

## Thomas Merton's Civil Rights Poetry

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Thomas Merton's commitment to racial equality predated his entrance into the Abbey of Gethsemani. In his autobiography and his premonastic journal he records his developing awareness of and opposition to racism and its consequences for African Americans, and his attraction to working in Harlem at Catherine de Hueck's Friendship House as a possible vocation.<sup>1</sup> His mature reflections on this issue two decades later, in the midst of the civil rights movement that transformed the racial landscape of America, infused his early passion for justice with a compassion for and contemplative identification with the marginalized and oppressed.<sup>2</sup> As his original engagement with the issue found expression in verse and well as prose,<sup>3</sup> so in the 1960s Merton's support for the black freedom movement produced poetry as well as essays. In four poems written between 1963 and 1968, the year of his death, Merton explored the political and spiritual significance of key moments in the struggle for equal rights.<sup>4</sup>

Merton's first civil rights poem, 'And the Children of Birmingham,'<sup>5</sup> was inspired by the demonstrations in May 1963 in the Alabama city that Martin Luther King called the most segregated in America,<sup>6</sup> when hundreds of young Black marchers were attacked by police dogs, dispersed by high-powered fire hoses, arrested and jailed.<sup>7</sup> The poem envisions the confrontation between the children and the authorities as the real-world equivalent of the fairytale of Little Red Riding Hood, a comparison that is anything but whimsical. While the most immediately obvious parallel connects the wolf of the story with the German shepherds in the Birmingham streets (cf. ll. 3, 10, 24), the thematic focus of the poem, central to 'Red Riding Hood' as well, is on the power of language both to conceal reality and to reveal it, both to oppress and to liberate.

In the opening stanza two conflicting frameworks for interpreting the events in Birmingham are juxtaposed. The archetypal pattern of

the fairytale in the first four lines is countered in the second half of the stanza by the specious common sense of the established order:

And the children of Birmingham  
 Walked into the story  
 Of Grandma's pointed teeth  
 ('Better to love you with')  
 Reasonable citizens  
 Rose to exhort them all:  
 'Return at once to schools of friendship.  
 Buy in stores of love and law.' (ll. 1-8)

By beginning the poem with 'And' Merton suggests that the 'story' the children 'walk into' is an ongoing one of which this is just the latest episode, not the tale of Red Riding Hood *per se* but the paradigmatic story the fairytale exemplifies, of the confrontation between innocence and iniquity, and more particularly of the encounter with evil disguised as good – the wolf in Grandma's clothes. Essential to this disguise is the misuse of language in order to distort perception and cloud judgment, as in the claim that 'pointed teeth' are 'Better to love you with', that the actions of the police, in this case, however harsh they may seem, are really for the victims' own good, an expression of benevolence rather than oppression. Though the words may be the words of Grandma, the teeth are still the teeth of the wolf, so such an assertion is of course somewhat less than convincing. The rhetoric of the authorities is thus exposed from the outset as untrustworthy and dangerous.

In this context the subsequent advice of 'Reasonable citizens' might initially seem to be offering an alternative to Grandma's 'pointed teeth', a way to escape the threat, the only way *out* of 'the story'; but their proposal to return to safety by returning to the status quo, going back to school and stopping the boycott of downtown merchants, proves to be simply a less blatant means to the same end, the preservation of an unjust social order. The slogans of the 'citizens' (a term that recalls the segregationist 'White Citizens Councils' formed to oppose civil rights for blacks) have in fact no closer relation to truth than the wolf's responses to Red Riding Hood. Their superficially appealing phrases are essentially deceptive and illusory: 'schools of friendship' implies that the segregated educational system, in contrast to street demonstrations, promotes harmony between the races, when in fact the exact opposite is the case; the phraseology of 'Buy in stores of love and law' sounds like a harmless, if typically banal, advertisement, yet

by making 'love' and 'law' equivalent, or at least coordinate, it drains love of its authentic transformative significance: love is to be exercised by obeying the law, and in fact both are reduced in this formulation simply to a commercial transaction.

The refrain, '(And tales were told / Of man's best friend, the Law.)' (ll. 9-10), with its echoes of the key terms 'friendship' and 'law' from the previous lines, describes an attempt to reinforce these directives by providing a series of stories having the same 'moral,' in order to convince the children to conform: the cautionary tale of Red Riding Hood is to be rejected in favor of these tales in which 'the Law' is 'man's best friend,' a phrase that recalls both the traditional description of dogs and the typical (white) parent's characterization of the policeman – 'the Law' – as someone to be regarded as a friend by a lost or threatened child – both identifications are wildly inapplicable to the streets of Birmingham, but if fact and myth conflict, in this view, fact must be sacrificed. At the same time, by identifying a personified abstraction, 'the Law,' as 'best friend,' the refrain in effect removes from the 'Reasonable citizens' themselves any necessity to befriend the young demonstrators, to relate to them concretely, in human, personal terms. Thus two competing stories are being proposed as ways to interpret the events in Birmingham: 'the story / Of Grandma's pointed teeth' and 'tales . . . / Of man's best friend, the Law.' Which is to be believed? Are law and love in conflict or in concert? Are the police dogs 'man's best friend' or new incarnations of the wolf? Can the exhortations of the 'Reasonable citizens' be trusted any more than the assurance of the 'Grandma' with pointed teeth that they echo?

The second stanza presumes that the citizens' attempts to persuade the children themselves have been unsuccessful, so attention now shifts to efforts to sway public opinion, to justify the measures taken to suppress the demonstrations.

And the children of Birmingham  
 Walked in the shadow  
 Of Grandma's devil  
 Smack up against  
 The singing wall.  
 Fire and water  
 Poured over everyone:  
 'Hymns were extreme,  
 So there could be no pardon!' (ll. 11-19)

The pattern of this stanza, with its identical beginning and its concluding direct discourse, parallels that of the opening stanza, but now the perspective seems to be completely 'Grandma's,' as the Red Riding Hood comparisons disappear and the children are now described as 'Walk[ing] in the shadow / Of Grandma's devil.' This initial imagery reflects not an attempt to deceive others but self-deception, the illusory fears of those in power who demonize their opponents. The identity of the devil in whose shadow, or footsteps, the children are following is not specified – it could be Martin Luther King, or the marchers who have preceded them, or black adults in general, or personified 'Lawlessness' – any or all are embodiments of evil from the perspective of those whose position of privilege is threatened.

