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"For Me Nothing Has Ever Been The Same": Composing The Niles-Merton Songs, 1967-1970

Kerstin P. Warner

This is the story of the collaboration between John Jacob Niles (1892-1980), the American balladeer, and Thomas Merton, the poet, theologian, social critic, and Trappist monk who was known at the Abbey of Gethsemani by his religious name, Father Louis. In the years 1967 to 1970, John Jacob Niles devoted himself to turning twenty-two of Merton’s poems into art songs. With his dulcimer, Niles was a colorful interpreter of traditional folk ballads. A poet and composer himself, he gained, through his appearances and recordings, an important reputation as a performing artist. Thomas Merton at this period was spending an increasing amount of time in his “hermitage” at Gethsemani, writing, on the one hand, articles about social issues and nuclear war and, on the other, essays about the monastic vocation and discipline.

One of the reasons Niles respected Merton was that he knew him as a student of Zen Buddhism. Merton’s Mystics and Zen Masters had been published in May 1967, and Niles was himself fascinated by the subject. When Niles introduced the songs in a performance at the University of Kentucky’s Newman Center, he began thus: “I am not a Roman Catholic, I am a Zen Buddhist. This means if the ceiling falls and hits me, it will be all right.” (“Composers are queer,” he added, “insecure to say the least. But if you’re crazy and you know it, it’s all right. . . .”) He then disclosed his creative method: “When composing, I just sit quietly or lie in bed, do not hate anything or anybody—that’s Zen—and then great ideas come crashing in on me.”

Jacqueline Roberts entered the scene at this point. Earlier in the decade, she had been a soloist at Christ Church Episcopal in Lexington, where John Jacob Niles worshipped. She had sung Niles’s “The Little Family” there for an Easter service, and had become acquainted with the composer. She was in the process of preparing a recital of sacred music and, on an impulse, telephoned Niles for some advice. He invited her to come to Boot
Hill, his home on Boone Creek, in Clark County Kentucky. She did, bringing her accompanist, Janelle Pope. Niles offered his critique of her recital material, and then he asked her if she would sight-read a song he had recently composed, “Messenger.”

Thomas Merton’s “Messenger” describes the signs of spring’s coming as reported by the same sentry who observed the Annunciation. “The morning the Mother of God / Loved and dreaded the message of an angel.” Niles was pleased to be able to hear the song in a soprano voice, and asked Roberts if she would be interested in working with him as he composed more songs. Jacqueline Roberts at this time was, as she put it, “just longing for work.” A professional musician and the mother of two very young sons, she was delighted to accept Niles’s invitation; so was her accompanist, Janelle Pope.

A routine was quickly established in which the three of them would work from ten in the morning until noon. Niles would have six or seven new measures of a song pencilled in on score paper. They would try it out. Niles then would experiment with it, testing ideas for changes. They would try it the new way. At the next session, Niles would have decided what he wanted from those measures, and they would now be inked in on the score paper, and six or seven subsequent measures, too, would be there in pencil.

The twice-a-week pattern established a rhythm for the work, and the run-throughs with these accomplished musicians stimulated Niles as well. In some introductory remarks at Bellarmine College, Louisville, preserved on tape in Jackie Roberts’s collection, Niles discusses the collaborative process involved in these compositions:

In these songs I used up seven hundred and fifty pages of the very best score paper I could possibly discover. I throw away scraps in the fire. . . . But if these songs meet any success, it is because Jackie encouraged me and was willing to sing my strange cockeyed attitude. Dissonance has to resolve, even if it takes two weeks. Jackie Roberts was able to take, learn, and sing the music.

“I think that Niles was at his best,” says Jacqueline Roberts, “when he was writing for solo, and for some reason, the soprano voice.” Niles had set many traditional songs for his own voice, but from the start, the Niles-Merton songs were worked out with
Jacqueline Roberts's voice in mind. The special qualities which she had to offer as a musician were a good ear, good pitch, sightreading skill, and a good rhythmic sense. "But above all, John Jacob Niles insisted on singing from the heart," she says. "At times Niles wept in the rehearsals, repeating, 'That's what I want! That's what I want!'" And on the first occasion that Thomas Merton heard the songs at Boot Hill, he wrote in his Journal that he found himself in tears, moved by the songs, "But above all by this lovely girl, Jackie Roberts, who put her whole heart into singing them."

