

Merton and Blake: The Heretic Within and the Heretic Without

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Abstract

Thomas Merton's epiphany at Fourth and Walnut described in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* developed into a deeply layered text delineating a moment of awakening in his life and writing. The various versions of the 'Vision in Louisville', as Merton called it, resonate with the imagery and mystical concepts of Merton's predecessor in the tradition of mystical poetry, William Blake. The Fourth and Walnut epiphany brings together three interrelated Blakean notions—that of the 'Human Form Divine', the expanded moment of timelessness within time, and the union of the masculine and feminine contraries in God, nature and the individual soul. By comparing the early form of this passage as represented in the journals, to its final form in *Conjectures*, one can see how Merton telescoped and revised the final text to transcend the dualities of the secular and sacred.

Keywords Merton, Blake, conjectures, mystics, epiphany

In his middle years, Thomas Merton became much more committed to the world and to a sense of solidarity with his fellow humans. The important epiphany at Fourth and Walnut described in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*¹ marks a transformation that occurred on 18 March 1958 in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. The passage developed into a deeply layered text, delineating a moment of awakening in Merton's life and writing that freed him to write the great experimental poetry of his later years. In all versions, the text of the 'Vision in Louisville', as Merton called it, resonates deeply with the imagery and mystical concepts of Merton's great mentor and predecessor in the tradition of mystical poetry, William Blake. The Fourth and Walnut epiphany

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 156.

brings together three interrelated Blakean notions — that of the ‘human form Divine’,² the expanded moment of timelessness within time, and the union of the masculine and feminine contraries in God, nature and the individual soul.

Thomas Merton’s early attraction to the poet-prophet William Blake as a teen in the early-1930s in England developed into a lifelong love affair. Michael Higgins’ important book, *Heretic Blood*,³ establishes the centrality of Blake to Merton and points out the Blakean substructure of Merton’s integration of the Four Zoas or psychological faculties: Urizen (Reason, Intellect), Luvah (Emotions), Tharmas (Instincts, the Body) and Urthona (Imagination, Wisdom), representing the fourfold structure of the human soul. Higgins explores the heretical nature of Merton’s mind and thought, suggesting his Blakean concerns (both visionary and political) come to fruition in the later anti-poetry of *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*. Merton moves beyond the limitations of the early, more conventional piety of *The Seven Storey Mountain* to challenge not only the culture from which he fled, but the very institutional religious structures to which he had committed himself as a young man. Like Blake, Merton is a complex artist of ‘the contraries’ rather than of bifurcated oppositions, sustaining the tension between commitment to his Christian tradition and awareness of a need for its radical transformation in the sense of a return to its origins or roots. It is only apparently ironic that the twentieth-century monk formed such a deep alliance across time and space with the marginalized Romantic poet whom so many in his lifetime considered mad.

Higgins explores the tension in Merton between his commitment to Roman Catholicism and the way in which, as a radical monk within a monolithic structure, he stands as a twentieth-century Blake, enacting ‘a form of institutionalized rebellion’.⁴ Yet on the surface, Blake and Merton are most unlikely bedfellows. Blake emerges from non-conformist, Protestant fringe movements like those of the dissenting Quakers and the Swedenborgians of the late eighteenth century. He draws extensively from the esoteric writings of the Protestant mystic, Jacob Boehme. Blake is from the outset a rebellious, anti-institutional artist

2. William Blake, ‘The Divine Image’, from ‘Songs of Innocence’, in *Blake: Complete Writings* (ed. Geoffrey Keynes; London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 117. All subsequent quotations from Blake’s work are drawn from the Keynes edition.

3. Michael Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1998).

4. Higgins, *Heretic Blood*, p. 88. ‘The Zoas’ are names Blake drew from eighteenth-century ‘faculty psychology’.

and poet, attacking the 'Wheel of Religion' of his day, Deism, as a Satanic (Urizenic) construct suppressing the 'Human Form Divine' and the 'Divine Imagination' in man. Writing out of the historical context of his response to the Church of England, then the only permitted Church, Blake decries the established Churches as 'Synagogues of Satan'.⁵ Even in his later prophetic poems such as *Jerusalem*, Blake continues to attack the Churches, revising traditional theology by setting up the figure of Jesus as the liberator of Albion (England) from the chains of false religion. Albion's reunion with his feminine counterpart or 'emanation', Jerusalem, symbolizes the reunion of the British nation with a feminine principle of Wisdom. The integration of Albion is the restoration of balance among humanity's four disparate parts through the agency of the Imagination, the only portion of human consciousness that retains its paradisaical purity.