But these lines contain their own refutation; hidden in them is another way to read not only the words but the events to which they refer: 'Walked in the shadow' subtly echoes Psalm 23: 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me' (vs. 4 [RSV]). Here the evil, or Evil One, is not the insubstantial demon of Grandma's fears, but the genuinely demonic power of violence and injustice she has raised, but which the marchers do not fear because their Lord and Shepherd is with them. The courage of the nonviolent demonstrators is rooted in their biblical faith, whereas the biblical terminology of Grandma is a façade concealing a lack of faith.

The marchers are described as walking 'Smack up against / The singing wall.' Since they themselves are the singers, the implication is that they have become their own barrier, their own wall – they are blocked, ostensibly, not by a police line but by their own actions – apparently if they had not been singing they would not have been stopped, so what ensues is to be construed as their own fault. This tactic of blaming the victim becomes explicit in the final four lines of the stanza, where fire (perhaps a reference to tear-gas smoke) and water (from the fire hoses) are defended as legitimate punishments resulting from the 'extremism' of the protestors' hymns. Again the imagery can be read in two contradictory ways: for the apologists of the official position, the unpardonable offence of the demonstrators unleashes retaliation with apocalyptic overtones of the biblical deluge and the final judgment. But the evident absurdity of labeling the marchers 'extreme' because of their hymn-singing makes such claims appear fatuous; in fact no pardon can be given for such actions because no

pardon is necessary, and the imagery of fire and water can suggest the purification of baptism and the descent of the Spirit as easily as divine punishment.

Yet the apparently nonsensical position taken by the authorities is not as illogical as it may seem. For in forbidding the singing of hymns they are inadvertently expressing their opposition to the authentic word of God, the good news of liberation and redemption from oppression that is being proclaimed in the freedom songs they are trying to suppress. The misuse of religious language for self-justification is implicitly contrasted with its proper use in the hymns being condemned, and the voice of authority is exposed as usurping the divine prerogative of judgment, again raising (and implicitly answering) the question who is actually on God's side here and who is aligned with the devil.

The verbal pattern of the first two stanzas is broken in stanza three by the extra rationalizations of Grandma, who apparently feels the need for more argumentation to convince the audience of the rightness of her cause:

And old Grandma  
Began the lesson  
Of everybody's skin,  
Everybody's fun:  
'Liberty may bite  
An irresponsible race  
Forever singing,'  
Grandma said,  
'Forever making love:  
Look at all the children!' (ll. 20–29)

By this point the pretence of empathy for the demonstrators has completely disappeared. The voice of the 'Reasonable citizens' and that of 'Grandma,' i.e. the wolf, have merged; the forces of repression and its apologists are morally indistinguishable. Unsuccessful in returning the children to 'schools of friendship,' Grandma now teaches her 'lesson' in the public arena, a lesson based on stereotypes and blatant prejudice (literally 'pre-judging'), in which 'everybody' can be categorized and condemned. The dogs and those they represent are identified with liberty, which is equated with the freedom to attack those considered inferior, the 'irresponsible race' identified with license. The grounds of her argument shift here, as 'love,' in the crass sense of sexual activity –

but applicable in a more profound and authentic sense as well – is assigned to blacks, in effect leaving the white power structure with law alone, as is evident in the repetition of the refrain (ll. 30–31), now used not to convince the children to obey but to buttress her own position: Law is to be seen as (the white) ‘man’s best friend’ because it keeps the ‘irresponsible race’ under control.

But for the perceptive listener, the very words she uses once again undermine her own arguments. She tells her audience to ‘Look at all the children!’ which is precisely what she herself fails to do – they are not really seen as they are, but only as (unsupported) evidence of promiscuity. But with unintended irony her command has the potential to backfire if her listeners take her literally and are truly attentive to the children and what they are about as they brave the dogs and hoses – they demonstrate love in a far more significant sense than the reductive and dismissive connotations given the word by Grandma.

By the fourth stanza, where the opening phrasing of the first two stanzas returns for a final time, the *pro forma* efforts to convince both children and observers seem to have become unpersuasive even to the defenders of the official line themselves, who mouth platitudes that have lost all plausibility:

And the children of Birmingham  
Walked into the fury  
Of Grandma’s hug;  
Her friendly cells  
(‘Better to love you with.’)  
Her friendly officers  
And ‘dooms of love.’  
Laws had a very long day  
And all were weary. (ll. 32–40)

The jailing of the children is described as ‘Grandma’s hug,’ but the self-contradictory nature of the rhetoric is apparent from the characterization of the hug as ‘fury’ (altered from ‘story’ in the otherwise identical opening lines of the poem). The true nature of the Law’s ‘friendship’ is revealed by the embrace of ‘friendly cells’ and ‘friendly officers,’ identified by the repetition of the same parenthetical remark (‘Better to love you with’) with the disguised wolf’s pointed teeth of the first stanza.

The phrase ‘dooms of love’ (borrowed from e. e. cummings<sup>8</sup>) is an ambiguous, double-edged term: who or what exactly is subject to this

‘doom,’ with its connotations of ‘statute, ordinance, decree,’ of ‘judgment, sentence, condemnation,’ as well as of ‘unhappy destiny, ruin, destruction’? The verse can be read as a continuation of the previous line of argument that these judgments are evidence of ‘tough love’ on the part of the authorities, but it can also mean that genuine love, evident in the young people’s actions, is in fact sitting in judgment over the racist social structure and ‘dooming’ it to destruction.

As the stanza concludes, ‘Laws’ are presented as too exhausted to provide a further rationale for their activities – thus there is no direct discourse as in the two opening stanzas; they may have won the immediate battle, but at this point in the poem they appear to have lost the war for the minds and hearts not only of the children themselves but of the audience observing the confrontation. The personification of ‘Law(s)’ that seemed so powerful earlier in the poem is reduced to an almost comic ineffectuality.

