Incarnation
Figures in every field and flowering tree--
How shall they pay for the drink of those last nights
Poured out on them that expect Thee?42

In a passage reminiscent of T. S. Eliot, he then calls upon the rich women and queens to weep for their vanities and then comments:

How long has silence flourished

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41 Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 13.
42 Ibid., 13.
In the houses of their joy?
See, now, the broken window panes
Sing to them in their years without harvest
Keener than a violin!43

Then, to individuals, under the guise of his friends, he has a word of advice:

Time, time to go to the terminal
And make the escaping train
With eyes as bright as palaces
And thoughts like nightingales.
It is the hour to fly without passports
From Juda to the mountains,
And hide while cities turn to butter
For fear of the secret bomb.44

Now is the acceptable time for the works of repentance. This world is about to crumble away from us. We must heed the warning.

Apocalypse XIV, 14 provides the text for the next section of the poem:

And I saw, and behold a white cloud; and upon the cloud one sitting like to the Son of man, having on his head a crown of gold, and in his hand a sharp sickle.

In the midst of the scene we hear again the warning of the poet:

Fly, fly to the mountains,
The temple door is full of angels.
Fly, fly to the hills!
The men on the red horses wait with guns
Along the blue world's burning brim.45

Then, Merton reproaches the false prophets and demagogues who have promised men salvation through money, factories, and the comforts of a material civilization. Here is the world of Eliot and Pound and the others with their gospel of disillusionment in the face of the failure of materialism. However, Merton does not have their despair. It is the condemnation of a prophet, not of an anarchist.

"Oh prophet, when it was night you came and told us:
'Tomorrow is the millenium,
The golden age!
The human race will wake up
And find dollars growing out of the palms of their hands,
And the whole world will die of brotherly love
Because the factories feed themselves,
And all men lie in idleness upon the quilted pastures,
Tuning their friendly radios and dreaming in the sun!"46

This is the promise of the materialist and the Marxist. For three hundred years humanity has been fed this poisoned dream. Is it any wonder that there has been disillusionment and despair?

46 Ibid., 20.
Eliot first painted this picture and Merton sees it in his apocalyptic vision:

"But when the grey day dawned
What flame flared in the jaws of the avenging mills!
We heard the clash of hell within the gates of the embattled Factory
And thousands died in the teeth of those sarcastic fires!" 47

The pride of the great cities of the earth will pass away as the poet envisions the ruin of New York and summarizes her follies:

"This was a city
That dressed herself in paper money.
She lived four hundred years
With nickles running in her veins.
She loved the waters of the seven purple seas,
And burned on her own green harbour
Higher and whiter than ever any Tyre.
She was as callous as a taxi;
Her high-heeled eyes were sometimes blue as gin,
And she nailed them, all the days of her life,
Through the hearts of her six million poor.
Now she has died in the terrors of a sudden contemplation. 48

But the poem ends on a note of triumph -- the triumph that is inevitable in the eternal order of the universe.

And oh! Begin to hear the thunder of the songs within the crystal Towers,
While all the saints rise from their earth with feet like light

47 Ibid., 21.
48 Ibid., 23.
And fly to tread the quick-gold of those streets.\textsuperscript{49}

In this coming of the King mankind will again rejoice in its real strength and the world will be set aright once more.

This expectation of the coming of Christ has its counter-part in the poems about those who are waiting for the King with lighted lamps in their hands; Merton's brethren, the Trappists. The Trappist poems are without doubt the best that Merton has written. This is not strange for that life has been most within the experience of the poet. His other religious poems, to the Saints: "Two Desert Fathers,"\textsuperscript{50} "St. Paul,"\textsuperscript{51} "St. Thomas Aquinas,"\textsuperscript{52} "St. Alberic,"\textsuperscript{53} "St. John Baptist,"\textsuperscript{54} "St. Agnes--A Responsory,"\textsuperscript{55} are more than somewhat unsatisfactory due to their shallowness and the superficial treatment which he has given them. The emotions of these poems are the stock emotions and feelings of a Nineteenth Century hagiographer. The autobiographical poems: "A Letter to My Friends,"\textsuperscript{56} "The Night Train,"\textsuperscript{57} "For My Brother,"\textsuperscript{58} "Three Postcards from the Monastery,"\textsuperscript{59} and "My Bapt

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{50} Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 50.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 66.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 98.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 152.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 118.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 126.
\textsuperscript{59} Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 35.
...tism" to mention a few, are, in general, more striking for their depth of feeling and the immediacy of their message.

The true freedom of one who has surrendered himself to Christ is the theme of all of his Trappist poems. This theme is stated explicitly in "Freedom as Experience."

When, as the captive of Your own invincible consent,
You love the image of Your endless Love,
Three-Personed God, what intellect
Shall take the measure of that liberty?