In Blake's restoration of paradise after the Fall, imagination leads reason. He rejects the almost universal Christian doctrine of Atonement as it is usually taught (the notion that Christ died for mankind's sins to propitiate an angry Father God) by arguing that God forgives humans as humans forgive each other, as stated in The Lord's Prayer, not through a primitive sacrifice to a Deistic God. Blake rejects the hierarchy of the priesthood in favour of the intuition of the individual, and espouses the Arian heresy that Jesus was not God, but a divine son, the 'elder brother' of humanity. Merton would perhaps have appreciated the distinction Blake makes between the priest and the solitary monk in his poem 'The Grey Monk'. Blake's priests are ominous figures 'in black gowns... walking their rounds, / And binding with briars [his]joys and desires',⁶ while the monk or hermit is a solitary: 'The Hermit's Prayer & the Widow's tear / Alone can free the World from fear'.⁷

For Blake, every human being has a spark of the divine essence, and we become 'Christ-like' as we perceive that. The only priesthood required is the mediating power of the Imagination, defined as that faculty in human consciousness which participates in eternity. Expanded awareness of the divine essence, for Blake, always leads to social action against injustice, as demonstrated by poems such as the 'Chimney Sweeper' one and two in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of*

5. Blake, in 'The Four Zoas', p. 341. In Blake's time, only members of the Church of England could be members of Parliament. The Catholic Emancipation Act was not passed until 1829.

6. Blake, 'The Garden of Love', p. 215.

7. Blake, 'The Grey Monk', p. 430

Experience. This sense of the inseparability of the contemplative and the activist would have struck Merton deeply. Blake's notions were heretical for his time, and in his 'Vision of the Last Judgment' he writes of the value of heresy. The Church requires its heretics for revitalization:

He who is out of the Church & opposes it is not less an Agent of Religion than he who is in it. To be in an Error & to be cast out is a part of God's design.⁸

Merton, while remaining within the Church, became similarly ambivalent toward movements and institutions, a marginalized man insisting on his position at the periphery of society.⁹ In a later journal entry (14 February 1967), when reflecting on the writings of feminist theologian Rosemary Ruether, Merton acknowledges that 'the whole Church-world argument in my work has been ambiguous because I bought the idea of a sacred and unworldly Christian culture and set that up against the wicked world'.¹⁰ The Fourth and Walnut epiphany, then, marks a transition in Merton's writings where he addresses this dichotomy directly and moves toward a more apophatic Christianity based on mystical experience. Blake helped him not only with his conversion, but to affirm his deepening sense of the primacy of authentic experiential encounter.

Unlike Merton, Blake was attracted to the teachings of the Gnostics as he had encountered them through esoteric sources, as well as to the more mystical passages of Plato through his contemporary Thomas Taylor the Neoplatonist; yet he rejected Plato's dualism of the body and soul. The early Merton was suspicious of the Gnostics and Plato for their dualism, preferring the more Aristotelian Aquinas. As Higgins points out, Merton generally interprets Blake through the lens of Scholasticism. In one sense, Merton's reading of Blake is a form of misprision, a deliberate taming of Blake to make him palatable to Merton's fellow ecclesiastics. His desire to approach Blake through the lens of Jacques Maritain helps him 'Catholicize' his anti-institutional mentor. The early Merton argues that Blake, through his studies of Dante in his later years, was drawn to earlier medieval expressions of Christianity, but held back from the 'true Church' because of the deterioration of

8. Blake, 'A Vision of the Last Judgment', p. 613.

9. George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1978), p. 186.

10. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (ed. Christine M. Bochen, Journals, VI, 1966-67, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1977), p. 198.

Anglicanism of his time. While it is true that Blake was drawn to all things medieval in art and poetry, a forerunner of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, he would not have accepted any kind of hierarchical mediation between the individual and God, and is clearly more in line with the esoteric stream of Protestant Christianity than with any form of orthodoxy.

