

For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943

MICHAEL WOODWARD

For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943

Sweet brother, if I do not sleep
 My eyes are flowers for your tomb;
 And if I cannot eat my bread,
 My fests shall live like willows where you died.
 If in the heat I find no water for my thirst,
 My thirst shall turn to springs for you, poor traveller.

Where, in what desolate and smokey country,
 Lies your poor body, lost and dead?
 And in what landscape of disaster
 Has your unhappy spirit lost its road?

Come, in my labor find a resting place
 And in my sorrows lay your head,
 Or rather take my life and blood
 And buy yourself a better bed—
 Or take my breath and take my death
 And buy yourself a better rest.

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

For in the wreckage of your April Christ lies slain,
 And Christ weeps in the ruins of my spring:
 The money of Whose tears shall fall
 Into your weak and friendless hand,
 And buy you back to your own land:

The silence of Whose tears shall fall
 Like bells upon your alien tomb.
 Hear them and come: they call you home.

I LIKE THIS poem. It's been good to get to know it better and study it more closely.

It stands out among the *Thirty Poems* in which it first appeared in 1944, stands out in the *Selected Poems*, and stands out as one of Merton's most fully achieved poems.

It is also distinctive for its subject matter. The dreadful hurt of losing his brother could only happen once. Merton rose to meet the brutal finality of his brother's death with a poem of weight and depth, providing a lasting memorial and a shaft of resurrection light in the darkness of his loss. In so doing he has achieved something universal about trusting God's love in the face of death. It is a poem of clear-eyed hope.

Ten minutes is a short time to spend on a poem with many layers and considerable subtlety. So I'm not going into possible sources in *St Bernard* or an elegy by Catullus for his own brother, and I'm not going in for a line by line commentary.

I want to simply move through the text and point up a few moments of special resonance.

But first I would like to set the poem in the context of the relationship between John Paul and his elder brother. On the whole, I'm dubious about introducing material from outside a poem. But in this case I think it enriches our reading to be reminded of the salient points.

I think it's fair to describe their early relationship as troubled. Tom understandably felt his place as *le fils unique* usurped, and his exclusive claim on his mother's attention diluted. Tom was three and a half when John Paul was born.

Tom wrote:

He was a child with a much serener nature than mine...I remember that...in the long evenings when he was put to bed before the sun went down, instead of protesting or fighting, as I did when I had to go to bed, he would lie upstairs in his crib, and we would hear him singing a little tune.¹

The contrast contributed to the young Merton's sense of himself as unworthy and unsatisfactory. In their early life the brothers were not soulmates or even playmates. With an age gap of nearly four years it's not surprising.

We have that terribly poignant image Merton wrote about in *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

The picture I get of my brother John Paul is this: standing in a field, about a hundred yards away from the clump of sumachs where we have built our hut, is this little perplexed five-year old kid in short pants and a kind of leather jacket standing quite still, with his arms hanging down at his sides, and gazing in our direction, afraid to come any nearer on account of the stones, as insulted as he was saddened, and his eyes full of indignation and sorrow. And yet he does not go away. We shout at him to get out of there, to beat it, and go home, and wing a couple of more rocks in that direction, and he does not go away. We tell him to play in some other place. He does not move.²

After Merton's mother's death in 1921, much of their growing-up was apart: Tom away with his father or at school, John Paul with Ruth's family on Long Island. Later on, they grew closer, becoming movie addicts and going camping together. With the war and American neutrality, John Paul enlisted by crossing the border and joining the Royal Canadian Air Force in Toronto.³ The war brought a concentration to their relationship. John Paul spent his 1942 embarkation leave at Gethsemani. Tom saw John Paul for the first time in the uniform of Sergeant Observer. He had been trained to read aerial photographs, and distinguish what was going on on the ground (he was not a pilot as Monica Furlong's book⁴ maintains). John Paul had decided to become a Catholic, and it was wisely arranged for Tom to do most of the instructing, even though he was simply a novice rather than a priest. They spent time talking among the Stations of the Cross. Before John Paul left the brothers received Holy Communion together.

Michael Mott writes:

The Chapel of our Lady of Victories was ever after a place for Merton where a greater mystery than reconciliation had taken place. Here, finally, he had been helped to help his brother. Before they had been little more to each other than orphans of the same parents.⁵

John Paul left in July 1942 for England. By early Spring he had married a young radio operator in the A.T.S., Margaret Evans. News of this event came to Merton on Easter Monday in a letter held over for him because of Lent. The next day he was called to the Abbot to receive a telegram saying that his brother had been reported missing ten days earlier. Soon the details came though of his broken

neck, his delirium during hours adrift with his crew in a rubber dinghy, calling for water; his burial at sea.

Thérèse Lentfoehr tells us that the holograph manuscript of the poem is dated April 28, the day after the telegram.⁶ So Merton probably began the poem, and may even have finished it, without knowing the details of John Paul's death. I can't be as certain of this as Patrick O'Connell seems to be.⁷ The poem itself, however, deals wholeheartedly with a death: there is no sense of a question mark. So the title tag "Reported Missing" takes on a special poignancy: it is, perhaps, a subliminal denial of the facts, bearing a vestigial hope that it was all a mistake.