The ‘fulcrum’ of the poem occurs at this point, as the three lines of the fifth and final stanza are counterpoised to the previous forty lines of argumentation:

But what the children did that time  
Gave their town  
A name to be remembered (ll. 41–43)

This statement of simple clarity outweighs all the complicated deceptions and sophistic rationalizations that preceded it. The actions of the children were a witness to truth, a reminder that the fundamental attribute of nonviolence is ‘truth force’ (Gandhi’s *satyagraha*). Naming is the primordial act of language that brings perception and reality into alignment, so that in giving Birmingham a name to be remembered, a name for brutality but also for heroism, the children’s fidelity to authentic human vision and values is ultimately more effective and lasting than all the distortions and disguises of the powerful; ‘what the children did that time’ (*kairos*,<sup>9</sup> the time of decision and transformation, the time of salvation, God’s time) subverts the old story and drains it of power. The proper function of language is restored as the story told corresponds to deeds done and the name given corresponds to true identity. The deeds of the children are signs of hope, as the wolf once again fails to triumph and the archetype prevails: evil is again unmasked by a child, or by many children, who speak and live the truth.

After this understated but clear declaration of the victory of truth over deception, justice over oppression, the reappearance of the refrain



as the poem's conclusion is somewhat disconcerting. It could, of course, be read in a radically different sense from its two previous occurrences, as 'the Law,' on the federal level, does arrive, if somewhat belatedly, to defend the rights of the protesters and at last legitimate its title as the Department of Justice. But one still might question the identification of the Law, a reluctant participant even in this more benevolent guise, as 'man's best friend.' A more plausible reading would recognize the recurrence of this statement as a sober, realistic awareness that the victory of justice in history is always tentative, always provisional, that the old order will continue to propagate its version of events. But while these 'tales' may still be told, they do not have to be believed, because what the children of Birmingham have done will be remembered: another tale has been created, a version of the authentic and definitive 'story' into which the children of Birmingham have walked, in which not law but love and courage and justice define what is fully human.

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'Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll,'<sup>10</sup> subtitled 'Carole Denise McNair, killed in Birmingham, Sept. 1963,'<sup>11</sup> commemorates one of the four young girls murdered by the bomb blast at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham on September 15, 1963.<sup>12</sup> It is based on a photograph of 11-year-old Denise McNair taken by her father Chris shortly before she was murdered,<sup>13</sup> which Merton found in *LOOK* magazine<sup>14</sup> and subsequently kept in his journal.<sup>15</sup> It is a reaffirmation of the transcendent power of love in the face of hatred and murder.

The poem, addressed throughout to the child herself, might be called in Blakean terms both a song of innocence and a song of experience, as it juxtaposes the perspective of the girl, embracing her doll with affection, and that of the speaker, raging with grief and anger at the morally bankrupt and homicidal society he finds symbolized in the doll. In the opening verse paragraph it is the bitter voice of experience that predominates:

Your dark eyes will never need to understand  
Our sadness who see you  
Hold that plastic glass-eyed  
Merchandise as if our empty-headed race  
Worthless full of fury

Twanging and drooling in the southern night  
With guns and phantoms  
Needed to know love (ll. 1–8)

The speaker reacts with visceral loathing toward the doll the child holds, which he identifies with the falseness and hollowness of the dominant white culture – its artificiality ('plastic'), its blindness ('glass-eyed'), its crass commercialism ('Merchandise'). The "sadness" of the speaker is of course prompted by the senseless loss of innocent life, but it is also associated with seeing the child bestowing her affection on what he considers such an unworthy object. The doll represents for the speaker a shallow, fraudulent *simulacrum*<sup>16</sup> of innocence, its empty glass eyes contrasting with the 'dark eyes' of the genuinely innocent child who embraces it.<sup>17</sup> He even associates the doll with the racist malevolence of the murderers: in repudiating their kinship with the children, they have denied their own humanity and so reduced themselves to the doll's level, 'empty-headed' and 'Worthless' but also 'full of fury,' ruled by passion ungoverned by reason, their lives filled with 'guns and phantoms,' violence triggered by illusion.

This description of the doll, of course, is not an expression of detached objectivity. It is the anguished outburst of one who is ashamed and sickened by the actions of members of his own race and is venting his revulsion on the product and emblem of white smugness, which could, and did, metamorphose into white savagery. There is some element of truth in this depiction, but it is not the whole truth. The white speaker's repudiation of the doll and all it stands for makes the black child's embrace stand out more sharply in contrast. Holding the doll affectionately, she shows an intuitive response of love, nurture, caring, a kind of wisdom in innocence that cannot be accounted for as simply mistaken and misdirected. The speaker recognizes, even as he struggles to accept, the significance of her embrace: it is, he says, 'as if' the white race, even in its most degraded manifestations, were in need of love. It is as though the child were aware of the spiritual void, the terrible lack of love and meaning, the doll represents, in which case it is accepted and cared for not in spite of its unworthiness but because of it, precisely because it is 'plastic, glass-eyed / Merchandise.'

The child does not 'understand' this motivation, does not analyze it in rational categories, and now will never do so – her death has spared her a 'fall' into a world of bitter experience. The speaker recognizes that this pre-reflective state could not have continued indefinitely; part

of the pathos of the situation is that the child has died before realizing how dangerous the object of her affection, or at least what it represented, actually was. But the very fact that it was an object of affection is a sign of her intuitive awareness of the lovelessness that would be the cause of her death. Her embrace of her doll cannot be regarded as simply pitiable ignorance of the harsh reality of white hatred, but as the instinctive recognition of and unselfconscious response to white need, white failure, white inability to love.

The brief, parenthetical verse paragraph that follows raises the question whether this response on her part will ultimately be redemptive, but leaves it unanswered:

(Yet how deep the wound and the need  
And how far down our hell  
Are questions you need not  
Answer now) (ll. 9–12)

The child is unable to answer the questions, but no longer needs to because they belong to an adult world she will never inhabit. The speaker has no answers either: there is no facile optimism, no cheap consolation that her death will transform her killers, or the society they represent; the depth of the wound in need of healing and of the hell in need of harrowing is left unmeasured. But they are questions that continue to haunt the speaker throughout the rest of the poem.