The songs also require of the singer extremely clear diction. In "A Responsory: 1948" the words rush and tumble to triplets, and must be absolutely clear. "Suppose the dead could crown their wit / With some intemperate exercise, / Spring wine from their ivory / Or roses from their eyes?" Or, from the menacing conclusion of "The Greek Women": "Beads and bracelets gently knifeclash all about her."

Niles sometimes spoke of his own voice's extraordinary performance capability (especially in his ballads), and of producing "the electric effect of a male alto c-sharp." This high quality, according to one critic, was "what the mountain singers tried to do." On a gift copy of "Softly Blowed the East Wind," Niles inscribed a note to Jackie praising her G above the G above middle C:

This copy for that sweet girl Jackie W. Roberts—who has helped me so much by being willing to 'try to' sing my compositions—even when they are as difficult as possible—almost unsingable, dull or even obtuse. The advantage I have in the case of Jackie's voice is that I (without boasting or braggin') know exactly where her voice is—Johnny Niles, Boone Creek Boy.

A sketch of a treble staff marked with Jackie's G is annotated, 'This is her greatest note.'

In an interview with Noel Coppage, Niles told how he had once been urged by Charles Ives to try writing art songs. "Charles used to say to me, 'Johnny, why don't you give up this folklore nonsense?'" Niles reported. "He said, 'If you'll work with me, I can show you how to put it together. You already have a good start, you're very perceptive.'" But Niles only undertook Ives's challenge when it coincided with Victor Hammer's, and when the
poetry of Thomas Merton had captured his musical imagination. In any case, the additional challenge of working with Jacqueline Roberts and Janelle Pope kept John Jacob Niles moving along on the songs. The establishment of a pleasant work ritual and the friendly collaboration of these musicians did much to enhance the continuity of the process.

After experimenting with different possibilities and refining new sections, Niles would frequently indicate that he had reached the end of a unit by asking Roberts and Pope, "What do you all think?" The replies: "I think you've got something here, Johnny." In Niles's taped introduction to the Newman Center recital, he alludes to this phrase. "I was fainthearted until someone came and said, 'You've got something here.'" Niles was warmly affectionate, and there would be hugs all around and a glass of wine,—on cool days, by the fire. Jacqueline Roberts recalls that "lunch was always a wonderful treat: Mary Tippie Mullins, the Niles's housekeeper and cook, always had something delicious prepared. The dinner bell rang at noon. But, before the food, John Jacob Niles always said the blessing and then read his newest poetry to us."

It was in October of 1967 that Thomas Merton came to Boot Hill Farm to hear the three initial songs, "Messenger," "Carol," and "Responsory." At lunch, Jacqueline Roberts was seated next to Merton. "I remember that he was very funny," she relates, "on the subject of the cheese the monastery produced." Merton had written a parody of Joyce Kilmer's "Trees" entitled "Cheese"—"I think that we should never freeze / Such lively assets as our cheese. . . ."4

By June of 1968, the ten songs of Opus 171 were completed. John Jacob Niles habitually referred to these aggregates of songs—ten in Opus 171, twelve in Opus 172— as "song cycles." Although his publisher, G. Schirmer, discouraged him firmly from alluding to them as such in the scores of The Niles-Merton Songs, Niles continued to do so casually. Obviously, Niles felt that these songs belonged together.

A concert was scheduled at Bellarmine College for October 1968. Since Merton was preparing for his fateful trip to the East and would not be in the United States in October, he visited Boot Hill Farm once again to hear the seven new songs. Niles took advantage of the opportunity to discuss with Merton some of the poems he was interested in including in a second collection. He also read some of his own poetry to Merton.
The Ten Songs in Opus 171

Messenger. This is the only song which Niles had completed when Jacqueline Roberts and Janelle Pope began working with him. They sightread this song for him so he could hear how it sounded. Niles especially enjoyed Merton’s descriptions of nature. As a confirmed woods walker himself, he responded favorably to “Walk in the woods and be witnesses.” The poem also contains several allusions to music, such as “the way the world is strung” and “grand belfries of the sleepless timber”; the Messenger/herald has a bugle.

