

THOMAS MERTON'S
UNDERSTANDING:
THE CLARITAS STRATEGY

by **Michael Rukstelis**, C.O.

At the close of Thomas Merton's only published novel *My Argument with the Gestapo*, originally written in 1941 while teaching English at St. Bonaventure University in New York, the narrator says "the only reason for wanting to write [is] Blake's reason."¹ What "Blake's reason" might mean can be evidenced in an examination of Merton's Columbia University thesis, composed in 1938, on this eighteenth-century poet. Accordingly, I want to pay careful attention to some important portions of that thesis entitled "Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation." A close reading of the thesis will help readers see how Merton's essay is an important source text, on at least two levels, for later Merton works. On one level, the Blake thesis suggests how Merton's own religious perspective eventually came to be shaped by the interpretive decisions he made about art and about the artistic process, as either are related to the mystic or contemplative experience. On another level the thesis reveals the

1. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969), p. 259.

beginnings of a symbolic language for vision, which I call here *the claritas strategy*.² The claritas strategy becomes an important context for readers of Merton, because it suggests to some extent how contemplative insights emerged.

That William Blake became for the younger Merton a model of a religious artist, if not a model of a radical prophet, has already been noted by some of Merton's readers.³ But Merton also acknowledges Blake's influence in his own works like *The Seven Storey Mountain* and others. In his St. Bonaventure lecture notes, for example, Merton frames all his material about Blake's poetry with a parenthetical statement about the poet's life. Blake's life, reasons Merton, was ". . . a vital unity" of "his philosophy, his work, & [sic] his religion He lived these all in one."⁴ Thus in 1941 Merton had a thumbnail sketch of an identity that represented new life in the midst of what he himself characterized as a time of lost innocence and exile: "The sense of exile," Merton would write in *The Secular Journal*, "bleeds in me like a hemorrhage. Always the same wound, whether a sense of sin or of holiness, or of one's own insufficiency, or of spiritual dryness."⁵

An important context to mention at this juncture involves Merton's view of Blake's achievement as a Christian artist: "As an artist, Blake found in art a way of knowing and loving the principle of all Being."⁶ As early as 1938, Merton was not only finding a partial model for his own vocation as a Christian writer in Blake, but he was also beginning to see the 'way' of the artist, not as contradictory to, but as complementary with, the religious vocation he had vaguely in mind at the time: "This seizure of intelligible realities without using concepts as a formal means is something analagous

2. This analysis of Merton's work follows Stanley Fish's reflections on interpretive or perceptual strategies that a reader brings to a particular text. See Fish's "Interpreting the *Variorum*" in *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 163-167. I also want to acknowledge the influence of David Bleich's book *Subjective Criticism* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), on my thinking during the composition of this essay. See especially his chapter "Epistemological Assumptions in the Study of Response," pp. 97-133.

3. Monica Furlong in *Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) discusses how Merton's reading of Blake profoundly influenced his conversion to Catholicism (see pp. 48-49 and pp. 75-76). Also George Woodcock mentions Blake's influence on Merton's conversion in *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978), pp. 10-12. Ross Labrie in *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1979) mentions Merton's interest in Blake, but he discusses Merton's interest in "the roles of religion and art in relation to the vitality of the whole society" without making any explicit connection to Merton's perception of Blake as a religious artist (see pp. 8-10).

4. Faddish-Siracuse File, Friedsam Memorial Library, St. Bonaventure University, Olean, New York.

5. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1959), p. 264.

6. Thomas Merton, "Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation," in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 430. Further references to the thesis are from this edition of *The Literary Essays* and are referred to in the text as *LE*.

in both the poet and the mystic, but they both operate differently and on different planes" (*LE*, pp. 444-445). As this facet of the thesis is presented in a more distilled form in his Bonaventure lecture notes, the meaning of Blake's reason becomes more explicitly art as a means to mystical union with God. Merton writes: "Everything Blake ever wrote, painted or said is either directly or indirectly concerned with the steps toward achievement of mystical union with God."⁷

Before going on to the thesis it is important to consider some broad concerns that Merton brought with him in writing this interpretive essay. One of these is clearly a need to defend Blake as a Christian poet. Part of the problem Merton has with readers of Blake, most notably J. Middleton Murray's reading, is that they "refuse to interpret Blake as a Christian and continue to seek explanations for everything he said among Gnostics, astrologers, and alchemists" (*LE*, p. 431). The other concern involves Merton's perceptions of Blake's thought about art as "recondite" or obscure (*LE*, p. 391). Since much of the discussion in the second chapter of the thesis touches on the "Imagination," we may assume that this is the particular aesthetic aspect of Blake's art that Merton sees as most in need of clarification. Finally, I want to suggest here that these concerns, which involve both public and private dimensions of Merton as a Christian and a writer, become in the writing situation motives for defense of the imagination as a value in the Christian religious vocation. Because this value appears in need of a clarified meaning that can be viewed (by Merton as well as by others) as having an orthodox meaning for the contemporary Christian, the burden of the thesis becomes deciding what that meaning is. Ultimately, Merton will find meaning for much of Blake's "more recondite" thought about the imagination through a Thomistic interpretive strategy.

Thomas Merton uses one of William Blake's prophetic poems, *The Four Zoas*, as the basis for his investigation into the subject of Blake's thought on the role of the intellect as it pertains to the artist. Merton claims the myth of the fall as central to the meaning and shape of the poetry in the prophetic books. For example, he notices that Blake "always deals with the fall into a violent, tragic conflict of ideas, and the subsequent regeneration into spiritual and intellectual harmony" (*LE*, p. 410). Thus the Blakean poet and his drama are located within a Christian mythic context, which is in turn associated with the tradition of the Christian "mystics" like Augustine. Such a tradition is known for its tendency to view human experience as a struggle

7. Faddish-Siracuse File, St. Bonaventure University.

between extreme forces. "This is the drama," says Merton, "which the mystics understand to underly the whole of human life. It is the pattern of the contingent universe" (*LE*, p. 410).