To the wilderness of modern literary unbelief and confusion, Merton calls out the way of true liberty:

Minds cannot understand, nor systems imitate
The scope of such simplicity.
All the desires and hungers that defy Your Law
Wither to fears, and perish in imprisonment:
And all the hopes that seem to founder in the shadows of a cross
Wake from a momentary sepulchre, and they are blinded by their freedom.

This is the freedom which the world cannot understand. This is the freedom which Merton sings in his Trappist poems. This is one facet of the interest which he has stirred up in the world of letters. He indeed speaks the language of the moderns,
is sympathetic to their problems and difficulties. But he has the assurance of one who has found a solution to the problems which beset the moderns. These problems are personal and moral. Thomas Merton gives a moral answer to them. The Trappist life is today, as always, a miracle to the worldly. Merton, in his poems, allows his troubled contemporaries a glimpse of the peace of soul that is to be found in that Great Silence. "The Poet, to His Book" expresses his hope that this message may be received:

Go, stubborn talker,  
Find you a station on the loud world's corners,  
And try there, (if your hands be clean) your length of patience:  
Use there the rhythms that upset my silences,  
And spend your pennyworth of prayer  
There in the clamor of the Christless avenues:  

And try to ransom some one prisoner  
Out of those walls of traffic, out of the wheels of that unhappiness!63

63 Ibid., 91.
CHAPTER IV

THE STYLE OF THOMAS MERTON'S POEMS

The surrealist quality of Merton's early verse has been noted by several critics. That James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence were read by young Merton is clear from his autobiography, The Seven Storey Mountain. Among the other acknowledged influences which are discernable in his work are those of Andrew Marvell, Thomas Crashaw, John Donne, William Blake, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. The extent of his reading of other modern poets was considerable. Mr. Nims sees in his work "the tricks and questings of Joyce and the surrealists," and "the fine music of Stevens." Mr. Lissner says that he was

Steeped in Catholic tradition, with interests ranging from the Gothic to the abstract, from John Skelton, Royal Tutor of Henry VIII, to W. H. Auden...

Sister Julie notes: "The 'surrealist' quality is most striking in Dirge for the Proud World, a somewhat cynical meditation on the theme of 'vanities of vanities.'" She also notes that it is "the freshness of Merton's imagery which explains the term

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1 Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, 80, 102, passim.
2 Ibid., 102.
3 Nims, 35.
4 Lissner, 428.
5 Sister Julie, 318
'semi-surrealist' used by the New Yorker to describe his technique. However she disallows the word in its strictest sense:

"Surrealist" once a menacing and mystifying term, seems to have dwindled to a workaday adjective signifying the quality of near-violence in expression...In Merton, "semi-surrealist" means the fine fusion of the delicate and the sophisticated.

She is unwilling to admit in Merton's poems the "taint" of the genuine surrealist.

Surrealist poetry is the extreme statement of the doctrine of "free association" of imagery which is supposed to arise from the activity of the sub-conscious. The early surrealists regarded the logical approach as representative of the scientific and industrial epoch end of spiritual strangulation. Elizabeth Drew summarizes its tenets:

At the outset, Andre Breton defined Surrealism as "Pure psychic automatism...thought's dictation in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations." It was a technique of experience directed primarily not at poetry but rather at the human spirit, which conceives and receives poetry.

In their attempt to attain a transcendent reality in their poetry,

6 Ibid., 318.
7 Drew, 83.
8 Ibid., 84.
the surrealists tried to empty the human mind of all its clutter and jungle of familiar associations. The results "have been a series of direct notations of what takes place in the poet's being when preoccupations with logic are reduced to a minimum--a deliberate mining of the veins of imagery buried in the poet's subconscious." Miss Drew quotes a stanza from "The Rites of Hysteria" by David Gascoyne to serve as an example of this surrealist poetry:

In the midst of the flickering sonorous islands
The islands with liquid gullets full of mistletoe-suffering
Where untold truths are hidden in fibrous baskets
And the cold mist of decayed psychologies stifles the sun
An arrow hastening through the zone of basaltic honey
And arrow choked by suppressed fidgettings and smokey spasms
An arrow with lips of cheese was caught by a floating hat

This is material for a Dali masterpiece or the couch of a Freudian psychologist, but to the ordinary reader it has all the meaning of a nightmare. The method has uncovered many fresh images, but they are used irrationally and obscurely. Some of Merton's early poetry suggests the influence of the surrealist technique. "Ash Wednesday" presents us with a good

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9 Ibid., 84.
10 Ibid., 84.
example:

The naked traveller,
Stretching, against the iron dawn, the bowstrings
of his eyes,
Starves on the mad sierra.

But the sleepers,
Prisoners in a lovely world of weeds,
Make a small, red cry,
And change their dreams.

....

And when the desert barks, in a rage of love
For the noon of the eclipse,
He lies with his throat cut, in a frozen crater.11

In the consciousness of the poet these images mean something,
perhaps, but to the unfortunate reader they have a very dubious
significance. Why "the iron dawn," "the mad sierra?" What is
"a small, red cry?" These are entirely subjective symbols which
communicate no definite feeling.