Gabriel, the “star-sandalled stranger,” descends to earth “like lightning down the air.” Niles’s vocal line descends accordingly to the word “air”; then the accompaniment makes a swift eleven note ascent. With the concluding words, “The morning that the Mother of God / Loved and dreaded the message of an angel,” the music is soft and the harmonies invite comparison to Gregorian chant.
Nativity. ("Carol" was the original poem title.) Niles noted on his manuscript: "This poem went thru 6 versions before I arrived at this one offered." One of the versions was a choral arrangement. In the premiere performance of these ten songs at Bellarmine College, the Transylvania University Chorus sang "Nativity."

The gentleness, timidity, and meekness which Merton emphasizes in the poem are reflected in the softness and steady bell-like repetition of the accompaniment, suggested by the words "lull the night with their weak bells."

Niles kept a small carving of the Madonna and Child on his piano, and he had written a number of his ballads on the theme of maternal love ("Sweet Mary," "Black Star," "The Little Family"). The lullaby quality of this "Nativity" is partly achieved by the 6/8 tempo of the opening melodic line. "Because they have seen come this holy time" marks a brief change to 5/4 in order to attenuate the word "holy." The allegorical heart of the poem, however, "Eternal Peace is sleeping in the hay, and Wisdom's born in secret," is marked by 4/4 time which returns to the lullaby-like 6/8 only in the final quatrain.

In A Responsory, 1948, Merton contemplates the paradoxes of the Cold War—even using the image of cold literally in "Down, down, down / The white armies fall." The startling first quatrain imagines corpses sprouting roses and springing forth wine. "Suppose the dead could crown their wit / With some intemperate exercise, / Spring wine from their ivory / Or roses from their eyes?" is used twice more as a refrain. Further paradoxes and riddles include 'That the dead are not yet dead / And that the living live apart.'

Merton's images grow increasingly vast in terms of time ("many thousand years") and space ("tides of new wars / Divide the massed stars"). The music is supple and energetic, leading toward the death-knoll repetition of A flat in "Toward the jaws of hell." But it is the refrain which is unforgettable, marked by the rhythm Niles was fond of using in his ballads—the foot which scans like the word the word "symmetrically"—"Suppose the dead could crown their wit . . ."

Sundown is Merton's translation of a work by the Nicaraguan poet Alfonso Cortes. Niles selected five of Merton's translations—all from the Spanish—for inclusion in this set of songs, Opus 171. "Sundown" is a subtle plea for a few seconds more of light, before
“the hound of night bays . . . / And down to the horizon goes a troop of unknown bodies and shadows.” Niles’s direction that this be played “as if on muted strings” suggests that this song be seen as a sort of serenade.

*When You Point Your Finger*, also translated from Alfonso Cortes, begins as an elaborate compliment, worthy of a Renaissance courtier or an eighteenth-century panegyrist: “When you go / By there stay perfumes swimming in the air and talking about you!” But in the last two stanzas, what has appeared to be outrageous praise of a beautiful woman turns into a serious philosophical observation. “If someone asks your origin, say / It is from Him you come. To those who do not know your way / Answer you go toward Thyself.” The female subject appealed to Niles’s dramatic sense as much as the philosophical twist at the end, which suggests the paradoxical self/no-self center of Zen Buddhism.

*The Weathercock of the Cathedral of Quito*, translated from the Spanish of Jorge Carrera Andrade, is an amusing poem about the passion of a weathercock, a “poor tin Don Juan,” for a proud and seductive lady, Anna del Campo, whom he watches walking in the street below.

The music dramatizes the bird’s agony and the lady’s pleasure in teasing. Anna del Campo’s entry is marked by a key change, from C to E flat. Silent and “paralyzed,” the wretched rooster—the “Cathedral ascetic”—can only flash sun-signals in an attempt to communicate his desire. Niles’s relish for the sensual elements of the poem—colors, gems, flowers, flavors—is apparent. The song makes much of the G above G above middle C—Jacqueline Roberts’s “finest note”—and the opportunities for dramatic flourishes that set off the steady *paseo* of a casually strolling accompaniment.