A couple of assumptions inform this world view and need to be briefly addressed. First, matter in the contingent world "is inextricably tied up with the idea of the fall, the expulsion from Eden" (*LE*, p. 426). Urizen is a prototypical father of this fall and creator of our world. He is the eternal whose "self-will . . . causes the fall from intelligibility into the blindness of matter" (*LE*, p. 427). Thus Merton sees Blake connecting matter and materialism with unintelligibility, which is associated with the Blakean hell (Ulro) and evil ("lack of intellect and the impossibility of participating in God's Grace . . . nonexistence") (*LE*, pp. 432-433).

For the sake of "clarification," Merton invokes a more orthodox Christian authority by comparing St. Thomas Aquinas's view of matter to Blake's in order to show "that matter is the principle of change, and change denies intelligibility; and that, therefore, things are intelligible insofar as they are immaterial" (*LE*, p. 426). Because Urizen (i.e. Your Reason)⁸ subjects himself only to the empirical, he stands as the principle *par excellence* of ignorance; he cannot ever fully know and love what is eternal in him. Thus, he "represents empiricism and doubt, and also dogmatism, because he is blind to imagination, passion, spirit. Consequently, he cannot really understand life or experience at all" (*LE*, p. 427). Urizen's "eternal" pursuit of material intelligibility becomes expressed in the fallen world as the tyranny of "abstract codes based on mathematical reasoning and materialism" (*LE*, p. 428). And, as usual, such a discussion is closely linked with Merton's own experience at the time. Monica Furlong puts it succinctly:

What Blake and Maritain between them taught Merton . . . was that art is part of a mystical and contemplative understanding of the world It came to Merton that, child of his age that he was, he had tried to interpret life in terms of sociological and economic laws, but that these separated from faith and charity became yet another imprisonment.⁹

Another assumption that informs the mystic world view is the belief that real existence is a perfect knowing and loving of God. Intelligence here is closely associated with a subject's experience of transcendent being. So, on one hand, Merton associates Blakean imagery of dogmatism and blindness with the Urizenic quest to control matter, and he calls this quest unintelligible and illustrative of nonexistence. On the other hand, Merton

8. S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1971), p. 419.

9. Monica Furlong, p. 75.

links intelligence with what is eternally transcendent. This notion, however, finds expression, not in the Blakean imagery as much as from the Thomistic language he introduces: "Things are intelligible insofar as they are immaterial." What is important for readers to notice is Merton's interpretive decision to link intelligence with transcendence, and to view this as constituting, as he says, "real existence (heaven)" (*LE*, pp. 433). Thus, "What is real, true, beautiful, good is transcendent. This is real existence."¹⁰

I have already mentioned that Merton chooses to use "the aesthetic ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas . . . as a key to help us unlock some of the more difficult problems in Blake's thought about art" (*LE*, pp. 391, 431). He adopts the Thomist language because it is clear and critical; it will help readers to "see into the depths of Blake's own more recondite thought" (*LE*, p. 391). Yet, while Merton finds meaning for much of Blake's "more recondite thought" about the Imagination through a Thomistic interpretive strategy, he understands St. Thomas within a narrow context. Merton himself acknowledges in the preface to the thesis and in his Columbia notebooks that a close reading of Jacques Maritain's discussion of art as a virtue of the practical intellect in *Art and Scholasticism* provides the basis for his understanding of Thomism.¹¹

In the Blake thesis, Merton focuses his attention on the idea of the virtue of the practical intellect. He understands "virtue" in a number of ways. Virtue is seen as an agent of transformation, which, according to Maritain, "'triumph[s] over the original indetermination of the intellectual faculty, . . . [and] raises it in respect of a definite object to a maximum of perfection'" (*LE*, p. 432). Virtue is also seen as an act going on in the artist which is never impaired by the temporal and contingent world: "The work may be imperfect, but the art in the artist is unimpaired" (*LE*, p. 433). As an act (again following Maritain), virtue has also an autonomous quality or a "permanent condition perfecting in the line of its own nature the subject [sic] which it informs" (*LE*, p. 431). Finally, virtue is seen as a conceptual agency by which "the knower and the thing known actually become identified" (*LE*, p. 432). This agency describes the operation of connaturality in the artist.

10. *The Literary Essays*, p. 432. It is worth comparing what Merton says in the thesis about the artist and the role of the intellect in art with what he says in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), cf. pp. 290-297. For example, "The world was not made as a prison for fallen spirits who were rejected by God: this is the gnostic error" (p. 290).

11. Columbia "Blake Notebooks," Vol. 2, 127552, Friedsam Memorial Library, St. Bonaventure University, Olean, New York. Besides extensive notetaking on Maritain, Merton also looked at some of St. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. Some of his note headings include: "Art and Nature," "Art and Prudence," "Art and Beauty."

The question for Merton, then, becomes "does [Blake] have any idea of art which would correspond to that of virtue or *habitus*?" (LE, p. 432). His answer to the question provides him with the opportunity to apply Thomistic aesthetic strategies to Blake's figure for the Imagination, who is Los. For example, Merton identifies the central act of Los in the Zoas as creating or building forms for the sake of the fallen eternal. Additionally, these forms operate to keep the eternal from falling into non-entity in Urizen's world; through forms Los will eventually lead fallen beings back to eternity: "But Los, imagination, we remember, created forms, builds the City of Art to keep eternal from falling into his [i.e. Urizen's] nonentity (or sin). In the end he leads them back to eternity, truth, real existence (heaven)" (LE, p. 433). Thus even though Blake does not know about "*habitus*," Merton sees built-in parallels between Blake's so-called concept of Imagination and St. Thomas's concept of *habitus*/virtue.