11 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 23.
12 Ibid., 21.
13 Ibid., 20.
14 Ibid., 16.
15 Ibid., 17.
16 Ibid., 15.
17 Ibid., 32.
18 Ibid., 31.
"April," 19 "Dirge," 20 "Crusoe," 21 "Lent in a Year of War," 22 and "Fugitive" 23 are poems written in this style. Let us look at "Fugitive." There can be no doubt of the influences which are at work in the poet at the time he wrote this:

Out in the green sun-dancing cane a mad half-Spaniard
Hiding, like a robber, from a coffee-drinking Judas,
Fears the newspaper owners
And the millionaires.

Planted, like bulbs, in the wet earth of sleep
His eyes had started to sprout:
Sea-changing in his murk of dreaming blood,
And shining in his fathoms of ambition,
Bones had begun to turn to money.

But now with secret agents out of mind
And mad sunstorm of parrots out of memory,
Beyond two miles of jungle,
He only sees the sweetly drumming sun.

And yet his waking memory, a murderous rooster,
Crested with a rag of meat,
Whirls its spurs in a cloud of magic feathers,
Braving the bread-colored dust.

But bamboo trees click in the wind like rosaries,
Charmed with watchfulness and thirst
His paper mask plays, (always), dead.

And in the priestly darkness of his love
Twenty prayers at once, to Saint Lazare
Talk with tongues of candle-flame,

And one by one are folded up
The treacherous, fly-catching flowers of his will. 24

19 Ibid., 26.
20 Ibid., 113.
21 Ibid., 30.
22 Ibid., 27.
23 Ibid., 22.
24 Ibid., 22.
This poem is a word-picture out of Dali. The grotesque images are certainly those of the surrealist technique of the subconscious. Eyes "planted, like bulbs, in the wet earth of sleep;" "the murk of dreaming blood;" "mad sunstorm of parrots" all remind one of the omelet-watch of Dali. The images are private and, consequently, obscure.

Another characteristic of the early poetry of Thomas Merton is the influence of the Imagists. Imagist poetry and prose is the off-spring of the stream of consciousness techniques. The originator of this technique in English is generally acknowledged to have been T. E. Hulme. "Late Victorian Poetry seemed abstract, rhetorical, and vague."25 Therefore, Hulme proposed to revitalize and renovate English poetry according to the principles which he laid down for his disciples: "The poet must escape the limits that perception imposes upon the flow of impressions and experience. Evading logical statement, he must try to embody his feelings and sensations in precise physical analogies."26 Imagist poetry is terse and precise, written in free verse, and vague! This ambiguity is of the essence of the system, since the metaphors and similes used are intended to convey the inexpressible. However, "such metaphors and similes

26 Ibid., 264.
may convey the inexpressible, but any suggestions surrounding them must be controlled by the poet in order to avoid vagueness of reference.\textsuperscript{27} The reader of this imagistic, illogical poetry, with its limited suggestion and its economy of language, must work as he reads and share the task of creation, according to its proponents.

D. H. Lawrence wrote in a letter quoted by Miss Drew:

The essence of poetry in this age of stark and unlovely actualities is a stark directness, without a shadow of a lie, or a shadow of a deflection anywhere. Everything can go, but this stark, bare, rocky directness of statement, this along makes poetry today.\textsuperscript{28}

This "rocky, bare, stark directness" is well illustrated in the "Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams, which is cited by Miss Drew. Williams has been praised highly for this poem.

RED WHEELBARROW\textsuperscript{29}

So much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
beside the white
chickens.

Dr. Williams was working here on the Imagist idea of using no

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 264.
\textsuperscript{28} Drew, 186.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 187.
words that do not directly contribute to the presentation of the object. His negative success, as it were, is complete; there is nothing whatever that is superfluous in the poem."  

Miss Drew concludes quite rightly: "The only question is whether there is enough there to make a poem at all: whether the bare bones live and whether their chirping is poetry."  

Merton's early poetry affords us with a number of poems done, more or less, after this manner. One of these poems was at one time, if not now, considered by its author as his best poem. "It was a song for La Caridad del Cobre, and it was, as far as I was concerned, something new, and the first real poem I had ever written, or anyway the one I like best."  

The poem runs:

The white girls lift their heads like trees  
The black girls go  
Reflected like flamingoes in the street.

The white girls sing as shrill as water,  
The black girls talk as quiet as clay.