*Evening*’s accompaniment is entirely based on the suggestion implicit in the last two lines: “One little, wakeful bird / Sings like a shower.” Not long before, Niles had stepped out onto his host’s patio at a party and had been transfixed by the sound of a whippoorwill; he thought of Merton’s “Evening.” The whippoorwill melody (F-F-G-E) cycles throughout the accompaniment nonstop, like one of Schubert’s rippling brooks.

The poem’s childlike imagery—blossoming trees are wearing first communion dresses—children’s “little voices, light as stems of lilies”—and the lightness of the soprano melody are beautifully
complementary. In an endnote on his manuscript Niles observed, "This composition pleases more than I can tell."

Great Prayer. The vocal line is extremely demanding because of the way it breaks in "Time is hunger / Space is cold." Niles changed a "solitary rock" to a "solid rock," the place of dreams "where the soul's hawk rests." This seven-line lyric is Merton's translation from the Spanish of Alfonso Cortes.

Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing. Two qualities in this poem were attractive to Niles—the natural imagery and the Zen-like silence. "The house of growth" is deeply buried, but it is there. The uncommunicative forest hides "secret vegetal words / Unlettered water." Silence is compared to the "unsetting sun," a "golden zero." The song is centered upon the word "Bless" (a sustained G) in "O peace, bless this mad place."

Lament of a Maiden for the Warrior's Death. Merton's translation from the Spanish of a short poem by Pablo Antonio Cuadra is set very simply, reflecting the central conceit. Death has been stalking on this earth for eons, yet people are never prepared for it. Each experience of grief is brand new and painful: "Your silence is new, / And new is my pain."

The ten songs which make up Opus 171 are the only ones which Thomas Merton heard in the Boot Hill rehearsal which preceded the Bellarmine College concert. Half of the songs were Merton's own lyrics, half were his translations of Spanish poets. Niles's selection of these poems reveals his affinity for Merton's love of nature, an interest in the descriptions of the soul's renewal in silence, and a particular attraction to poems involving birds—and women. What these ten poems have in common is a shared sense of promise of growth. Even the Cold War ironies of "A Responsory, 1948" are belied by the paradoxes of roses sprouting from the eyes of the dead—of the dead who "are not yet dead" and the wounded who are healing. Each of the poems/songs seems to be poised on the verge of change—"at the rim of winter," or the very last minute before sundown, or buried in a germinating seed. Though Opus 171 is not a song cycle in the traditional sense, this collection has a kind of thematic integrity and generally a different character from the twelve songs which Niles wrote following Merton's death.

Niles was writing but had not yet completed "O Sweet Irrational Worship" when Merton visited Boot Hill. He asked Merton then whether he would object to some slight alteration of
words—in this case, additional repetition seemed to be called for by the music. Thomas Merton encouraged Niles to make any changes in the text that he felt were necessary. Merton’s approval gave Niles the freedom he needed to complete composition, following Merton’s death, of the chosen songs.

Working with these poems as closely as he did, it is not surprising that Niles had come to feel a special empathy for Merton. Although they had met only on rare occasions and had not carried on an extensive correspondence, Niles was not surprised when he had a dream about Merton’s death—on the very day Merton died in Bangkok. “I saw Tom’s face down in water,” Niles told his friends. He was convinced at an intuitive level that Merton had been killed.

The songs of Opus 172 include some particularly autobiographical poems, including “For My Brother,” “The Ohio River,” and “Bird Cage Walk.” By the time he was setting “The Ohio River,” Niles was annotating an informal “Thomas” and “John” on his score paper to indicate lyricist and composer. These twelve songs are more elegiac, more reflective upon violence and human misery and sin than the previous works.

The Twelve Songs in Opus 172

O Sweet Irrational Worship shares a bird motif and a meditative quality with “Evening,” only in this case the bird is the bobwhite. The simple beginning, “Wind and a bobwhite / And the afternoon sun,” leads to the poet’s metaphor (and the refrain) of “I am earth, earth.” Throughout the piece the accompaniment mimics the two-tone song of the bobwhite. The images converge at the end of the poem as we see first the bobwhite rise out of earth’s heart, then the song—the worship—rises from the bird. Niles dedicated this song to Jacqueline Roberts.