Merton then links the *habitus*/virtue idea of St. Thomas with the Blakean vision of Imagination, which is "a special kind of artistic vision necessary" (LE, p. 435). He argues that "The man of imagination, the artist, because of the 'virtue' of his art, sees more than his eyes present to him" (LE, p. 436). This is so because "the intellect [perceives] through the eye" to "the formal relations of objects to one another" (LE, pp. 435). The rationality of the intellect, then, becomes very subjective in that "we perceive the relationships that interest us; as we look at nature, we interpret it" (LE, p. 435). Quoting one of Blake's letters, Merton indicates that a ramification of this vision is that nature becomes reorganized by the virtue in the artist: "'But to the eye of the man of Imagination,'" writes Blake, "'Nature is Imagination itself'" (LE, pp. 436). Such a reorganization or transformation of nature gives the artist the freedom to look "through nature" (LE, p. 443) and "into the very essence of things" (LE, p. 445). For the Blakean artist, the "perfect portrait of a person will always be that one's 'essential image,' his image as he 'is in God'" (LE, p. 435).

In this way the Blakean Imagination converges with the Thomistic idea of the virtue of the artist. In this sense, Imagination operates to reorganize (or create forms for) the natural world in order to reveal the secret image of God, God's essential intelligence, already pre-existing in individual things. More specifically, Merton describes form as "revelation of essence." It is, according to Maritain, the "'peculiar principle of intelligibility'" (LE, p. 443) in each creature, and it is what gives each its own individual character, its "*quidditas*" (LE, p. 442). Form, then, operates to determine and complete the "ontological secret" of everything (LE, p. 443).

Ultimately, however, Merton holds up claritas, "the glory of form shining through matter," as the condition of form *par excellence* (LE, pp. 443). Thus, as a "condition" of form, claritas takes on a central place in his decision about how the form of a thing would "apply" to Blake's aesthetic ideas, especially to Blake's concern for beauty.

Merton claims that beauty for Blake was always distinct and particular to a given thing and thus beauty did "not conform with certain ideal and unchanging types." Merton applies a Thomistic definition of beauty as

'a certain excellence or perfection in the proportion of things to the mind,' and this excellence depends upon three conditions: integrity, proportion, and clarity. (LE, p. 442; my emphasis)

The language I have underscored recalls an aspect of Merton's earlier discussion of the relationships in nature that are of interest, especially of ontological interest, to the person. On the one hand, this implies the artist's personal participation (intellectually, physically, and appetitively) in and creative use of the "virtue" in him to reveal the secret image of God in the world. On the other hand, the implication seems to be that the subjective rationality of the intellect is regulated by the particular person's own ontological orientation, which is of course integrally bound up with who that person is. I shall develop each of these implications in greater detail during a discussion of a passage from *The Sign of Jonas* later in this essay.

Meanwhile, claritas is an otherly and extra-human condition. It is the condition that best satisfies the intellect's demand not just for intelligibility and light but also for "essential beauty" (LE, pp. 443-444). Yet, at the moment in which the artist and the essential beauty of a thing "meet," the artist, as a sensuous being, falls under the influence of the form of a thing that his own virtue as artist has just revealed. As the claritas of some thing's form touches the artist, the artist knows it as beautiful first through the senses and then through the mind (LE, p. 443).

Beauty, then, can be said to be connatural to someone because the splendor of form that shines through matter (i.e. claritas) touches the artist first through the senses. In this way the intellect can enjoy and delight in the beauty of a creature or "a thing as it is essentially," "directly and intuitively," and "without using concepts as a formal means" (LE, pp. 443, 444). Within the claritas strategy, then, connaturality seems to have not just a transformational agency in the knower's identification with the thing known, but it also uncovers an attitude, cultivated by the artist in the process of doing his art, which deliberately abandons intellectual

manipulation.¹²

The formation of the claritas strategy as a strategy for meaning may be briefly summarized in the following way. The virtue of the practical intellect is used as a means of explanation. In other words, it is a way of understanding Blake's "more recondite thought" about the concept of the Imagination. As we have seen, the Thomistic "key" clarifies Blake's obscure thought by providing not just an explanation but a strategy for explanation that satisfies both psychological and intellectual needs of the time: St. Thomas, writes Merton at one point in the thesis, "comes to conclusions which astonish us with their brilliance and yet delight us with their perfect soundness and consonance with our experience and intellectual needs" (*LE*, pp. 446). Meanwhile, in ascribing to the Blakean Imagination the Scholastic meaning of virtue, Merton explains how it is possible for the artist to become free enough to look "through nature" and "into the very essence of things." Such vision depends partially upon the relationships in nature that interest the artist; thus the artistic vision is subjective. However, I have suggested from this point that the artist's subjectivity (as well as the initiatives he takes in making art) is regulated by that person's ontological orientation.¹³

The claritas strategy explains the visionary power of the artist to transform the natural (fallen) world into a place where intuitions about God may be born and grow up. As we shall see, this relationship between a person and a local landscape becomes vital to the creation and development of that visionary power. However, this power of vision has the capacity to conquer and enslave the natural world too. For Merton, the problem is and will remain the perverse use of the artist's imagination. In short, imagination may be manipulated for purposes that, unlike Blake's reason, attempt to seize and possess being for material ends.

One can begin to see how fine a line there is between the artist

12. In his thesis, Merton seems interested in Hindu asceticism because it provides a process that best engages his own concern to develop a physical and intellectual program of discipline compatible with his understanding of the artist. Hindu "thinking," then, is used to support his on-going analogy between the mystic intuition and the pure aesthetic experience of the artist, "without the accompaniment of ideation." Furthermore, in his discussion of the role of judgment in art and the necessity of training the intellect to judge, Merton turns his attention briefly to the importance of asceticism as a "sacrifice of immediate physical goods for the good of the spirit, for the success of the work of art." However, Merton's original model of the artist, the Blakean poet, does not lend itself well to this concern. Therefore, Merton appeals to "the artistic process" of the Hindu artist who, "with a strict routine of asceticism and contemplation . . . must purge himself of all personal desires." Subsequently, the artist is free enough to visualize "his subject as it is described in a given canonical prescription (mantram); he contemplates this ideal model until he comes to 'reflect' it, becomes identified with it, holds it in view in an act of nondifferentiation, then draws it" (See *LE*, pp. 445-448). Finally, Merton draws these ideas from his reading of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934).