In the third verse paragraph the focus returns to the doll, with the implication that it represents love reduced to a commodity, to the satisfaction of lust, to *eros* without *agape*:

That senseless platinum head  
Of a hot city cupid  
Not yet grown to whore's estate  
It glories and is dull  
Next to your live and lovely shade  
Your smile and your person  
Yet that silly manufactured head  
Would soon kill you if it could think  
Others as empty do and will  
For no reason  
Except for that need  
Which you know without malice  
And by a better instinct  
The need for love. (ll. 13–26)

Just as the cheap simulation of love represented by the 'hot city cupid' contrasts with the authentic love demonstrated by the child, the tawdriness of the doll's flashy appearance is apparent when compared with the 'live and lovely shade' of the child's face. The showy, glitzy superficiality of the doll's platinum blond hair is said to 'glory' – both in the sense of forming a kind of corona or aureole around its 'senseless' head and of being a sign of haughty pride, a sense of superiority based on color. Yet its conventional 'beauty' pales in comparison with the child's vibrant vitality; it 'is dull': less bright, less intelligent, less interesting. If it were capable of thinking, the doll would attack her, the speaker claims, because its pretensions to superiority would be undermined by the very act of love being offered to it. So it is with 'others as empty': to expose the spuriousness of their pose of self-sufficiency by daring to offer them love threatens their self-constructed identity and so invites retaliation; any evidence of their own inadequacy, their inner hollowness, must be made to disappear.

Again the speaker's analysis is valid but incomplete. The child's continued embrace of her doll witnesses to a more profound truth, that a rejection of love does not have to lead to the withdrawal of love. Her 'better instinct,' the visionary insight of innocence which penetrates more deeply into reality than the speaker's experience, is 'without malice' and so perceives others' need not as a justification for hostility in return but as an opportunity to reach out with affection and nurture. Love, then, as the child demonstrates, is a free gift not dependent on the worthiness of the recipient and not conditional on the recipient's response.

In the fourth verse paragraph the spiritual and theological significance of the photograph, already implicit in the previous sections, is directly considered:

So without a thought  
Of death or fear  
Of night  
You glow full of dark ripe August  
Risen and Christian  
Africa purchased  
For the one lovable Father alone. (ll. 27–33)

The simplicity of the progressively shorter opening verses here, in which the line breaks at least momentarily separate 'death' from 'thought' and 'night' from 'fear,' conveys with heartbreaking pathos the child's unawareness of the fate that awaits her, but they are merely

preparatory to the declaration of the child's identity as 'Risen and Christian / Africa.' The darkness of night and death is subordinated to the darkness of 'ripe August,' the season of approaching harvest (and probably the month in which the photograph was taken) that fills her and shines through her. This reference to the harvest recalls the words of Jesus that if the seed falls into the ground and dies it will bear much fruit (Jn. 12:24). Like Jesus himself, the child is a sign of life even in the face of imminent death because she participates in Christ's own stance toward the world, by showing the same kind of redemptive, self-sacrificing love as God has shown toward her and the rest of humanity. As the representative of her oppressed race she has shared in Christ's rejection and crucifixion, but she also shares in his resurrection because she has been 'purchased' by Christ. In this context the word 'purchased' both recalls the legacy of slavery and proclaims that redemption by Christ is the true purchase, for to belong to God is freedom not bondage. But it is also linked to the earlier description of her doll as merchandise: despite the contrast between 'risen and Christian / Africa purchased' by Christ and the white doll purchased for the child, she relates to the doll with the same unconditional love that God has shown toward humanity. Even if the doll and those it represents are not intrinsically 'lovable,' not deserving of love, the final line here is a reminder that love is due by right to the 'one lovable Father alone'; but in loving the Father one is called to share the Father's love for sinful humanity, a participation the child exemplifies and symbolizes in the photograph.

The final stanza is both heavily ironic and genuinely celebratory at the same time:

And what was ever darkest and most frail  
 Was then your treasure-child  
 So never mind  
 They found you and made you a winner  
 Even in most senseless cruelty  
 Your darkness and childhood  
 Became fortune yes became  
 Irreversible luck and halo. (ll. 34-41)

The passage alludes to the parable of the treasure in the field (Mt. 13:44). The child finds her treasure<sup>18</sup> in nurturing, sacrificial, Christ-like love for 'what was ever darkest and most frail,' that is, for sinful humanity, represented by her doll, now ironically described as 'darkest.' The doll has become a representative, at least implicitly, not just of the

white race but of the human race, all of whom have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, all of whom were loved while they were still sinners. On the other hand, 'They,' her assassins, find her but fail to recognize her as likewise a treasure, the potential instrument of salvation through her love, and so destroy what they should have cherished. They have lost a fortune though they fail to realize it; she alone is a winner because in losing her life she has gained fullness of life.<sup>19</sup> Her 'darkness and childhood' (verbally parallel to but thematically contrasting with the moral darkness and frailty of line 34) have become 'irreversible luck' — a double-edged phrase that first suggests her misfortune in being in the wrong place at the wrong time, since she was not specifically targeted by the church-bombers, but then affirms that this misfortune has been transformed by the power of Christ into an eternal treasure that shall not be taken from her; her darkness and childhood is finally recognized as a 'halo,' testimony to her beatitude, the authentic 'glory' of which the doll's platinum hair was only a contrived simulation. The presence of the halo in effect transforms the photograph into a kind of icon, making the picture of the black child with her white doll a portrait of one who manifests God.

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Merton's third civil rights poem, 'Plessy vs Ferguson: Theme and Variations',<sup>20</sup> is a satiric 'anti-poem'<sup>21</sup> strikingly different in style from the two previous poems, though in its concern for the abuse of language in the service of oppressive power it has affinities with 'And the Children of Birmingham'. If William Blake was the guiding spirit for 'Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll', the savage ironies of this poem are more reminiscent of Jonathan Swift's 'A Modest Proposal'. The first of its twenty-one numbered sections, a direct quotation from the 1896 United States Supreme Court decision legitimating racial segregation, which remained in force until the 1954 Brown vs Board of Education case that rejected the 'separate but equal' argument on which 'Plessy' was based, provides the 'theme'. The remaining twenty sections are the 'variations', which tease out some of the racist implications, both chilling and absurd, of the ostensibly objective decision. It might seem that Merton is beating a dead horse here in holding up to ridicule a seventy-year-old court case that had been officially repudiated and



superceded, but in the closing sections of the poem the contemporary significance of the assumptions on which 'Plessy' is based becomes evident.

The quotation that begins the poem is taken from the opening sentences of the penultimate paragraph of Supreme Court Justice Billings Brown's decision that Louisiana district court Judge John Howard Ferguson was correct in upholding the law under which Homer Plessy, a mixed-race man, was arrested for refusing to leave a whites-only railroad car:

We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff's argument to consist in the assumption that enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so it is not by reason of anything found in the act but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it.<sup>22</sup>

This assertion that segregation implies racial inferiority only because 'the colored race' chooses to interpret it that way is disingenuous at best, blatantly cynical at worst. Its pose of detached judicial objectivity is ludicrous, and exposes the court to the wildly imaginative deconstruction of its argument that follows.