Autumn is Merton’s translation from the French of Raissa Maritain (1883-1960), the Neo-Thomist poet and wife of the French theologian Jacques Maritain (1882-1973). A sorrowful sparrow sheds tears that turn to glass on an elm branch: “both branch and sparrow / Marry their homesickness / With the night’s mystery.” The accompaniment features the descending thirds and triplets which characterize many of these songs. Niles has noted at the song’s conclusion, with two arrows pointing at the minor chords which resolve the piece, “This is the mystery.”
Though there are two more bird poems to come in this opus, "Autumn" is the last of the meditative nature poems in which the soul figures as a bird. In "Bird Cage Walk" and "Mosaic," the Palace Girls and the Virgin Mary respectively are compared to birds. It is obvious that one of the attractions for Niles of Merton's poetry is the imagery of birds, which naturally suggests song.

*Wisdom* is a wry reflection on the paradoxes of pursuing wisdom: "I studied it and it taught me nothing. / I learned it and soon forgot everything else." The wit of this poem recalls "Responsory, 1948," but the use of the first person gives a different quality to the irony. "How sweet my life would be, if I were wise!" But there is pain in "the insupportable knowledge of nothing" as well as irony. Wisdom requires emptying: it "is well known / When it is no longer seen or thought of. / Only then is understanding bearable."

At the words "seen or thought of [prolong: an afterthought], or thought of"—Niles's direction on the music calls for a kind of introspective double-take with this repetition. In his end-comment on the manuscript Niles declares, "I am so weary I could weep. This may be the last of it."

*The Mirror's Mission* is Merton's translation of a poem by Jorge Carrera Andrade, the author of "The Weathercock on the Cathedral of Quito." Addressed to "the mineral silence" of a mirror, the poem has a metaphysical quality. In the night, only the mirror stands, a witness: "Each chair opens out, waits in the night / To seat some unreal guest before a dish of shadows." This solipsistic mirror, "alone," recites its "lesson learned by heart—your lesson of light." Niles noted on his manuscript, "Where have I been all this time to have missed these fabulous ideas?"

*Elegy: For My Brother Reported Missing In Action, 1943* may be the most famous of all the Niles-Merton songs. The poem had been included in Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain,* and was therefore perhaps the best-known of all of Merton's poems. Niles's struggle and satisfaction with his setting of this work is reflected in his manuscript notation: "The most difficult and demanding piece I have ever written. Finished. I am going to ink this before I have time to tamper with it."

Niles's song shows sensitivity to the structure of Merton's poem, which moves outward in three stages from the personal to the general. The first section, in the key of G minor, describes
Merton’s raw and stunning pain in hearing the news of his brother. “In what desolate and smoky country / Lies your poor body, lost and dead?” In the music, “Lost, lost and dead” runs down an octave, landing on a low G, with a sad and hollow dramatic effect. This section ends with Niles’s insertion of the words—“as an afterthought”—“Sweet brother.”

The second section in the song is marked by a change into the key of G major, just as in the poem this section makes a rhetorical shift into the imperative mood. Niles directs that this be played “with great tenderness”: “Come, in my labor find a resting place / And in my sorrows lay your head.” The transitional nature of the section becomes clearer as the poet offers his own life and blood to his brother: “And buy yourself a better bed— / Or take my breath and take my death / And buy yourself a better rest.” The transition to the Christian resolution is effortless and inevitable.

Returning to G minor for the final section, “When all the men of war are shot,” Niles significantly alters the tempo for the measures in which the poem speaks of “your cross and mine” and of Christ’s dying “on each for both of us.”

Then begins a distinct funeral march, in steady 4/4 time, with very low and ponderous chords in the accompaniment. Niles told Jacqueline Roberts, as they were working on this song, of a funeral march he had seen in the Netherlands, where men in tall black hats marched behind a coffin. The steady iambic rhythm of the poem, “For in the wreckage of your April Christ lies slain / And Christ weeps in the ruin of my spring” suggests the march of mourning. A crescendo is reached with “buy you back to your own land,” which then steadily diminishes to the concluding hush of “they call you home.”