13. "Ontological" here necessarily involves a holistic view of the person.

figure, Blake's Los, who with his building of forms attempts "to keep eternal from falling into [Urizen's] nonentity (or sin)," and Urizen's own building of forms which entrap and sink being into the oblivion of material intelligibility. The Los figure and the Urizen figure, who represent different uses of the intellect, provide the basis for Merton's understanding of the role of the intellect in the realm of contemplation. The tension that exists between the two uses shows itself throughout his career as a contemplative writer. On the one hand, vision may be obedient to the "Urizenic" demands to structure the world according to its own material needs and preoccupations. On the other hand, when vision is released from those demands it is free to engage a person or people in "God's discovery of us." "We only know Him," writes Merton in *Seeds of Contemplation*, "in so far as we are known by Him, and our contemplation of Him is a participation of His contemplation of Himself. We become contemplatives when God discovers Himself in us."¹⁴ An episode from *The Sign of Jonas*, dated 10 February 1950, will demonstrate how the "claritas strategy" I have just identified surfaces and plays out some of these concerns.

I call this episode from *The Sign of Jonas* the "Hawk and Starlings" passage.¹⁵ In it, Merton is especially interested in how the action of a hawk stands in relation to the experience of the contemplative monk. The hawk's arrival signals for Merton an extraordinary shift in attention from preoccupation to release from preoccupation. The starlings that once filled the pasture and dominated perceived relationships are now dispersed by the hawk. The hawk is presented as symbolic mediator of human and divine encounter by means of the subjective initiative of the artist. This is to say that the claritas strategy demands nothing less from the artist than a rendering of the essential image of the hawk, precisely because it is in the monk's interest (ontologically) to be oriented by such an image. We have such a "portrait" in this passage; and it works not only to reorganize the scene but also to constrain Thomas Merton's review of relationships in the scene, including his own implied relation to that scene.

The features of this episode are like those I shall describe in this essay when I discuss the origins of the "Le Point Vierge" symbol in the Cuban epiphany as it is represented in both *The Secular Journal* and *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In the "Hawk and Starlings" passage there is a sudden awakening, but on this occasion the awakening reflects not a sudden

14. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1949), p. 32.

15. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1953), pp. 274-275. Further references will be cited in the text and refer only to these pages.

recognition of the "Truth" as in the Cuban epiphany, but rather it reflects an obfuscation. The sudden awareness is of "great excitement" in the pasture, and this excitement is associated with the starlings. Merton describes the birds in consistently exaggerated terms. They are perceived as one body and as filling what would otherwise be a "bare" winter pasture: "And the starlings filled every large and small tree." While the body is identified as one that fills the pasture, its behavior is described in general, almost casual terms. The starlings filled every tree and "shone in the light and sang." When they move to avoid an attack by an eagle, they do so as a "whole cloud of them." When the danger has passed over, "they all alighted on the ground" and continued "moving about and singing for about five minutes." Merton's description, in effect, isolates the birds as one body and characterizes its behavior as amorphous. From such a description, the reader gains an impression of distortion of the scene, the cause of which Merton assigns to the birds themselves. Thus the birds, which fill the pasture with "their" excitement, become a way of talking about a loss of definition, perhaps even of identity.

This loss of definition in the scene is reinforced by observations about other birds and their behavior in relation to the starlings. There are originally three tiers of birds involved in the scene -- buzzards, crows, and an eagle. The buzzards are the farthest away and act only as "observers." Frightened apparently by the great excitement, the crows are in the process of distancing themselves -- ("soaring, very high, keeping out of the way") -- from the scene. If a tendency of avoidance is characteristic of the behavior of the buzzards and crows, the eagle's behavior is notable for its imprecision. The eagle is introduced as "flying over the woods" and then observed to have "attacked a tree full of starlings." The attack is unsuccessful and this bird comes "nowhere near" the starlings. Instead the effect of the eagle's attack is to relocate the "cloud" of starlings from the tree to the ground. In other words, the relationship between the one possible predator and the starlings is described in terms that reinforce the starlings' domination of the physical scene.

The starlings' domination of the scene, however, is reversed by the hawk's attack. The hawk's behavior is formulated in terms that suggest what it is, what its nature, or "quidditas," is. Merton isolates two attributes of the hawk: one is the speed of its descent, and the other is the precision of its attack. Furthermore, these two attributes are reviewed and developed through different contexts in the passage. One such context is concerned with the event itself: the hawk's initial appearance. Heretofore the starlings

have dominated the scene with their "excitement." The hawk's appearance, on the other hand, is communicated as an event in its dispersal of the starlings: "I saw a scare go into the cloud of birds." The sudden shift in attention from that which had preoccupied attention (i.e. the starlings) to that which releases attention from preoccupation (i.e. the hawk) is associated with an attitude of surprise. In fact, the surprise registered here is rehearsed in language with which readers of Merton are already familiar: "Then, like lightning, it happened." The image of lightning here, just as the image of the thunderclap in the earlier Cuban epiphany, signals a special awareness, which accounts for both the experiential and the ineffable in the event.¹⁶

The first context closes with a description of the hawk's apparently perfect execution of its hunting act. Imagery that suggests that precision of weaponry enforces a new relationship between the hunter and prey also poses a strong contrast to the eagle's approach. Furthermore, the imagery of precision highlights the two attributes *par excellence* of the hawk: its speed and its exacting aim. Thus, the hawk "shot straight into the middle of the starlings" and "got his talons into the one bird he had nailed."