The first of the 'variations', addressed to Plessy, the plaintiff, and the race he represents, gets directly to the crux of the matter, the verb 'chooses': 'The whole issue is a question of choice. We are only giving you what you want. Why don't you make up your mind?' (#2). Here the classic tactic of blaming the victim already implicit in the language and logic of the decision is openly expressed. If the colored race has made the choice to consider itself inferior, the argument goes, it shouldn't complain or object – or bring a lawsuit – if it is treated as inferior.

But Plessy and his fellow blacks are to be held responsible not only for choosing, but for every other action mentioned in the passage from the decision. The third section lists six 'characteristics' of the 'underlying fallacy', all drawn from the quotation, which the court blames the plaintiff for putting forth: 'Why don't you admit that all these things are your fault?' (#3). In the sections that follow each of these examples of pretentious legal verbiage is subjected to withering mockery in the guise of further explication by the court itself. First the court claims the fallacy 'underlies' because the plaintiff is half-white<sup>23</sup> and therefore the fallacy is partially hidden. 'If he were all black the fallacy would not be 'underlying' but evident on the surface' (#4). What is really being implied, of course, is that segregation is harder to defend when there

is little observable difference between those being segregated, but the court has risen to the challenge. A further connotation of 'underlies' points to the fears of miscegenation that are themselves just beneath the surface of white racism (and would be particularly aroused by a mixed-race man who could pass for white): 'Meanwhile, *who* is this that is found underlying the plaintiff? ... How would you feel if it turned out to be your sister?' (#5).

The next characteristic, 'It consists', is dismissed because the plaintiff, being of mixed race, is 'a living contradiction' and therefore has no 'consistency' (#6). But if it cannot consist neither can it assume (#7), since the fallacy was said 'to consist in the assumption ...' so if one is illegitimate so is the other. Moreover, 'How can anything 'consist in an assumption' which is at the same time 'an underlying fallacy'? – the problem being that 'assumption' implies ascent and 'underlying' the opposite! Of course what is ostensibly the court criticizing the alleged actions of the plaintiff is in fact the author having a wonderful time reconfiguring the stately language of the hapless judge in ever more preposterous combinations and permutations.

While 'It enforces' (#8) is included in the list of the characteristics of the fallacy, as though the plaintiff and his race were enforcing their own segregation, by this point in the analysis the court seems to have forgotten or abandoned its original claim and does all the enforcing itself. It not only 'enforces the separation of the plaintiff from his own argument and thereby from the underlying fallacy,' and in doing so takes on the veritable mantle of emancipator, 'liberat[ing]' him 'from all his mistakes'; it gets carried away in a virtual orgy of enforcing, involving all the elements of the decision in a progression that becomes increasingly nonsensical: 'The court however enforces the separation of the races, the separation of the acts, the separation of the stamps, the separation of the badges, and the separation of the constructions.' And just as the court gave the plaintiff freedom by denying his petition so he (along with 'the races,' 'the acts,' 'the stamps,' etc.) is given equality by being separated, according to the 'separate but equal' message of the decision: 'They are all equal.'

The two final 'characteristics' – 'Separates' (#9) and 'Stamps' (#10) – get down to the practicalities, so the plaintiff is once again addressed directly – and quickly and decisively put in his place. After the exuberant piling up of the parallel phrases in section 8, the seven words that constitute the stark and laconic section 9 have a brutal, almost



physical directness: 'Separation stamps: stamps separate. Consider yourself stamped.' The reciprocal relationship of the two terms here conveys the impression of a closed circle, an inescapable fate. The first statement is lifted directly from the decision, the subject-verb combination that allegedly constituted the 'assumption' that created the 'underlying fallacy'; it has now become the decision of the court; and since the converse is equally true – to be stamped is to be separated – the following section orders the plaintiff: 'Get back in the other car and stay there'; even though he is given his badge (i.e. of inferiority), because he is separate he is declared to be equal as well: 'Only there can you be equal. Don't you want to be equal?' (#10).

Having completed its analysis of the six characteristics, the court is now ready to provide some conclusions. The most mordant segment of the entire poem, section 11 places 'the colored race' in segregated restrooms, focus of more recent demonstrations, 'constructing what is not found in the act' – apparently alluding to a common vulgar metaphor for an unconvincing argument, which the dignified justices would never use explicitly, a scatological image that might easily be applied to the court's own claims as spun out in the previous sections. The court then turns for one final time to address the plaintiff, circling back to the focus on choice from section 2, now rephrased in the context of the intervening discussion: 'Why did you choose that badge in the first place? Now that you have it, *wear* it. It stamps you with a unique choice.' The movement from question to command to indicative statement places the responsibility for the progression of events clearly on the plaintiff and his race: if they had made a different choice 'in the first place' things could have been different, but now they must live with the consequences of that choice – the situation is the way it is and can't be altered.

Section 13 literally plays variations on the first sentence of the original quotation, transforming 'underlying fallacy' into 'overbearing fantasy,' which now is said to consist in 'an assumed pigmentation' – which could refer to the light coloring that Plessy 'assumes' (i.e. puts on), or to the dark pigmentation that the law 'assumes' (i.e. takes for granted, even though in fact Plessy's color is light) – in either case he is subject to 'enforced separation' that is nevertheless described as 'entirely voluntary.' This flatly contradictory statement is defended by the fact that 'voluntary' means free and it has already been demonstrated (in section 8) that the plaintiff has been made 'free and equal' by being

'forced to separate.' This leads, then, to the much more succinct 'variation' on the second sentence of the decision: 'If this be so, Plessy is found in the act' (#14). To be 'found in the act' suggests being 'caught in the act' – both the law he violated and perhaps other acts of depravity such as that referred to back in section 5. In any case, he is safely categorized and labelled as guilty – but not, except in his own mind, as inferior: 'He thought he was wearing a badge of inferiority but we taught him different' (#15).