The Greek Women is rich in allusions to sound (“Talking, among themselves, like violins”) and in onomatopoetic sounds (“Beads and bracelets gently knifeclash all about her”). The restless and stylish widows pace and talk and sigh: “All spine and sandal stand the willow women.” All their men are dead, but one. “And Clytemnestra, walking like a willow, stares. . . . / The soldier, Agamemnon, / Bleeds in her conscience, twisting like a root.”

The undertone of violence in this restless, stylish scene is enhanced by the contrast with a calm accompaniment, by Niles’s cascading triplets in the accompaniment, and by the anxious qualities of the key of F sharp minor. In addition, the composer shifts from 4/4 to a mildly unsettling 5/4 tempo twice in the song,
at those points where murder is being contemplated. This is a
dashingly dramatic song, a foil to its sunny counterpart in Opus
171, "The Weathercock."

Cana is autobiographical, in the sense that Merton evokes his
early experience as a monk. The simple hopefulness of the young
monks, who are as contented as the guests at the wedding at
Cana, is in the lines "What wine those humble waterjars foretell!"
And on their simple minds is the one prayer of soil-tillers of all
times—"Yet hardly mumble, in their dusty mouths, one prayer. /Wine for old Adam, digging in the briars!"

On the heading of this manuscript we find the shorthand
"Thomas" and "John." Jacqueline Roberts recalls Niles's saying, at
the lowest possible D octave marking the end of the song, "That's
me! I am Old Adam."

The Ohio River—Louisville is to be performed "languidly, with
thoughtful tenderness." The accompaniment to this song is
floatingly serene, evoking the summer heat and torpor of the
poem's setting. Merton ponders the mysterious silence of the Ohio
River—mysterious in the presence of so much industry, with
boats, bridges, the power plant, "the singing dynamos." "Nothing
is heard, / Only the immense and silent movement of the river."

Niles uses, as in "The Greek Women," the slightly disturbing
5/4 tempo and the minor key. This poem also builds quietly to its
threat of violence, first with the image of the swimmers' clothes on
the bank, "Like white birds shot to death." Then we see the
bathers themselves, the black children who "float like alligators"
in the "murderous heat."

Not until the conclusion of the poem is the unease and the
menace of racial tension made explicit, "Only there is anything
heard: / The thin salt voice of violence, / That whines, like a
mosquito, in their simmering blood." The tenderness and languor
of the music contrasts so sharply with the meaning of the words,
that as comprehension sets in, the effect is chilling.

Original Sin (A Memorial Anthem For Father's Day) is
addressed to the day itself. "Weep, weep, little day," it begins.
Merton had very little time for the sort of ersatz event which
Americans feel obliged to tolerate, like "National Pickle Week."
His lack of enthusiasm for the fabricated Father's Day turns up in
the form of ghoulish humor as he contemplates the crudities of our
cave dwelling ancestor who "walked on two syllables / Or maybe
none" and who abused words, "One by one / Beating them
grievously / With a shin bone."

It pleases "John" to take "Thomas's" suggestion of an anthem literally here, and a grand—if not grandiose—introduction in waltz time stands in pompous contrast with the humble accomplishments of the cave fathers. The song concludes with two strange little flourishes (or whimpers) on the words "Ah! Ah!," as if in pained response to the beating.

The vocal line and the accompaniment have an equal relationship throughout this song. Jacqueline Roberts says that Niles wrote the accompaniment especially with Janelle Pope in mind: "It is really a duet."

*Bird Cage Walk* took Niles three months to finish. The poem is based on an early childhood memory, and Niles had queried Merton about it on one of the visits. "Thomas said rather reluctantly [that this poem] might have been named 'The Palace Girls.' Some of Thomas Merton's admirers will object to this but I think I know quite well what he was trying to say. It is in fact autobiographical with Thomas being the Bishop," Niles wrote on the completed manuscript.