The white girls open their arms like clouds,  
The black girls close their eyes like wings:  
Angels bow down like bells,  
Angels look up like toys,

Because the heavenly stars  
Stand in a ring:

30 Ibid., 187.  
31 Ibid., 187.  
32 Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, 283.
And all the pieces of the mosaic earth,  
Get up and fly away like birds. 33

This is Imagist poetry, illogical, limited in its suggestion, and economizing in expression. That the reader will have to work as he reads is evident. Merton's love of the brilliant and sparkling simile betrays the pure Imagist in him. It would be a mistake to say that he has been influenced by the Imagists as much as he has been influenced by the Surrealists. There is a curious blending of the two techniques in poems such as "April," 34 "The Greek Women," 35 "The Dark Morning," 36 "The Flight into Egypt," 37 "Prophet," 38 and others. This style is not pure and is found in only a few of his early poems.

These poems are for the most part developed by the method of Qualitative Progression. 39 This is the method of development followed by most Surrealists. As we progress to Merton's later poems we find that the method becomes more explicative and the logical development becomes explicit. "The Man in the Wind" is characteristic of the development of most of the early poems:

Here is the man who fancies Arab ponies,

33 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 117.  
34 Ibid., 30.  
36 Ibid., 116.  
37 Ibid., 114.  
38 Ibid., 115.  
39 Winters, 40.
Captain April, walking like the wind,
Breeding the happy swordlight of the sun,

Secret, in his looks and manner,
He's not as inattentive to the music as he seems,
That jangles in the empty doorways.

But his well-tempered spirit,
Rapt in the middle of a harmony,
Flies to a breathless wedding with the Palisades.

Then his five senses, separate as their numbers,
Scatter, like birds, from in front of his steps,
And instantly return, like water,
To the common Bermuda of the flashing river.

The mathematics of the air describes a perfect silence,
And Captain April's mind, leaning out of its own amazing windows,
Dies in a swirl of doves.40

Here the argument of the poem is hard to find, since the poet is concerned merely with the communication of impressions. This technique is repeated in "Poem: 1939,"41 "Ash Wednesday,"42 "Tropics,"43 and others. In his later poems which seem to begin circa page 54 in A Man in the Divided Sea, Merton withdraws more and more from surrealist influence. He still retains his brilliant and striking imagery, but he has moulded it into the texture of his more conventional verse. "The Image of True Lovers' Death" illustrates this blend:

It happened when they came to find our brother,
The men from the police,  
And knocked at his five doors  
With stern, accusing face:  
"Come out, unprofitable monk,  
And view our spurious badges,  
While we convince you of sin:  
(The mess your garden's in.)"

Before they cleared their iron throats  
Or knocked or rang again,  
Our brother was off to the hills,  
Leaving his body in this position.44

Or in "The Trappist Cemetery--Gethsemani:"

Brothers, the curving grasses and their daughters  
Will never print your praises:  
The trees our sisters, in their summer dresses,  
Guard your fame in these green cradles:  
The simple crosses are content to hide your  
Characters.45

The imagery is less violent and more universal in its signifi-
cation.

In the last book of his poems, Thomas Merton has been  
somewhat disappointing. In forsaking the vices of the Sur-
realists, obscurity and private imagery of the subconscious,  
Merton falls into the snare of writers of spiritual poetry,  
facile ejaculations and hortatory rhetoric in place of real  
feeling. "The hortatory rhetoric booms somewhat hollowly; it  
implies fervor in the poet, but does not generate its own."46

44 Ibid., 68.  
45 Ibid., 89.  
46 Frederick Morgan, "Recent Verse," Hudson Review, New York,  
1, 2, 1948, 250.
Elsewhere the same critic says that Merton has "a talent that operates characteristically in terms of a brilliant and sometimes violent imagery and relies somewhat too heavily upon the rhetoric of exhortation and impassioned statement."47 This criticism is well taken as we shall see from a brief examination of some of his later poems.

The title poems of _Figures for an Apocalypse_ ends with this impassioned address to the Heavenly City:

Lo, the twelve gates that are One Christ are wide as canticles:
And Oh! Begin to hear the thunder of the songs within the crystal Towers,
While all the saints rise from their earth with feet like light
And fly to tread the quick-gold of those streets,

Oh City, when we see you sailing down,
Sailing down from God,
Dressed in the glory of the Trinity, and angel-crowned
In nine white diadems of liturgy.48

This is to try to impose upon us an emotion which we cannot feel from a reading of the poem. Again in "Canticle for the Blessed Virgin:"

But, oh! Queen of all grace and counsel,
Cause of our joy, Oh Clement Virgin, come:
Show us those eyes as chaste as lightning,

47 Ibid., 259.
48 Merton, _Figures for an Apocalypse_, 28.
Kinder than June and true as Scripture.
Heal with your looks the poisons of the universe,
And claim your Son's regenerate world!49

Or in "A Mysterious Song in the Spring of the Year:"

Oh happy death, where life and fright,
Where love and loss are drawn apart
And stand, forever, separate,
While one by one the fragments of a century
Disintegrate and fall in silence all about us:
And these are news of peace, but not dismay,

For heaven is builded deeper and stronger everywhere
From the collapse of our neglected history.50