Here the voice of the judge momentarily gives way to the voice of a rural white southerner, as though the effort to 'talk educated' is itself an act that can't quite be sustained perfectly throughout. Though the judicial mask is quickly readjusted, the perspective of the confused and threatened southerner continues to reappear in the next four sections. Thus section 16, again echoing the phrasing of the quotation, now 'consider[s]' not the plaintiff's argument but the bi-racial plaintiff himself, who 'consist[s]' of two separate and equal races' (in a single person!) and so is doubly free, doubly equal, and for this reason seen as particularly troubling: 'This gives him an unfair advantage,' an anxious observation, however irrational, reflective more of the point of view of a southerner nervous about the blurring of sharp boundaries between the races than of the Olympian court that pontificates but doesn't fret. Likewise the following section worries about what 'They' may actually be doing when they 'get together in segregated schools and churches where they conspire to stamp each other with badges of inferiority' (#17); the word 'conspire' signals the paranoia just below the surface here. They're responsible for their own inferior status, but there is a hint that to be inferior is to be dangerous, subversive: 'They undermine the American way of life.' A note of hysteria seems to be creeping in as the speaker voices concern about possible unintended consequences of segregation: 'Was anything of the sort ever found in the act?' (#18). There is an effort to dissociate the 'white race' from the act, which is true enough in the sense that no white person would be likely to violate the ordinances by trying to use 'colored' facilities ('There is indeed an act but nobody is found in it'), and the insistence that the 'badges of inferiority' are the work of blacks themselves becomes more shrill and urgent: 'This is solely the construction of the colored race which began at the beginning and went on building' (#19).

The reason for this increasingly apprehensive tone, and indeed the *raison d'être* for the poem itself, becomes clear in the second to last

section, which is a letter addressed to Mr. Ferguson, the original judge in the case who upheld Plessy's arrest. Though the letter is unsigned, its authors are quickly revealed. The letter congratulates Ferguson on the staying power of his decision, 'seeing that it outlasted all the other decisions meant to reverse it.' *De facto* segregation continues even after Brown and various civil rights bills have been passed to promote integration. It might initially sound as if the letter is written by diehard segregationists, but in fact it comes from the pen of advocates of Black Power, who provide one final 'variation' on the 'theme' of the Plessy decision, one that does not fall pleasantly on the ears of Ferguson and his supporters through the decades: 'The underlying fallacy of your argument is that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of superiority. If this be so it is not by reason of anything found in the act but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it' (#20). Here the argument is turned inside out, but without sacrificing the logic of the original claim: if blacks assume racial separation means racial inferiority, as the original decision maintained, they can just as well assume racial separation means racial superiority. The phenomenon of Black Power in the mid-1960s is revealed to be the direct result of the policies of racial segregation approved in the 1890s. This frightening new movement is the whirlwind that the Fergusons must reap after sowing the wind of segregation. Far from being obsolete, 'Plessy vs. Ferguson' is in an unexpected way, the poet finally suggests, more relevant now than ever. Advocates of racial separation have given birth to a frightening offspring they cannot control.

In the final section, labeled 'Envoi,' Ferguson consults with the Supreme Court justices who ruled on his case, maintaining that while segregation offered 'the colored race' a 'way out,' they refused to take it, so now everyone finds themselves 'all locked up together in the same construction' (#21). In fact all efforts at separation were ultimately futile, and the destinies of white and black alike are inextricably joined. The final variation remains implicit: it is the transformation of the last noun in the original passage, 'construction,' into its opposite, foreseen in the gloomy query with which Ferguson acknowledges his defeat and concludes the poem: 'Only one question now remains: who will be the first to set fire to the building?' – a question that seems to imply that violent revolution may be forestalled only by nuclear catastrophe.

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The final civil rights poem, entitled 'April 4th 1968' and subtitled '*For Martin Luther King*',<sup>24</sup> is of course a commemoration of King's assassination on that day. It can be regarded as a kind of coda to the eight 'Freedom Songs' Merton had written to honor the civil rights movement (four of which would be performed at a memorial for King at the 1968 Liturgical Conference in Washington, DC),<sup>25</sup> though with its repetitions and incremental progressions, and its absence of explicit scriptural references, it is perhaps closer in style to a blues than a spiritual:

On a rainy night  
On a rainy night in April  
When everybody ran  
Said the minister

On a balcony  
Of a hotel in Tennessee  
'We came at once  
Upstairs'

On a night  
On a rainy night in April  
When the shot was fired  
Said the minister

'We came at once upstairs  
And found him lying  
After the tornado  
On the balcony  
We came at once upstairs'

On a rainy night  
He was our hope  
And we found a tornado  
Said the minister.

And a well dressed white man  
Said the minister.  
Dropped the telescopic storm

And he ran  
(The well-dressed minister of death)  
He ran  
He ran away

And on the balcony  
Said the minister  
We found  
Everybody dying

The elegy weaves together simple phrases drawn from news reports quoting King's associates (here generalized as 'the minister') not to convey information but to set a mood and to build slowly, almost hesitantly, as if reluctant to confront the full import of the tragedy, to the climactic final statement.

The two opening quatrains first of all establish time and place, respectively, in parallel phrasing ('On a rainy night ... On a balcony ...') but each also includes a yet unexplained note of urgency – 'everybody ran ... We came at once'. The next pair of stanzas reuses the same phrases, with significant variations. In stanza three 'When everybody ran' is replaced by 'When the shot was fired', moving from effect to cause, while the fourth stanza reconfigures the phrases from stanza two to frame the new details: 'And found him lying / After the tornado'. The tornado, of course, is the one figurative element in the poem, signifying not only the scope of the disaster but the initial inability of the witnesses to process what they see – the figure lying on the balcony must have been struck down by some natural force (associated with the rainy night). (It is worth noting that this phrase is included in a direct quotation – quotation marks are used only here and in lines 7–8 of stanza two, of which this stanza is an expansion; in the other stanzas where the line 'Said the minister' appears, no quotation marks are used.)

Stanza five begins and ends the same way as the first and third stanzas, compresses lines 14–15 into 'And we found a tornado', and adds the one new line, 'He was our hope' – an understated acknowledgement of what has been lost. But the sixth stanza significantly breaks the pattern – not only is it only three lines long (contrasting particularly with stanza four, which added an extra line by repeating its first line, 'We came at once upstairs', at the end of the stanza), but its only repeated element is the line 'Said the minister' – previously used only as the concluding line of the odd-numbered stanzas, now the middle line here. The variation is significant because the focus shifts to a description of the assassin and his rifle, the 'telescopic storm' which is recognized as the true source of the 'tornado'. The pattern continues to be violated in stanza seven, also focused on

the murderer, which does not begin with 'On a [rainy] night' or end with 'Said the minister' – the figure of the minister in this stanza is instead 'The well-dressed minister of death', and the other three lines emphasize the contrast by echoing line 3: 'When everybody ran' – the triple repetition of 'ran' hammers home the difference between the 'minister of death' and the 'everybody' of the first stanza, since he alone, as the final line expressly states, 'ran away.'