That background gives us an insight into the weight of emotion carried by the opening "Sweet brother." It has taken death to call this "sweet" forth. It contains Tom's remorse for past hostility, regret for the words never spoken; appreciation of what he has suddenly lost; the pathos of his brother's untimely death.

Drawing on his very recent experience of Lenten fasts and the reality of manual work in the Kentucky sunshine, in the first stanza Merton weaves this stuff of his daily life into a parallel structure redolent of the psalms he was chanting by night and day in the Abbey church. His own discomfort is offered as a sacrifice, becoming "flowers", "food" and "water" to bring comfort to his brother.

What impresses throughout the poem is its sombre, restrained ritual. It needs that strong framework to contain the intensity of the emotion. The mechanical rhythm and clipped vocabulary work to the same end.

The first sentence of the second stanza deals with the pain of not knowing where his "poor" brother's body lies. Ironically, John Paul, the trained Sergeant Observer, would have been the one best equipped to find it. But it is the "unhappy spirit" of his brother, and its fate in the "landscape of disaster" that preoccupies the poet from now on.

Merton goes on to offer more than his physical discomfort. He moves from "labor", to "life" and "blood" to "breath" and "death": anything and everything to give his brother peace.

But then, in the fourth stanza, the audacity and impracticality of this rhetoric is acknowledged. The perspective of time is introduced, with the "flags...fallen into dust", as the poet accepts there is no salvation or restitution he can possibly bring to his brother alone. Indeed Tom's need is as great as John Paul's. Here, at the end of the

fourth stanza, the One who can redeem is revealed, the vital third presence capable of breathing life into the touching, but one-sided and ultimately sterile, dialogue of aspirations the poem has so far been.

For the suffering that has been inflicted on John Paul and offered by the poet is not wasted. It is taken up in the transforming power of the Easter mystery. The poet and John Paul will ultimately share the same death and, in doing so, share in Christ's atonement and resurrection.

This is developed particularly well in the final stanza, alive with resonances. Now, the brothers have different faces of Christ in common. John Paul has the Christ of Calvary, "slain" (and notice the stark appropriateness of the triple-stressed, "Christ lies slain..."); Merton identifies with the Christ who actively mourns: for his friend Lazarus, for the intractable city of Jerusalem. This grief is redemptive. Helpless as his brother is now, the Christ-tears are his ransom. As the paradoxes, images and tenses leap and dart, future and present time inter-penetrate. The tears become bells, suggestive of Gethsemani's own bells, tolling to summon John Paul home. A home, ironically, was the thing both brothers lacked for many years—like Christ during his public life.

Here we connect directly with the events and liturgy of Holy Week. There is an echo of the Last Supper: the money hints at Judas, and Tom's sense of his past betrayals. But in Merton's notebook the poem appears among notes on the liturgy for Holy Saturday.⁸ Deeply embedded in it all is the silent waiting of Holy Saturday, and the drama of the Harrowing of Hell. John Paul becomes one of those released by Christ's power in his descent to Hell to open its gates after his death on the Cross, and before his physical resurrection.

Look especially at the rhymes here. After the metronomic pairing of "full" with "full" and "hand" with "land", the poem ends with the deft uncertainty of an internal rhyme "tomb/home". These two, in turn, are played off against another near-rhyme, "come" which rests between them in the middle of the final line. Their discordant music denotes a painful grappling with events that eschews pat answers. The triad itself is suggestive of John Paul, Tom and Christ: John Paul, the "tomb", Merton the advocate for his brother who is crying, "come", Christ, the Alpha & Omega, their destined "home".

At its end the poem has achieved a unity of sorts, a complex unity of sorts, but it is one based on hope and things unseen, and contains the dissonance of separation.

And finally, the last line. Few last lines of poems, and very few of Merton's last lines, contain any more punctuation than a stray comma. The last line tends to come in on the surge of the tide, finishing off with a flourish. But here we have a colon. To me it's like a fulcrum, a pivot or a hinge, almost the opening of a door. It's a gateway of hope, not in a naive or sentimental way but, in its movement of return, it subtly communicates a rooted belief in the communion possible between the living and the dead, and speaks of the gathering to come, when what has been lost will be restored, and the dead will be raised to new life.

Notes and References

1. Merton, Thomas. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., New York, 1948, p.8
2. *Ibid.*, p.23
3. *Ibid.*, p.355
4. Furlong, Monica. *Merton: A Biography*, London, Collins 1980, p.132
5. Mott, Michael. *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin 1984, p.221
6. Lentfoehr, Sister Thérèse. *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton*, New York: A New Directions Book, 1979, p.9
7. O'Connell, Patrick F. 'Grief Transfigured: Merton's Elegy on His Brother,' *The Merton Seasonal* 18.1 (1993): pp.10-15
8. Lentfoehr, p.9