These prayers are without doubt important and moving to the poet.
Yet, they fail to present the reader with any true emotion.
When we find them repeated and repeated in these poems, the monotony becomes painful. Running through the twenty-five poems of Figures for an Apocalypse, we note that eighteen poems are marred by the rhetorical habit of exclamation, exhortation, and pious questionings which convey, not real feeling and conviction, but the trappings of false sentiment. Notice how the telling of the glories of the "Grey Monks'" sacrifice fails to convey any feeling because of the trite and stale rhetoric:

Oh, who shall tell the glory of the grace-price

49 Ibid., 44.
50 Ibid., 43.
and the everlasting power
Of what was once the Grey Monks' sacrifice,
When with the slow and ending canticle they broke their choirs
And bent them to the ground:
What were your names, you hundred thousand cross-cowled nameless saints?
Burning before the Lord upon the altar of your poverty and love,
You there destroyed before the face of His great Majesty
All the world's armies and her kingdoms and her centuries of blood and fire,
And all her palaces and all her treasuries
And the glory of her crowns. 51

These poems have been stripped of the clutter of the subconscious, but, at the same time, have been rendered insipid by a superficial piety. Figures for an Apocalypse, one suspects, was written as a monkish exercise of piety. This is a laudable exercise, but scarcely the inspiration of good poetry.

The style of Thomas Merton's poetry is very uneven. Yet, one characteristic is outstanding. His imagery is fresh and vital. "Similes fall fresh and clean-cut and with the regularity of chips from an axe; word-groupings bristle with baffling point; syntax breaks on the rugged reefs of thought," says Frank J. Wiess. 52 This use of simile become very obtrusive and tiresome. "The phrasing is at times bizarre enough to induce a

51 Ibid., 70.
52 Wiess, 5.
belief that the poet was preoccupied with the neat fall of words. This is a preoccupation that is especially noticeable in his early, surrealistic poems. Generally, it is used with effectiveness. However, simile becomes a capital vice with the poet. In none of his poems will we find a poorer use of simile that in his "Aubade--The Annunciation." The poem is a poor thing at best, but the constant recurrence of "like" and "as" make it almost intolerable. Ten similes, two metaphors, and seven personifications in twenty-seven lines! As Wiess notes, we even find "figures within figures." This is an unbearable burden of rhetoric for any verse to carry. It weakens the feeling of the line and by its tinny sparkle destroys emotion by calling attention to its own cleverness.

When the dim light, at Lauds, comes strike her window,
Bellsong falls out of Heaven with a sound of glass.

"With a sound of glass" is a comparison which is indefinite enough to suit the strictest Imagist. Is it the sound of breaking glass, or what is it? Simile has been used effectively very often by Merton, but in "Aubade--The Annunciation" it is out of control.

53 Ibid., 5.
54 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 44.
55 Ibid., 44.
The poet then gives a description of the activities at which the Virgin was engaged at the time of the Annunciation:

Prayers fly in the mind like larks,
Thoughts hide in the height like hawks:
And while the country churches tell their blessings to the distance,
Her slow words move,
(Like summer winds the wheat) her innocent love:
Desires glitter in her mind
Like morning stars:

We are told that "prayers fly," "thoughts hide in the height," "country churches tell their blessings to the distance," "slow words move," and "desires glitter." What sort of prayer? What thoughts? What blessings? What words? Whatever they are, they are like "larks," "hawks," "summer winds," and "morning stars/"

Drop the similes and you will find that the burden of the verse is entirely in the similes.

Then, her name is spoken:

Until her name is suddenly spoken
Like a meteor falling.
She can no longer hear shrill day
Sing in the east,
Nor see the lovely woods begin to toss their manes.
The rivers have begun to sing.
The little clouds shine in the sky like girls:
She has no eyes to see their faces.

57 Ibid., 44.
58 Ibid., 44.
The clashing similes in this stanza are indeed amazing. The day is shrill and singing and the lovely woods toss their manes. Reference to the manes introduces a suggestion of a horse which does not belong in the picture, even though the trees waving in the wind might suggest to the poet a horse's mane. We cannot condone every simile just because it happens to occur to the fancy of the poet. A simile may be just and true, but not fitting to the mood of the poem.

The next few lines give us a beautiful description of the words: "And she pondered these things in her heart."

Speech of an angel shines in the waters of her thought like diamonds.
Rides like a sunburst on the hillsides of her heart,
And is brought home like harvests,
Hid in her house, and stored
Like the sweet summer's riches in our peaceful barns.59

The similes are original and effective in these few lines, though by their vagueness they lose some of their vividness. The last stanza continues the figure of the harvest and the sowing:

But in the world of March outside her dwelling
The farmers and the planters
Fear to begin their sowing, and its lengthy labor,
Where, on the brown, bare furrows,
The winter wind still croons as dumb as pain.60

59 Ibid., 44.
60 Ibid., 44.
This "Aubade--The Annunciation" is the grossest example of the fault, but this predilection for simile is so obvious in the other poems as to be immediately noticeable. In the first ten poems of A Man in the Divided Sea, for example, there are eighty-two similes and metaphors.