The final stanza does restore the pattern, as the opening 'On the balcony' echoes stanzas two and four, though like stanza six the phrase 'Said the minister' is inserted medially, rather than as the concluding line as in stanzas one, three and five; this allows the poem to end with the statement, 'We found / Everybody dying.' The phrase echoes 'found him lying / After the tornado' from stanza four and 'we found a tornado' from stanza six, and carries the suggestion of a large number of casualties, but it also recalls line 3: 'When everybody ran,' linking the 'everybody' running to see what had happened at the beginning of the poem with the 'everybody' that lies dying here at the end. Thus the final line, surprising and disconcerting, suggests first of all that the death of Martin Luther King (never mentioned by name in the poem, in accordance with elegiac convention) was in some sense shared by those who were with him, who had been part of his work and whose death meant the death of that hope mentioned in stanza 5. But the final 'Everybody' is implicitly even wider than the 'everybody' who ran in the opening stanza, as the hope, the 'dream,' King represented, was not only an inspiration for his own people but a sign for people of every race.

King's death marked the end of the predominantly Christian and nonviolent phase of the American civil rights movement, prompting Merton to note in his journal 'the feeling that 1968 is a beast of a year.'<sup>26</sup> And yet this final line may carry a hint of hope in the midst of apparently unrelieved bleakness: the depiction of the slain leader as a kind of 'corporate personality,' an embodiment of universal dreams and aspirations, recalls the figure of the suffering servant of Isaiah whom King frequently invoked in his conviction that 'unearned suffering is redemptive.'<sup>27</sup> While the accent here is on the unearned suffering, the witness of King's own life and words, as of the movement he championed, always maintained faith in the redemptive consequences of that suffering, in new life rising from death. 'Dying' may be the last word of the poem, but because it is not simply an atomistic individual



but 'Everybody' who is found dying, within the poem are buried seeds of renewal and rebirth.

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All of Merton's civil rights poems are 'occasional' in nature, linked with particular events (the event in 'Plessy vs Ferguson' being not the 1896 Supreme Court decision itself but the rise of the Black Power movement in the mid-1960s that he connects to 'Plessy'). The progression from 1963 to 1968, from the spring demonstrations in Birmingham, through the church-bombing, to the rise of Black separatism and the assassination of King, charts an increasingly bleak picture despite the social and legal gains achieved, and the tone of the poems can be seen to darken accordingly, to move toward 'the rim of chaos,'<sup>28</sup> just as Merton's essays on the topic become more pessimistic as he sees that white America has missed its opportunity for conversion, its 'kairos' moment.<sup>29</sup> But in his final prose statement on racial justice he declares, 'I for one remain for the Negro. I trust him, I recognize the overwhelming justice of his complaint, ... I owe him support, not in his ranks but in my own, among the whites who refuse to trust him or hear him, and who want to destroy him.'<sup>30</sup> Certainly one of the ways in which Merton expressed this support was through these poems, each of which in its own way confronts its readers with the choice whether to accept the stereotype of 'an irresponsible race' or to discover 'Risen and Christian / Africa' in the 'dark ripe August' of a black child's face, whether to stamp blacks with a 'badge of inferiority' or to find themselves united with 'Everybody' on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. Written with both passion and precision, Merton's civil rights poems can be regarded, as I hope this discussion has been able to demonstrate, both as important contributions to his social commentary and as significant examples of his literary artistry.

Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> See Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948, pp.337-52, 357-60, and Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, Patrick Hart (ed.). San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995, pp.384-85, 448-51, 455-56, 464-65

<sup>2</sup> Merton's essays on racial justice are collected in Part I of Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964, pp.3-90, and

Part III of Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968, pp.119-88; they can also be found helpfully organized in chronological order in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, William H. Shannon (ed.). New York: Crossroad, 1995; see also the significant comments in Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, *passim*. An overview of Merton's thoughts on the issue can be found in the articles 'Civil Rights Movement' and 'Racism' in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002. pp.60-62, 377-79; see also the articles 'The Controversial Merton' by John Howard Griffin and 'The Struggle for Racial Justice' by Gerald Twomey in Gerald Twomey (ed.), *Thomas Merton, Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox*. New York: Paulist Press, 1978, pp.80-91, 92-110; George A. Kilcourse, 'Thomas Merton and Racism: 'Letters to a White Liberal' Reconsidered,' in Danny Sullivan and Ian Thomson (eds), *Your Heart Is My Hermitage: Thomas Merton's Vision of Solitude and Community*. London: Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1996, pp.155-62; and 'Racism and Violence,' Chapter 5 of David W. Givney, *The Social Thought of Thomas Merton*. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983, pp.83-98

<sup>3</sup> See 'Holy Communion: The City' and 'Aubade - Harlem' in Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems*. New York: New Directions, 1977, pp.39-40, 82-83; for a discussion of the first poem see Patrick F. O'Connell, 'Sacrament and Sacramentality in Thomas Merton's *Thirty Poems*,' in Patrick F. O'Connell (ed.), *The Vision of Thomas Merton*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2003, pp.169-72; and for a discussion of the second see Patrick F. O'Connell, 'Thomas Merton's Wake-Up Calls: Aubades and Monastic Dawn Poems from *A Man in the Divided Sea*,' *The Merton Annual* 12 (1999) pp.131-36

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that much of Merton's long posthumously published poem *The Geography of Lograire*, New York: New Directions, 1969, particularly 'Prologue: The Endless Inscription' and sections of the first, 'South,' Canto, focus on racial injustice. Merton also composed eight 'Freedom Songs' applying scriptural texts to the liberation struggle (*Collected Poems* pp.756-57, 711-12, 669-70, 714-15, 692-93, 775-76, 779-80, 701-703); for a discussion of the circumstances of composition see William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*, New York: Crossroad, 1992, pp.234-38; for an analysis see Patrick F. O'Connell, 'Eight Freedom Songs: Thomas Merton's Cycle of Liberation,' *The Merton Annual* 7 (1994) pp.87-128

<sup>5</sup> *Collected Poems* 335-37; the poem first appeared in *The Saturday Review* 46 (10 August 1963) p.32, and was included in Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) pp.33-35.