It is clear that Blake aided Merton in his conversion. In his Master's thesis on Blake at Columbia, 'Nature and Art in William Blake: an Essay in Interpretation' (1939),¹¹ Merton discovers in Blake the image of the poet as mystic, poet-prophet (entailing the role of social critic) to which he would himself aspire. He traced sources that suggested Blake, through his etymological studies, had been exposed to eastern ideas and to *The Bhagavad-Gita*. In his investigation into Blake, one can observe the beginnings of his fascination with the east, as a letter to his friend Bob Lax (August 1938) suggests: 'Truthfully I have an enormous obscure subtle thesis that Blake is all full of Indian and Chinese theories of art, for a certainty. That he has read the *Gita*...' ¹² However, the quality that Merton valued most in Blake was what he saw as his absolute purity, the integrity of the lonely visionary who experienced God directly. He was drawn to the Blake who was beaten as a lad for reporting his vision of a tree full of angels.

In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, where Merton first shares publicly his deep affinity with Blake, the tone remains that of the apologist who whitewashes this 'lionlamb' to make him appear less quirky and wild than he is. Yet in his letters, where Merton is less guarded, we observe the continuation of the lifelong fascination that can be traced through the essays and journals. As he moves into his periods of restlessness and frustration with the Institution, he draws closer to the core of Blakean fire. The heretic without the system enables the heretic within to express his growing sense that he is not interested in a Christianity subservient to or supporting a social order or rigid ideology, but to the Christ of the mystics. Merton's reading of Blake gave him renewed freedom to develop his core ideas on the divine essence residing within the self and accessible to everyone. For Merton, Blake proved a lifelong companion. Though many other figures, particularly Eckhart, helped Merton formulate his identification with the mystical, esoteric stream of Christian tradition, Blake remains the abiding presence. In a

11. Thomas Merton, in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (ed. Patrick Hart; New York: New Directions, 1981).

12. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends* (ed. Robert E. Daggy; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993), pp. 142-43.

journal entry of 9 March 1968, not long before his death, Merton writes:

Back to Blake—after thirty years. I remember the profound overturning of the roots that took place in my study of him. And the same—even much more profound, is required... I think Blake would be my desert-island book now. I must get into it—and be on my desert-island alone with the mystery.¹³

Towards the end of his life in April 1968, Merton wrote a review of Thomas Altizer's book on Blake in 'Blake and the New Theology', where he argued boldly that 'Blake was a radical Christian in his belief that Churches had perverted Christian truth and that the God of the Christian Churches was really Urizen, Nobodaddy, and even Satan'¹⁴ He pointed out that Blake 'saw official Christendom as a *narrowing* of vision, a foreclosure of experience and of future expansion, a locking up and securing of the doors of perception. He substituted for it a Christianity of openness, of total vision, a faith which dialectically embraces both extremes...'¹⁵ Blake's program, as Merton describes it, had clearly become his own. There would be no more taming of Blake's wildness, for he had joined his voice to that of his mentor.

One of the main ideas that informs both Blake and Merton is that of the 'Divine Humanity', the notion that human beings contain the kingdom of heaven or 'divine spark' within their deepest being, every man and every woman a contraction and expansion of the divine pulse. The 'divine self' of Blake and Merton is not the self of the humanists in which 'man is the measure of all things', but closer to the divine self of Eckhart, the ground of unified being and knowing that can be tapped only through kenotic (self-emptying) love, not mere knowledge. In Blake, it is the activation of 'mutual forgiveness' that begins the restoration. Merton and Blake also share the sense of time as a place of access to eternity through what Blake calls 'the expanded moment', when the grain of sand, the sunflower, or an ordinary wildflower reveals its union with ultimate reality:

Thou perceivest the Flowers put forth their precious odours,
And none can tell how from so small a center comes such sweets.
Forgetting that within that Center Eternity expands
Its ever during doors...¹⁶

13. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton* (ed. Patrick Hart; Journals, VII, 1967–68 San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 64.

14. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 5.

15. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 6.

16. Blake, 'Milton', p. 520.

Blake insists that the kingdom of heaven is spread out before us constantly, especially in nature, but without the transforming power of what he calls 'Imagination' remains unperceived, veiled. By 'Imagination', he does not mean merely the faculty of the artist to see beyond the surface of things, but the capacity of all humans to participate in Creative Spirit in the largest sense. Because of his poetic expression of such mystical insights, Blake remained for Merton the authentic religious poet in an irreligious age.