This imagery of precision is reviewed and developed in further reflection in the passage. Merton rehearses the outcome of the attack -- "Then every tree, every field was cleared" -- through the hawk. He characterizes the hawk's identity as unique: "He stayed in the field like a king with the killed bird, and nothing else came near him. He took his time." Such an identity stands by itself in contrast to the domination of the pasture by the starlings. Now, and quite simply, "The hawk, all alone . . . possessed his prey." The language suggests that the hawk is in control of the area, but it also announces an image of balance previously unapparent. For example, the crows, which are "still in sight, but over their wood," and the vultures, newly introduced but seen to be possibly circling "something dead," are described in terms that suggest them to be in their proper places, to be, so to speak, at home. Thus, in this second context, the new relationship enforced between the hunter and prey through the hawk's precise act reorganizes the space of the pasture and constrains Merton's review of relationships in it.

16. Starting with the Cuban epiphany, there are several such moments in Merton's writing career. Generally, these are "beginner's" recognitions, which signal a moment of liberating insight on the one hand, and a change in life direction on the other. See the so-called "Louisville epiphany" in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and the revelation at Polonnaruwa in *The Asian Journal* (New York: New Directions, 1975), pp. 233-236. See also *New Seeds of Contemplation* where Merton describes the kinds of beginnings a contemplative might have: "The best of these kinds of beginnings is a sudden emptying of the soul in which images vanish, concepts and words are silent, and freedom and clarity suddenly open out with you" (p. 275).

Thomas Merton seems more consciously interested in the relationship he uncovers between the hawk and the contemplative: "I think that hawk is to be studied by saints and contemplatives; because he knows his business."¹⁷ In addition to this interest, however, the apostrophe to the hawk in the final paragraph signals an earlier understanding about the role the intellect plays in the production of beautiful forms. Here again the artist exercises a subjective initiative in choosing relationships in nature that are of special interest to the monk, especially as they direct that person to solitude.

In isolating the hawk's speed and exacting aim, Merton also indicates what is unique about the hawk. In Thomistic terms, he identifies the bird's perfection, the excellence of its nature, while posing it over and against the starlings' amorphous body, which previously overshadowed the pasture scene. These attributes of speed and aim, then, are also conditions of the creature's form; they reveal, furthermore, the hawk's "peculiar principle of intelligibility," its essential image. The physical hawk, then, has become a symbolic object for mediating an understanding of the experience. The hawk, in other words, becomes that which frees the artist to look "through nature" and "into the very essence of things" (*LE*, pp. 443, 445). As mediator of an encounter between human and divine, the flight of the hawk and its hunting skill are a "beautiful thing," and both affect Merton's view of the relationships in the now "cleared" pasture scene. Thus the hawk's appearance gives rise to language that invokes its revealed image, its essential beauty.

But this experience also includes an unacknowledged relationship to the starlings. The scene's sudden shift in consciousness importantly reflects how Merton participates in the death of the "slowest starling." Here his attention shifts from participation in the original acts of domination and relationships of power to participation in an act of powerlessness and death. Thus, while the hawk means death to the "slowest starling," its revealed image also means "death" to the monk and dispersal to the forms he imposes on reality. For the person who is constantly pushed about by undirected energies or who grafts onto the world his own self-preoccupations,

17. Readers should note the strong resemblance in diction, theme, and even cadence between Merton's final paragraph in this passage and Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem, "The Windhover." I have Richard Aticks of the University of Central Florida to thank for pointing this out to me. Another more hidden presence in this passage is St. John of the Cross. At an earlier point in *The Sign of Jonas*, Merton writes: "Didn't Saint John of the Cross hide himself in a room up in a church tower where there was a small window through which he could look out at the country?" (p. 109). The hideaway in the "Hawk and Starlings" passage resembles St. John's own hideaway; the view is from a "small window" in the "garden house attic" which looks out over the bare pasture.

what breaks through the intellect's verbal forms is a moment of "love a thousand times more terrible."¹⁸ The hawk's flight was a "terrible" thing because what is understood, precisely by the manipulative intellect, to be breaking through into reality as a fact of experience is God.

The hawk's possession of the bird becomes a kind of icon of God's possession of the monk. This is the moment in which the intellectual encounter with God achieves a private and ecstatic character. This moment is prepared for by Merton's understanding of the role of the intellect as revealing, and not manipulating, the splendor of form shining through matter. In the context of the apophatic way, this aesthetic understanding of the experience is formulated as the artist's apprehending a thing's "ontological secret, . . . directly and intuitively, . . . and without using concepts as a formal means."

This is also a moment in which monastic discipline orients the artist, who has in effect broken away, back towards the lived-in world. The return to the attic is a deliberate and ritualized refusal to remain exclusively in charge of the strategies that might otherwise distort or spiritualize his experience. I want to emphasize this return as disciplined because the monastic attitudes of solitude, poverty, and penitential sacrifice direct the "extreme case" of solitude back towards a communal and public realm of experience: "Now I am going back to the attic and the shovels and the broken window and the trains in the valley and the prayer of Jesus." This return is a psychological necessity and an intellectual discipline if the monk is to avoid a "spurious solitude" and an isolate (or angelic) stance. What emerges here in part, then, in the "Hawk and Starlings" passage is the role of the monk in regulating the visionary experience of the artist.

I am now in a position to make two observations about the *claritas* strategy and its explanatory function. This interpretive strategy indicates to readers Merton's quiet motive, on the one hand, to return to an original moment of revelation. On the other hand, it reveals his motive to proclaim and develop that revelation to an audience -- in this case, a Christian reading community. The *claritas* strategy reveals a problem peculiar to Merton. The intellectual problem (i.e. his understanding) or "paradox" that Merton faced comes out of this tension between a yearning to return to a moment of revelation and a need to say what that revelation is.

18. Cf. Merton's own language in "The Inner Experience: Prospects and Conclusions (VIII), *Cistercian Studies*, XIX (1984), p. 344: "When he tries to be his own God, and insists on keeping his hands on everything, remembering everything, and controlling everything, he drives himself to ruin. For when man thinks himself powerful, then at every moment he is in desperate need: he is in need of knowledge, strength, control, and he depends on countless instruments."