We cannot pass on to Merton's later poetry without commenting on the extraordinary strangeness of these similes. A simile or comparison is, in general, used to heighten the emotion of the poem or, rather, of the line. Its function is to provide an expansion of the meaning or of the emotion. The object of the preposition "like" is usually more concrete, more surrounded with connotation, than the object modified. The effect of a simile is to individualize and concretize the image. The simile, therefore, becomes a clarification, an enrichment, an explanation of the object. For instance,

As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.

Here Coleridge compared the actual ship becalmed upon the sea to a painted ship on a painted ocean. The well-known picture of a painted ship and the obvious quality of stillness that is in any painting is used to emphasize and make more vivid the stillness of the actual ship of the Ancient Mariner. Or again:

I pass, like night, from land to land.
Here "I pass", a very general term, a pronoun-verb combination which is colorless and unimaginative is specified, made individual and concrete by giving it the qualities of the passing night. "I pass from land to land." How does one pass from land to land? "Like night." This is certainly the ordinary use of simile. Now let us compare this with Merton's use. In "The Ohio River--Louisville," we find the following:

slow-moving river, quiet as space.
The trains go through the summer quietest as paper.
    the singing dynamos
make no more noise than cotton.
    the swimmers float like alligators,
And with their eyes as dark as creosote.61

The simile is less imaginative than the thing to which it is compared. In more conventional poetry, such similes would be criticized mercilessly. Do they give us any clearer notion of what the poet means or feels than Shakespeare's famous slip:

    Or to take up arms against a sea of troubles?

I think not. Their vagueness, while it intrigues the reader as any puzzle does, defeats the purpose of the metaphor or simile.

Whereas the images of the early poets was in the main ex-

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61 Ibid., 57.
expansive, Merton's are often belittling. The simile fails to enrich the emotion by opening up new vistas of related feeling. It impresses one as being thin and weak. The influence of Edith Sitwell and her followers is seen in his frequent transference of values from one field of experience to another and unrelated field. This is one of the devices studied by Yvor Winters in his Defense of Reason. Sound or touch evokes the sensations of sight, or sight is expressed in terms of touch or sound. This reversal of values can be used to great advantage, but for the most part Merton fails in his use of it. There are many examples in his verse--too many to cite all of them. A few will suffice to show how this affects his poetry:

Drums and bells exchange handfuls of bright coins

At noon the sky goes off like a gun. The day explodes like a bomb

Twenty prayers at once, to Saint Lazare Talk with tongues of candle flame

But the sleepers, Prisoners in a lovely world of weeds, Make a small, red cry

Then the sleepers, Prisoners of a moonward power of tides, Slain by the stillness of their own reflections,

62 Cf. page 12 of this thesis for Winters' analysis.
63 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 18.
64 Ibid., 21.
65 Ibid., 22.
66 Ibid., 23.
This trick of speech used injudiciously and too frequently lays the poet open to the suspicion of deliberate obscurity or of intellectual laziness. What is easier than to describe a cry as "red" or "white" and leave the reader to guess its significance?

Overuse and misuse of simile is a special error of style in a poetry which, for the most part, is a chain of visual images. A certain definition of imagery is necessary where the logical development of the poem is nowhere expressed. Any schoolboy who has had to make prose summaries of the thought content of a poem soon realizes that the precis does not sound the depths of meaning in a good poem. But the moderns delight in wrapping up their thought and feeling in layer upon layer of symbols and illusive references. This causes a great many readers to throw modern poetry aside impatiently and accuse the poet of being deliberately obscure. It is quite true that many moderns are suspect, but all modern poetry cannot be dismissed as irrational and unintelligible because of the aberrations of the few. Most poets are really trying to tell us something, but become enmeshed in their own personal theories so much that their symbols and images become almost completely personal. For the reader, then, these poems become puzzles full of beautiful, but irrational, imagery. As Max Eastman said:

Life itself as I try to live it is puzzle enough, and there is no dearth of riddles
even when the talk is clear. Therefore, when the modernist critics object that Mr. Cummings' poems are too lucid--"they do not present the eternal difficulties that make poems immortal"--I can only bow and retire.67

These poets and critics feel that they are betraying their sacred muse if they slip into something that is clear and intelligible. One modernist objects to punctuation in Shakespeare because "it restricts his meaning to special interpretations of special words,"68 and says that "if we must choose one meaning, then we owe it to Shakespeare to choose one embracing as many meanings as possible, that is, the most difficult meaning."69 Mr. Eastman summarizes as follows:

As poets they do not want to tell us, they do not want to sacrifice, in order to tell us, any least value that their poems may have untold. The act of communication is irksome to them. It is irksome at times to all of us. It is inadequate. How much can we communicate, indeed, by this elementary device of tongue-wagging or by making these tiny inkwriggles on a sheet of paper? Little enough. Everyone who has composed a poem knows how often he has to sacrifice a value that is both clear and dear to him, in order to communicate his poem to others. Abandon that motive, the limitation it imposes, and you will find yourself writing modernist poetry. I know that because I have tried it.70

68 Ibid., 219.
69 Ibid., 219.
70 Ibid., 219.
Eastman then goes on to conclude: "The modernist tendency may be defined as a tendency towards privacy combined with a naive sincerity in employing as material the instruments of social communication." 71 We suspect Merton of indulging in this purely personal poetry in very many of his early poems. Let us look at "Tropics" for confirmation of this.

TROPICS

At noon the sky goes off like a gun.

Guards, on the Penal Island,
Converging, mad as murder, in the swearing cane,
Arrest the four-footed wind.

But the chained and numbered men
Do not cease their labor:
Building a cage for the devouring sun.

At six o'clock, exactly,
The day explodes like a bomb,
And it is night.

Instantly the guards
Hide in the jungle, build a boat
And escape.

But the prisoners of the state
Do not cease their labor:
Collecting the asphalt fragments of the night. 72

If this is intelligible to the poem, we are happy, but it is evident that he is living in his own dream world, however

71 Ibid., 222.
72 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 21.
striking his images may be.

It has been said that Merton was greatly influenced by the Metaphysical Poets. Nowhere is this influence more clearly seen than in "The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to a Window." Lowell calls this poem repetitive, loose, and wordy. "One of Merton's faults is a contrivance that he may have learned from some of the less successful poems of Crashaw (e.g., "The Weeper"), the atomic conceit; each conceit is an entity and the whole poems is seldom more than the sum of its parts, often it is considerably less."74

At first glance "The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to a Window" is merely a tour de force in imitation of the Metaphysicals. The conceit of comparing a person to some inanimate object is not new in English poetry. Thomas Wyatt used the conceit in his poem, "The Lover Compareth His State to a Ship in Perilous Storm Tossed on the Sea;" John Donne offers a notable example of it in his ode, "Of My Name in the Window," and Crashaw uses it in his poem in honor of the tears of St. Mary Magdalen, "The Weeper." In our own times we find "The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to the Air We Breathe" by Gerard Manley Hopkins. While Merton cannot be

73 Ibid., 142.
74 Lowell, 241.
credited with any originality in making use of this genre, he has contributed something to its development.

The poet is struck by the peculiar place of the Blessed Mary in the story of our salvation. It was through Mary that the Savior came into the world; and it was through the humility of Mary that this coming was accomplished. What comparison could be more apt to illustrate the position of the humble handmaid of the Lord and the channel of our salvation than a window?

An ordinary window is simple, a lowly thing. It is uncomplicated in structure, plain and unadorned, yet a marvelous thing, perfectly adapted to its purpose and entirely suited to the transmission of another element, light. Consequently, the poet used the window as the image which will speak to us of those qualities of the Virgin's will and of her love which stand out in the story of her part in the Redemption of Mankind.

Because my will is simple as a window
And knows no pride of original clay,
It is my life to die, like glass, by light;

In this poem we see the beginning of Merton's reaction from the obscure and violent symbolism of the Surrealists. Gone is the

Naked traveller,

75 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 142.
Stretching, against the iron dawn, the bowstrings of his eyes,

and "mad sunstorm of parrots," "treacherous fly-catching flowers," and "sleepers in their lovely world of weeds." The ancient symbols of the Catholic Church have found their way into his consciousness. These symbols are images enriched with the feeling of centuries of Christianity and partake of an universality that allows the poet to communicate richer floods of feeling than in the surrealist imagery of the early poems. With his withdrawal from the surrealist founts of imagery, Merton has overcome many of his faults of style.

A Trappist is a farmer. He clears the land, plows the fields, and sows and reaps his crop. We are not surprised, then, to find Merton's Trappist poems full of the scenes of farm life. The wheat and the hay and the leafy avenues of the forest trees are views of his new life which while at the same time symbols of the eternal life for which the Trappist labors are the poet's familiar friends.

See how we come, our brows are full of sun
Our smiles are fairer than the wheat and hay,
Our eyes are saner than the sea.
Lay down your burden at our four-roads' crossing,
And learn a wonder from Christ, our Traveller.