Even in Merton's last days Blake remained a central inspiration. On his Asian tour he shared with Dr Raghavan, an expert on Indian aesthetics, Blake's concept of 'Fourfold Vision':

We discussed the difference between aesthetic experience and religious experience: the aesthetic lasts only as long as the object is present. Religious knowledge does not require the presence of 'an object'. Once one has known brahman one's life is permanently transformed from within. I spoke of William Blake and his fourfold vision.¹⁷

And in Merton's final visionary experience at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) when reflecting on the giant statues of the Buddha, he expresses his renewed sense of the holiness of matter: 'The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya...everything is emptiness and everything is compassion'.¹⁸ Blake's language for a similar perception is the phrase: 'For every thing that lives is Holy'.¹⁹ In his final talk in Bangkok on 'Marxism and Monastic Perspectives', where Merton prophesied the fall of social and religious structures and the necessity for each man to stand on his own two feet, he ended on a very Blakean note: 'You cannot rely on structures. The time for relying on structures has disappeared.'²⁰

Merton's text as it finally appeared in *Conjectures* was written and rewritten like a palimpsest or piece of layered stone. The original epiphany occurred when Merton was in the position of Master of Novices, then revised after he had removed to the hermitage, gaining the greater solitude he had long desired. In a journal entry of 20 September 1965, he speaks of his revision process:

[R]ewrote an experience of March 18, 1958 (entry of March 19) in light of a very good meditation of Saturday afternoon, developed and changed.

17. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 204.

18. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, p. 235.

19. Blake, in 'A Song of Liberty', p. 160.

20. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, p. 338.

A lot of telescoping, etc. In a word, transforming a Journal into 'meditations' or 'Pensees'²¹

As Michael Mott points out in his biography *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, the original entry and final version move in 'radically different directions'.²² The first is set in the context of references to the seventeenth-century mystic Traherne (with whom Blake has been compared), and the figure of Hagia Sophia, divine feminine Wisdom. The passage ties to a discussion of the feminine principle as well as Merton's need to be connected with the opposite sex in a more personal fashion. Both Blake and Merton's later concerns have to do with the reintegration of the male and female portions of the self. In fact, the whole of Blake's vast, complicated mythology resolves itself in the nuptial embrace of Albion (fallen England) and Jerusalem (his bride), the masculine and feminine principles, at the end of his long poem *Jerusalem*. Jerusalem in Blake's work is a feminine wisdom figure. In Blake's cosmology the Fall (division of humanity into disparate parts) involves the separation of man from his internal opposite or 'emanation', and the restoration of humankind requires their mystical rejoining. Just a few days before writing his first journal entry on the Fourth and Walnut experience, Merton recorded a significant dream about a sapiential figure of a young Jewish girl he addressed as 'Proverb', who continued to haunt his dreams and appeared later in his poetry. In the same journal entry that contains the Fourth and Walnut epiphany, he addresses her directly in very Blakean terms: '...God is seen and reveals Himself *as man*, that is in us and there is no other hope of finding wisdom than in God-manhood: our own manhood transformed in God!'²³

Merton's reflections in both the original and published versions of the Fourth and Walnut epiphany share two central notions. The first is that Merton himself, though a monk, is one with common humanity. As he puts it in the journal:

Yesterday, in Louisville, at the corner of 4th and Walnut, I suddenly realized that I loved all the people and that none of them were, or, could

21. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: The Journals of Thomas Merton* (ed. Robert E. Daggy; Journals, V, 1963-65; San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 298.

22. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 312.

23. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton* (ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham; Journals, III, 1952-60; San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p.183.

be totally alien to me. As if waking from a dream—the dream of my separateness, of the ‘special’ vocation to be different. My vocation does not really make me different from the rest of men or put me in a special category except artificially, juridically... Thank God! Thank God! I am only another member of the human race.²⁴

In *Conjectures*, the same realization is rephrased in the context of his developing social-political concerns:

...the conception of ‘separation from the world’ that we have in the monastery too easily presents itself as a complete illusion: the illusion that by making vows we become a different species of being, pseudo-angels, ‘spiritual men’, men of interior life, what have you... [W]e are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race and hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest.²⁵

The second half of the epiphany is a vision of what Blake would call ‘the human form divine’. In the original version the focus is concrete and personal, while in *Conjectures* it is more universal:

I have the immense joy of being *man*, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.²⁶

The original entry on the shining light of humanity is a reflection on the relation of the celibate monk to the divine feminine observable in ordinary women he passed on the street:

It is not a question of proving to myself that I either dislike or I like the women one sees in the street. The fact of having a vow of chastity does not oblige one to argument on this point—no special question arises. I am keenly conscious, not of their beauty...but of their humanity, their woman-ness...