Furthermore, in Merton's attempt to proclaim the public and communal dimensions of the private revelation to his reading community (and this is especially so in his early writing), his explanation will itself be developed and even enriched, while the original experience of the revelation will tend to be distanced, if not distorted.¹⁹ Perhaps the best way to illustrate what I mean about this developmental and yet distortive tendency in Merton's explanations about revelation, especially as these explanations are surfaced by the *claritas* strategy, is briefly to look at the origins of what I shall call the "Point Vierge" symbol.

In the spring of 1940, Merton took what probably seemed to him a long deserved vacation. He travelled to Cuba just over a year after completing his Master of Arts thesis on the subject of Blake's thinking about art. This trip to Cuba is recorded in both *The Secular Journal* and in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In both accounts, he describes a moment of awakening to the presence of God in a church in Havana, in which, says Michael Mott in *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, "Merton drew close in words to the experience which was beyond words."²⁰

There are at least three features that influence Merton's recounting of the epiphany in April 1940 in Havana while attending mass in the Church of San Francisco. The first feature is the initial realization of God's presence during the Consecration. In the *Journal* account this new awareness is expressed by the images of a "thunderclap" ("something went off inside me like a thunderclap") and a "thunderbolt."²¹ In the autobiography the special awareness is named differently: "There formed in my mind an awareness, an understanding, a realization."²² In this account, the image of "thunderclap" again appears to emphasize the experiential impact in the midst of the ineffable: ". . . this awareness: it was so intangible, and yet it struck me like a thunderclap" (*SSM*). The "metaphor" of light is a second feature worth noticing. In both accounts Merton attributes his initial intuition of God's presence in the scene as coming from the "good big shout" of "all those Cuban children." The later account, however, more clearly associates the children's "Creo" with an intellectual action: "There formed in my mind an awareness, an understanding, a realization of what

19. By distortion I mean simply "to distort" or "to twist out of a natural, normal, or original shape or condition." See *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (1983).

20. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984), p. 151.

21. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal*, pp. 76 and 77. Further references will be cited in the text as *SJ* and will refer to pages 76-78 only.

22. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 284. Further references will be cited in the text as *SSM* and will refer to pages 284-285 only.

had just taken place on the altar, at the Consecration." The "awareness" becomes expressed in metaphor as a light "a thousand times more bright" than the children's shout had been. Here Merton gives the metaphor special force by frequently characterizing it as dark or blinding, and by displaying the prominence of the intellect's role in receiving the light: it was "as if a sudden and immediate contact had been established between my intellect and the Truth Who was now . . . before me." Finally, the autobiography is emphatic about the discontinuity between light of Truth present to the mind and natural light: "It was a light that was so bright that it had no relation to any visible light and so profound and so intimate that it seemed like a neutralization of every lesser experience" (SSM).

The Secular Journal entry does not emphasize this dimension of the light metaphor. Although here too the metaphor describes God as beyond the powers of the natural eye or mind to see "anything or [apprehend] anything extraordinary," the light is presented within the context of a public and communal reflection about God working through the church scene. While Merton talks about the certainty that comes from his experience and links it to both an "order of knowledge" and a "strong movement of delight," his focus remains directed towards the children and God's action through them: "All this was caused directly by the great mercy and kindness of God when I heard the voices of the children cry out 'I believe.'" Subsequently, the "certitude of faith" gained here is associated with "the same kind of certitude that millions of Catholics and Jews and Hindus and everybody that believes in God have felt." Thomas Merton is here emphatic about there being "nothing esoteric about such things" as "These movements of God's grace" which are in everybody; they are, in fact, available to all: "They are common to every creature that was ever born with a soul" (S). Fundamental to this passage is its public and communal view of God working through people, and the light metaphor reflects that view.

There is a third feature influencing Merton's expression of the dark experience of God in the prose. This feature concerns the working of the transcendent light upon the sense and mind of the person who comes in "contact" with God. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton places emphasis on intuition of God as an intellectual realization, which is compared to a light "a thousand times more bright" than the children's shout of affirmation. Furthermore, the logic of the apophatic way, a logic peculiar to Merton's monastic interests and concerns during the composition of his autobiography, finds expression through his emphasis on the

discontinuity between light present to the mind and natural light. Thus, the "sudden and immediate contact . . . established between my intellect and the Truth" is perceived as a light that "was blinding and neutralizing" not just to the physical senses but also to the ability to "see" conceptually: "This awareness . . . disarmed all images, all metaphors, and cut through the whole skein of species and phantasms with which we naturally do our thinking."²³

While the *Journal's* view is communal and public, the autobiography surrenders this view to a more private and ecstatic focus. The "movement of delight" in the *Journal* "manifest[ed] itself in the Faith of all those children" by means of "the great mercy and kindness of God" (*SJ*). In the later account, the metaphor of light, which shifts attention from the children to the Consecration, becomes emphasized as the point of contact between the mind and "the Truth Who was now physically and really and substantially before me on the altar" (*SSM*). This contact is perceived as a new awareness and as such belongs to a transcendent "order of knowledge, yes, but more still to the order of love," as it pertains to the intellect's quest for an encounter with pure being.²⁴

Although a private character and ecstatic tone seem to pervade the language of the autobiography, Thomas Merton's new awareness is not wholly intellectual. In his reconstruction of the experience Merton retains important elements of his original experience. For example, the children's "good big shout" still initiates what will later be called the "metaphor [of light] which I am using, long after the fact" (*SSM*). The children remain agents of revelation; they initiate the thunderclap of recognition in both passages through the physical presence of their "loud and strong and clear voices" (*SJ*). And they invoke a spontaneous joy and otherly light in the passage from *The Seven Storey Mountain*: "But that cry, 'Creo en Dios!' It was loud, and bright, and sudden and glad and triumphant; it was a good big shout, that came from all those Cuban children, a joyous affirmation of faith." Importantly, it is the Cuban children who mediate Merton's initial

23. Cf. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York, Image Books, 1968), p. 158: "At the center of our being is a point . . . which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will."