77 Ibid., 23.
78 Ibid., 58.
The seed must dies before it can sprout and bring forth fruit:

Sing your new song in the winepress where these bloody pence
Weep from the skin of our Gethsemani,
Knowing that we must die to break the seed our prison
And spring like wheat from the wet earth
Of who knows what arena.79

The mysteries of his Faith afford the poet other symbols and images. The Mystery of the Cross and Passion of Our Lord is a map:

Although my life is written on Christ's Body
like a map,
The nails have printed in those open hands
More than the abstract names of sins,
More than the countries and the towns,
The names of streets, the numbers of the houses,
The record of the days and nights,
When I have murdered Him in every square and street.80

Wiess is emphatic when he writes about Merton's "Clairvaux" that this new poetry is not surrealistic clutter;

"Clairvaux" merits special attention in its significance of interlocking detail, its fervor mounting as contemplation recreates the Abbey, as veneration colors the remembrance. The Abbey is almost personified. Devoted recollection yields to imagery and thought which in turn gather to soar with grace and ease to that which is beyond the physical vision, beyond the contemplation

79 Ibid., 86.
80 Ibid., 72.
of the earthbound mind. But the world
is not of kindred spirit with a man whose
heart has found joy and peace in glorifying
God in whatever simple way it best can.81

Merton's language is still contemporary in his later poems.
Sister Madeleva remarks that "nothing defies the diction of the
poet so completely as the slang, the vernacular, the current
idiom of the day. Yet Merton whips these unruly outlaws into
complete subservience to the disciplined line."82 She goes on
to quote several passages from "Figures for an Apocalypse:"

And the cops come down the street in fours
With clubs as loud as bells83

and

All night long we waited at the desert's edge,
Watching the white moon giggle in the stream.84

In the final stanza of his "Letter to America" his language
is as modern as the neon light:

Down where the movies grit
Their white electric teeth,
Maybe the glorious children have rebelled
And rinsed their mental slums
In the clean drench of an uncalculable grief.
...
But oh! the flowering cancers of that love

81 Wiess, 11.
82 Madeleva, 102.
83 Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 17.
84 Ibid., 17.
That eats your earth with roots of steel!
No few fast hours can drain your flesh
Of all these seas of candied poison,

Until our long Gregorian cry
Bows down the stars' Samaritan
To rue the pity of so cruel a murder. 85

Here is poetry of the finest, modern in language and technique; but without the obscurity and grotesquerie of his early work. The images are clear and meaningful both to the intellect and to the senses. If he is sometimes too hortatory in his later poems, as some critics hold, in many others he reaches out and grasps the truths of religion with fine poetic inspiration.

The rich symbolism of the Catholic Church and its rites and history is ransacked by the poet for figures. The dice which the executioners of Jesus cast for the cloak on Calvary are used in a double simile in "The Betrayal."

With little smiles as dry as dice
We whipped and killed You for Your lovely world. 86

The treasure of great price buried in the field is the fruitful-
ness of the earth in winter:

November analyzed our bankruptcies, but now
His observations lie knee-deep beneath our
Christmas mercies,
While folded in the buried sand

85 Ibid., 34.
86 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 75.
The virtual summer lives and sleeps;
And every acre keeps its treasure like a kingly secret

Sister Madeleva says that

Not since Patmore, perhaps, has the ode known a better master. All these new poems in Figures for an Apocalypse employ this form. Every poem in the book is autobiographical, looking outward from the Trappist Monastery to the world of New York City, America, the universe: the ultimate city of God.

The image of the seed falling into the ground to die and spring up again is used by Merton in another place to point up the plan of God when He commands our love:

Why are we all afraid of love?
Why should we, who are far greater than the grain
Fear to fall in the ground and die?
Have you not planned for minds and wills
Their own more subtle biochemistry?
This is the end of my old ways, dear Christ!
Now I will hear Your voice at last
And leave the frosts (that is: the fears) of my December.
And though You kill me, (as You must) more, more
I'll trust in You.

The parenthesis in verse eight is a reversion to the type of his early poems, but the total gain in clarity and depth is more than

87 Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 32.
88 Madeleva, 106.
89 Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 47.
enough to offset the defect.

In his early poetry, Merton was extreme in his use of experimental methods. His later work shows a development in style which in some ways is a return to the conventional, since he rejects the methods of the Surrealists. However, while discarding the freakish dream-imagery and poses of the moderns, he holds fast to a modernity of language and freshness of inspiration that indicates his growing mastery of the technique of the most progressive poets and holds forth the greatest promise of development.

In conclusion and in summary of the various points of style in the poetry of Thomas Merton, we must say that his work shows a definite development from the ideas and techniques of the Surrealists and the themes of the Decadents to a poetry which, while retaining the structural development, Qualitative Progression, Implicit Reference, and the rest, becomes more logical and more clearly communicates the idea and the feeling of the poets. This is a significant thing in itself. However, though he fails in some of his later poems because of a tendency to didacticism and a resultant superficiality of emotion and thought, Merton, by harmonizing the achievements of the Modernists and the traditions of Christianity, has restored poetry to the way of poetical salvation and pointed the way that poetry must follow to regain the lost esteem of serious readers—the way of poetical communication.
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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Paul E. Brewer, S.J., has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English, West Baden College, West Baden Springs, Indiana.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

Jan. 11, 1950

Date

Signature of Adviser