The music moves right along at a quick pace—"My girls call this Cake Walk"—to accompany what is the lengthiest narrative of any of the poems selected to become songs. Merton is a boy walking with his uncle, who asserts that "These . . . are the tallest houses." Merton remembers being "in the spring of my joy / When I was visibly affected by a gaitered bishop." "'He is an old one,' said uncle, / 'The gaiters are real.'" The light, inconsequential chatting of the poem takes a turn for the serious when the boy sees the cages "where they put the palace girls!"

In the fourth stanza the boy is already rejecting the received wisdom of his uncle, arguing that "The stars have higher houses!" And the bishop himself has forbidden him to cross the bridge to the island of birdcages: "No crossing to the cage / Of the paradise bird." And in the final stanza, the boy breaks loose and rebels: "I opened all the palace aviaries / As by a king's representative / I was appointed fowler."

The poem has a fairytale simplicity of language which is a characteristic of the poems in *The Strange Islands*, the collection in which it first appeared, in 1957. The attractions of this poem for Niles seem to have been (in addition to birds) the theme of rebellion and the rather veiled subtext, which questions celibacy.

*Jesus Weeps Into the Fire* is Niles's title for what is known as
"80" in Cables To The Ace. Sister Therese Lentfoehr notes that in the poem Merton "evokes the setting and atmosphere of Christ in Gethsemani." Niles draws out the words "Slowly slowly" and adds a third "slowly," responding to the characteristic that made Merton refer to early drafts of this poem as the "Slowly hymn." There is reassurance in the inexorable slowness of Christ’s coming to the doubting disciple, "A timid one / Too literate / To believe words / So he hides." Whether or not this poem is autobiographical in its references to Gethsemani, surrounded by fields, and to the doubting one—the poet perhaps—it is the redemptive message which is important.

Mosaic: St. Praxed’s is the last of the twenty-two songs. Niles had a special feeling that the number twenty-two brought him good fortune. He originally thought that "Bird Cage Walk," the twentieth song, was the last of the series, but he went on to write two more after that.

"Mosaic" is Merton’s translation from the French of Raissa Maritain. The heart of the poem is the serene image of the Virgin, "Mary made of love art and poetry," in mosaic, "stone needled tapestry." The rich colors and gems of the setting combine with the sense of refuge Mary offers. "So like a quiet pigeon in a hollowed rock / You stand there in the wall’s curve." This is the last of the many birds that wander through the Niles-Merton songs.

"Mosaic" features another exquisite accompaniment, including an introduction which Niles suggests should be played "as if it was faintly remembered music." There are instructions throughout to play "ever so gently," or "rapidly but gently." The composition is full of ritards that trail off into murmurs of ascending or descending thirds in the accompaniment.

The poem celebrates the enduring quality of the joy which is to be found in "love art and poetry"—and we must also include music. It is art which can help us to forget "the evil by our side" so that "We sail above our strange agony / Chained utterly Mary to your joy." Like the sonnets of Shakespeare on the brevity of life and the endurance of art, "Mosaic" is a fitting conclusion to the series of songs which totally preoccupied the composer, the soprano, and the pianist who were "chained utterly" to this joy.

John Jacob Niles wrote on this last manuscript, "I started these two cycles, Opus 171 and 172, with 'The Messenger' 3 years ago, and though it was the most moving musical and creative..."
experience of my entire life, many times I have wished I had never heard tell of this wonderful 'Poetic' material. It taught me a new kind of music composition and the writing of poetry." Signed, "Johnny Niles." Postscript: "For me nothing has ever been the same."

NOTES

Much of the information in this article is based on interviews with Jacqueline Roberts, the soprano who, along with the pianist Janelle Pope, worked closely with John Jacob Niles during the composing process. Eventually, Roberts and Nancie Field, the accompanist who replaced Janelle Pope, were invited to join Niles on his concert tours over the decade of the 1970s. Rena Niles, both in her writings and in interview, has also been a valuable source of information.

Text and music, as well as a cassette recording of the Niles-Merton songs may be obtained from Mark Foster Music Company, Box 4012, Champaign, Illinois 61820.

3Coppage, 60.
4Thomas Merton, The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton (New York: New Directions, 1977), 799-800. All Merton texts cited will be found in this source.
6Victor Kramer, Thomas Merton (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), 133.