24. Compare this treatment of the "point of contact" with the image of the "apex of existence" in *Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 31-33, a book published a year after *The Seven Storey Mountain*. This surprise development in *Seeds* comes when Merton calls attention to God's mission to us in a way that recalls the artist figure of Los and his mission of creating forms to keep eternal from falling into nonentity. In this meditation Merton indicates God's supernatural mission to us is to "come down from heaven to find us." God's initiative then "bridges the infinite distances between Himself and the spirits created to love Him, by supernatural missions of His own life" (p. 33). Thus the "point of contact" and the "apex of existence" images rehearse, although from different "directions," possible names for, as well as explanations about, new life in God's form: "God utters me like a word containing a thought of Himself" (p. 31).

awareness of God in the autobiography, and not the metaphor of light and contact.

The later interpretation of the experience regards a "contact" between a person's intellect and the Truth of God as paramount. Such an interpretation suggests a development in Merton's understanding about the role of the artist in expressing contemplative intuition. This development is based on, and consistent with, the thesis's concern for how the intellect is used when reconstructing that sudden and immediate encounter with God. In the earlier version the children were more clearly the ordinary, yet otherly, mediators of the sudden revelation; thus, they constrained Merton's initial explanation of the epiphany. However, the metaphor of light gains a more exclusive focus in the later passage, and it, in effect, reforms the original public and communal view of God. In other words, the later version poses a second and more narrowly construed mediator (light/contact) over and against what seems to be an original and naturally expansive mediator (the children). The effect of this new interpretation on the initial account (and surely upon the original intuition) is as much a distortion of the originally expressed insight (as to where God seems located) as it is a development of Merton's explanation about the radically transcendent and unknowable nature of God.

The claritas strategy realizes its fullest explanatory capability in what is known to many as the "Louisville epiphany" in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. The symbol by which this strategy is realized is *Le Point Vierge*.²⁵ The symbol integrates into a new interpretive arrangement the more disparate explanations about a sudden and immediate encounter with God, as I have just represented them in the two versions of the Cuban epiphany above. In the Louisville epiphany Merton consciously uses *le point vierge* to describe the moment of revelation. Moreover, *le point vierge* becomes such an important mediator of the epiphany that it, in effect, reorganizes the scene in ways similar to those described in the "Hawk and Starlings" passage.

Le point vierge describes a core of reality which is the shared "center of our being" and which is the hidden "secret beauty" of those people that

25. It is important to recognize that this passage from *Conjectures* was written originally in March, 1958, and revised in September, 1965. Michael Mott indicates this chronology in *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (pp. 311-313). He also notices a pattern similar to that in my discussion of the Cuban epiphany. He describes a "rhetoric of distancing" that occurs in the writing: "Merton talks of coming closer to the crowd at the very time his rhetoric is distancing 'the crowd' as an ever more abstract concept of another writer's imagination" (p. 312). Mott's evaluation is critical of the piece: "Part of the problem is that Merton goes on to see the crowds in Louisville through his reading of the Third of Thomas Traherne's *Centuries*: 'There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around like the sun'" (p. 312). Obviously at this point in my discussion I find Mott's evaluation, as I hope to show, limited.

Merton sees in the street.²⁶ On one hand, the symbol recalls the sudden "lightning" realization of the Cuban epiphany in that it is compared to a "spark" or, again, "It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven." The light on this occasion, though, is emphatically located in the people he sees walking around like "billions of points of light coming together." On the other hand, his description of the spark as having a transcendent quality reminds us of the earlier understanding of *claritas* as a condition of form that best satisfies the intellect's need for essential beauty. Consequently, this spark, although integrally bound up with who these people are, is distinguished from them as a "point of nothingness" and as "absolute poverty." Furthermore, it "belongs entirely to God" and "is never at [the] disposal . . . of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will."

Le point vierge clarifies and renews the meaning of the monk's existential loneliness. Moreover, the verge point recasts the religious artist's long-sought-after "vital unity" in terms of the contemplative's solitude and, in turn, interprets solitude. Consequently, this spark of light in part reviews what we saw as the visionary's deliberate refusal to remain exclusively in charge of his created meanings (i.e. the monk's ethos of preferring not to know); and yet the spark also directs the monk towards that which is the basis for his joy and profound solidarity with the people in Louisville: his solitude in God. Thus a special kind of vision again comes into play which describes two related contexts of experience.

The first context comes under the purview of the manipulative intellect and describes the spurious solitude that this use of the intellect creates. Because the Louisville piece turns on the dichotomy between natural seeing and faith seeing, this vision of the people cannot be gained by the ordinary act of seeing or understanding; nor can the person who has this sort of vision "naturally" devise a "program for this seeing." In fact, what sets the monk apart from the people in the street is definitely not an active cultivation of a set of rules for seeing, especially if they are devised as a prescription for belonging to God alone. Merton goes to some lengths to indicate "sixteen or seventeen years" of misunderstanding the monk's identity as "a different species of being, pseudoangels, 'spiritual men,' " which is reinforced by taking vows. The consequence for Merton has been the creation of a dream world "of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness."

26. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 158. Subsequent references to the so-called "Louisville epiphany" will be taken from pp. 156-158.

In the second context, *le point vierge* radically reorganizes the knowledge about what constitutes the realm of the holy. In short, the realm of the holy now involves in a very personal way, the public and communal dimensions in life.²⁷ This knowledge leads to the realization central to the passage that overwhelms the person who for so long has inhabited the world of "spurious self-isolation." The notion, then, of monastic life as a "separate holy existence" is an illusion created by Merton himself and encouraged, in part, by the existing structures. The knowledge that constitutes the new and unique revelation is that "when I am alone they are not 'they' but my own self. There are no strangers." Moreover, because this knowledge of the holy is placed back into the domain of the "world," it becomes an "understanding" that overwhelms and is "such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud." *Le point vierge* signals this radical reorientation and new found solidarity with people; in addition, the symbol clarifies the difference between the "spurious solitude" of the manipulative intellect and the solitude of vital unity lived by the monk. Ultimately, the loneliness that sets Thomas Merton apart from the people in Louisville becomes, "by a peculiar gift," the solitude that unites him as monk to them: "I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers."