...For the woman-ness that is each of them is at once original and inexhaustibly fruitful bringing the image of God into the world. In this each one is Wisdom and Sophia and Our Lady—(my delights are to be with the children of men!).²⁷

In *Conjectures* the discussion of the divine center within each person leads into Merton’s development of the notion of ‘le point vierge’, or

24. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, pp. 181-82.

25. Merton, *Conjectures*, p. 157.

26. Merton, *Conjectures*, p. 157.

27. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 182.

virgin center of purity within the soul, a notion he borrowed from Louis Massignon's work on the Sufi mystic al-Hallaj:²⁸

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, 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. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us... It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.²⁹

This recognition of our unity with both the Godhead and with humanity breaks down the false division between the secular and the sacred, celibate monk and ordinary man, man and woman in a moment of expanded perception. The oppositions become Blakean contraries. The moment occurs within the quotidian, but opens into eternity. It is what Blake called in his epic poem *Milton* (in a phrase quoted by Merton) the 'Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find'.³⁰ In *Raids on the Unspeakable* Merton writes in a similar vein: 'The Christ we seek is our inmost self, and yet infinitely transcends ourselves. He is ourself'.³¹ Blake too uses the metaphor of the blazing man, the solar hero in figures like Orc and Albion and in his painting 'Glad Day', and speaks of the doors and 'gates of perception': 'If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is — infinite'.³²

Blake was not a monk, but a married man who earned his living by engraving with his wife Catherine at his side. Yet in his poverty and rejection by the artistic establishment of his day, he was a kind of solitary. Merton was a monk (in the Syrian sense, a 'man of silence') who lived a solitary life within an institutional structure. Yet he commanded a vast reading public and led an intensely active public life. Both poets were voluble men of silence, artists and mystics whose interiority

28. Rob Baker and Gray Henry (eds.), *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), p. 42.

29. Merton, *Conjectures*, p. 158.

30. Blake, *Milton*, p. 526.

31. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 202.

32. Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', p. 154. In the terms of Blake's early satire, the voice of the 'devil', who speaks these words, represents energy and imagination, qualities seen as 'evil' by the Church.

continually led them back into the world, as the world again drew them back into silence. Like Mary and Martha, the Biblical representatives of the contemplative life and active life in the Middle Ages, Merton and Blake were mystics and activists summing up in themselves and their writings the irreducible union of the 'contraries'. As Blake puts it: 'Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence'.³³ Merton and Blake transcend the dialectical opposition of heretical versus orthodox Christianity by embracing a mystical path in which these oppositions are seen as 'contraries'.

Merton's message to the twenty-first century via Blake is that the cultivation of the mystical and contemplative life is the prerogative and, indeed, responsibility of everyone, whether or not an individual stands within or outside the framework of institutional religion. The issue of heresy versus orthodoxy is superseded by the larger question of one's common humanity.

As Merton puts it in a journal entry (31 July 1961), the authentic position is 'To be detached from all systems without rancor toward them, with insight and compassion. To be truly "Catholic" is to be able to enter into everybody's problems and joys and be all things to all men.'³⁴ Merton and Blake remind us we are commonly rooted in the divine, people of silence (monks) and people of action. Our birthright is the exercise of the creative imagination for the building up of a Jerusalem in the here and now. In a harried and materialist culture like ours, Blake's timely admonition is an invocation of the creative spirit in mankind: 'Let every Christian, as much as in him lies, engage himself openly & publicly before all the World in some Mental pursuit for the Building up of Jerusalem'.³⁵ For Merton, to join his voice to Blake's remained one of the deep pleasures of his life: 'But oh, what a thing it was to live in contact with the genius and holiness of William Blake...!'³⁶

33. Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', p. 149.

34. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (eds.), *The Intimate Merton: His Life from his Journals* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 180.

35. Blake, 'Jerusalem', p. 717.

36. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1948), p. 189.