<sup>6</sup> See Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham Alabama - The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001, p.21; this Pulitzer Prize-winning account provides the most thoroughly detailed account of the various phases of the civil rights struggle in Birmingham.

<sup>7</sup> In a letter of 15 October 1963 to the English Benedictine Dame Marcella Van Bruyn, Merton explains the background of the poem in the 'great act of injustice on the part of the police, but the wonderful good order of the children and their indomitable religious spirit of charity,' and goes on to mention subsequent developments, particularly the church bombing that will inspire 'Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll,' his second civil rights poem (Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious*

*Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, Patrick Hart (ed.), New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990, pp.182–83; see also McWhorter pp.303–454 for the various phases of the Birmingham demonstrations in April and May of 1963, and especially pp.359–78 for the participation of children in the marches

<sup>8</sup> See 'my father moved through dooms of love,' in e. e. cummings, *Complete Poems, 1904–1962*, George J. Firmage (ed.), New York: Liveright, 1991, p.520; Merton seems more interested in the phrase itself than in the poem from which it comes, though certainly the attitude of the caring, protective father in cummings' poem is the complete antithesis of the sham concern shown by the adults in this poem

<sup>9</sup> See *Seeds of Destruction* p.44: 'The Negro children of Birmingham, who walked calmly up to the police dogs that lunged at them with a fury capable of tearing their small bodies to pieces, were ... confronting the truth in an exalted moment of faith, a providential *kairos*.' An earlier draft of the poem reads 'day' rather than 'time' in this line

<sup>10</sup> *Collected Poems* pp.626–27. The poem first appeared in *New Blackfriars* 46 (October 1964) p.32, and then in the *New Directions Annual* 19 (1966) pp.290–91; it was part of the collection 'Sensation Time at the Home' that was put together by Merton before his death but was never published separately

<sup>11</sup> Though she was always called Denise, her first name is properly 'Carol' not 'Carole,' as is clear from the inscription on her tombstone, shown in Spike Lee's documentary film about the bombing, *Four Little Girls*, HBO 1997. Merton's misspelling may be the result of a confusion with the name of one of the other girls who were killed, Carole Robertson

<sup>12</sup> For a thorough discussion of the bombing in all its aspects, including detailed portraits of the four children, see McWhorter, pp.19–28, 519–602

<sup>13</sup> The photograph is featured in the closing minutes of *Four Little Girls*, in which Chris McNair calls it his favourite photograph of his daughter, which he took at her request shortly before her death and developed only after the tragedy. In the photo a smiling, radiant Denise, dressed for bed, is hugging her doll, a rather large (c. 2-foot) white baby or toddler with particularly prominent eyes, their two faces close together

<sup>14</sup> The photograph was published on the first page of the article about Denise by William Bradford Huie entitled 'Death of an Innocent,' *LOOK* 28.6 (24 March 1964) pp.23–25

<sup>15</sup> See the editor's note in Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, Robert E. Daggy (ed.), New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989, p.332. The picture is captioned by Merton, 'Carole Denise McNair, one of the four bomb-murdered Negro children, never learned to hate'; he is quoting the statement by Maxine McNair, Denise's mother, from the *LOOK* article: 'I'm glad Denise never learned to hate' (p.24). The note introduces the 12 October 1964 letter that Merton sent with a copy of the poem to Chris McNair, in which he says the photograph 'seemed to say so much, principally about goodness, and about the way in which the goodness of the human heart is invincible, and overcomes the evil and wickedness that may sometimes be present in other men' (p.333); he describes the poem as 'somewhat angry, ... because I think that a little anger is still called for,' but adds 'I hope that love and compassion also come through, for anger is not enough and never will be'

<sup>16</sup> See the essay 'Events and Pseudo-Events' in *Faith and Violence*, in which he describes a *simulacrum* as having 'implications of a mask-like deceptiveness,

of intellectual cheating, of an ideological shell-game ... It is a fine word for something monumentally phony' (p.152)

<sup>17</sup> In his letter to Chris McNair Merton calls Denise 'a witness to innocence and to love, and an inspiration to all of us who remain to face the labor, the difficulty and the heart-break of the struggle for human rights and dignity' (*Road to Joy* p.333)

<sup>18</sup> The only substantive difference between the version of the poem in the *Collected Poems* and in the *New Directions Annual* is the replacement of 'treasure' by 'treasure-child,' which emphasizes the identification of the treasure with the doll

<sup>19</sup> In his letter to Chris McNair Merton writes, 'I wanted to say what you already know and believe; that the mercy and goodness of the Lord chose Carole Denise to be with Him forever in His love and His light' (*Road to Joy* p.333)

<sup>20</sup> *Collected Poems* 651–55; the poem appeared posthumously in the *New Directions Annual* 21 (1969) pp.201–203 and was part of the 'Sensation Time at the Home' collection of Merton's late shorter poems

<sup>21</sup> Anti-poetry can be described as 'an ironic, parodic feedback of the essentially meaningless jargon that passes for information and communication in modern, or perhaps early postmodern, mass society' (*Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* p.36)

<sup>22</sup> The quotation is exact except for minor variations ('the' missing before 'enforced'; commas missing before 'so' and 'act'). The complete decision [163. U.S. 537 (1896)] can be found on a number of internet web sites, including the 'FindLaw' site: <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=163&invol=537>

<sup>23</sup> In actuality, according to the second paragraph of the decision, the plaintiff, Homer Plessy, was 'of mixed descent, in the proportion of seven-eighths Caucasian and one-eighth African blood'

<sup>24</sup> *Collected Poems* pp.1005–1006; this poem is included in the 'Drafts and Fragments' section of the volume; the typescript used as the setting copy for of this poem, now in the New Directions files at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, includes a notation in an unknown hand that the poem is unfinished, but while Merton may have intended to do some revising and polishing, it appears to be substantially complete

<sup>25</sup> See Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, William H. Shannon (ed.). New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985, p.648

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals*, vol. 7: 1967–1968, Patrick Hart (ed.). San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998, p.78

<sup>27</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., 'I Have a Dream' (28 August 1963), in James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986, p.219

<sup>28</sup> Merton's 'Prayer for Peace' (*Passion for Peace* p.328)

<sup>29</sup> See *Faith and Violence* p.130

<sup>30</sup> *Faith and Violence* p.129