In conclusion, I would like to call the reader's attention to the subjective and therefore foundational bases for this essay. The most important decision I made in the process of writing it was to identify as problematic Merton's perception of Blake's theory of art as obscured or "recondite." As Merton develops a new understanding of Blake's Imagination, he addresses and somewhat resolves an even more fundamental question that he has at this time about the relationship between the artist and the mystic.²⁸ Thus, my attention eventually became ordered by what I (and many other readers of Merton) have determined to have been a conflictual relationship for him. Because I decided I wanted to know more about this relationship, my decision redirected my attention to moments of revelation that I thought "activated" that relationship between artist and mystic and

27. Mircea Eliade, in his discussion "Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred" in *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959) provides a broader anthropological picture for my discussion about the "realm of the holy," by looking at the sundry mythical symbols that describe sacred space and the creation of such space.

28. Cf. Merton's thesis in *The Literary Essays*: "This seizure of intelligible realities without using concepts as a formal means is something analogous in both the poet and the mystic, but they both operate differently and on different planes" (pp. 444-445).

which best described it.²⁹ However my attention is initially ordered, the meanings I make come out of my own personal situation; the explanations I create are motivated by demands inherent to my lived situation.³⁰ In order to suggest how this may be so, I must provide some brief biographical information about myself.

I live in a small city in South Carolina. I live in a Roman Catholic religious community called an Oratory, among sixteen other men, about half of whom are ordained priests, and half of whom are lay members. I am a lay member of the Congregation. In Oratorian communities, there is no canonical prescription for vows such as stability, poverty, or chastity as in a traditional monastic community like Merton's. Although priests who live in the community have priestly vows, lay members live there "voluntarily." John Henry Cardinal Newman, who became an Oratorian after his conversion to Catholicism, describes Oratorian community simply as "nothing more or less than" a group of "secular priests [and lay members] living together, without vows. . ." ³¹

I have lived in this Congregation for less than two years, and during this time one of the basic questions with which I have lived is whether I want and/or need to live and commit myself to a celibate lifestyle *and* in this particular community. I have asked this question from at least two points of view. I have asked it from a social or public point of view because I have become more sensitive to the serious questions many people in my own tradition ask about the role of celibacy in "religious life." Moreover, I am sensitive to the people in my region of the country who are suspicious of the value of celibacy. The second point of view is more personal: I have noticed that my own conception of what constitutes community is altered when I acknowledge the possibility of celibacy as part of my lifestyle.

My contention here is that the interpretive strategy I formulated in the course of this essay reflects some of my outstanding interests and concerns in a newly organized and acknowledged way. My analysis of

29. Cf. David Bleich in *Subjective Criticism* and his discussion of "the nature of our investigation of, or understanding of, language" in his chapter, "Motivational Character of Language and Symbol Formation," pp. 38-67. Among other things, his discussion indicates that when one's assumption is that "What a person wants to know determines explanatory adequacy," that person discovers himself in a "new epistemological circumstance" (p. 41). Bleich sees this new assumption as a central feature of what he calls "the subjective paradigm."

30. My understanding of motive is influenced by Bleich's formulation: "A motive is a subjectively regulated cause" (p. 44). I follow Bleich's use of "motive" especially because I understand my present situation in life not as inevitable but as chosen: "In particular, motivation is necessary as an explanatory principle when we aim to understand deliberate behavior or other human action in which choice figures prominently" (p. 45).

31. Placid Murray, O.S.B., *Newman the Oratorian* (Leominster, Herefordshire, England: Fowler Wright Books, 1980), p. 314.

Merton's thesis leads me to two key interpretive conclusions. Put together, these conclusions may be summarized in the following way. Artistic vision reorganizes the natural world in a way that reconstitutes space in which being can behave. Consequently, a person is able to review old meanings (i.e. Blake's more recondite concept of the Imagination) of words. Furthermore, as one develops new explanations or meanings in that reorganized space or scene (i.e. Merton's praise of the Hawk's essential beauty), attention preoccupied with other personally created "forms" is released.

These two conclusions form the basis for what I call the claritas strategy. However, the claritas strategy is not something objectively "there" in the texts which have been examined. Rather this interpretive strategy is created by my own interests and concerns on the occasions in which I respond to a text. In other words, my own lived situation bears decisively on the *kind* of attention I direct towards a particular text. In this way, the claritas strategy emerges out of my on-going interaction with certain passages written by Thomas Merton.

I have already suggested how the claritas strategy helped me to evaluate and clarify the meaning of solitude in the Louisville passage. The basic insight is that knowledge about what constitutes the realm of the holy, as Merton's attention is directed by the *point vierge* symbol, now involves him in a more personal way in the public and communal dimensions of life. In addition, such an explanation partially satisfies a demand inherent to my situation for developing my intuition about celibacy as a way of finding closeness or intimacy with people in different public situations.

My contention is that the interpretive strategy I have formulated out of my reading of Merton had made this demand noticeable.³² As a result, I was able to clarify an on-going (and at times problematic) perception of myself as a man who chooses to be celibate. Moreover, the claritas strategy becomes a key interpretive context for, because it calls attention to, "new" meanings to problematic perceptions of a word or value as I know either in my situation.³³ This interpretive context may clarify, but it also reorients me in a "new" way to my community. The implication of the claritas strategy is that I now have a way to gain knowledge about, as well as a more complex understanding for, a value to which I am daily committed.

32. Cf. Fish, "Interpreting the *Variorum*," pp. 166-167: "In short, what is noticed is what has been *made* noticeable, not by a clear and undistorting glass, but by an interpretive strategy" (p. 166).

33. Bleich sees interpretation as "not a decoding or an analytical process . . . [but rather] a synthesis of new meanings based on the assumption that the old shared meanings of words and works are not in question, but that the *present perception* of these meanings have created the experiential circumstance for resymbolization" (p. 95). I share this assumption with Bleich. In addition, Bleich's term "resymbolization" coincides with my use of "interpretive conclusions."