

# THOMAS MERTON

  

## AND THE GREY MAN

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People who care to look at art, for example at Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*, sometimes say they experience moments when they feel engaged by something other than their own efforts to make sense of what is before them on the canvas. They may feel they have been set free from trying to know about the picture, and in the process, have been able to enjoy an experience of taking part in what the artist is trying to do when representing "another" world. After undergoing such a moment, their responses to the picture may suggest how alike some experiences of art and religion really are. On the face of it, Thomas Merton's early reflections about aesthetic and religious experience frequently point to a pattern like the one I have just outlined. During the process of writing his 1939 Columbia University thesis on William Blake, for example, Merton draws a conclusion that will later influence his own development as a contemplative. It is that the artist and the mystic seem to share the same kind of intuition about God: "This seizure of intelligible realities without using concepts as a formal means is something analogous in both the poet and the mystic, but they operate differently and on different planes."<sup>1</sup> If we pursue Merton's responses within the context of a particular experience of art, we can bring to view his struggle for identity empowered by something other than an impulse, as one of his biographers has put it, "to interpret life in terms of sociological and economic laws."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Thomas Merton, "Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation," in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*; ed. by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 444-445. Hereafter referred to in the text as *LE*.

2. Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 75.

In Thomas Merton's thesis, "Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation," this claim for an analogous relationship between the artist and the mystic seems rooted in his reading of Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*. A key source for the thesis, Maritain, in part, argues that the artist in "pursuing the line of his art . . . tends without knowing it to pass beyond his art."<sup>3</sup> Since the artist's activity resembles the mystic's in this way, there is especially in the fine arts a sort of divine horizon "where matter comes into contact with spirit" (*Art*, p. 27). And for Maritain, because the purpose of art is to "prepare the human race for contemplation," one object of the fine arts is "to produce an intellectual delight, that is to say a kind of contemplation . . . whence the beauty of the work ought to overflow" (*Art*, pp. 27, 62).

That Merton's opinion resembles Maritain's is evidenced in a 25 October 1939 entry from his "Perry Street Journal," printed in *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton*. For example, in this passage Merton argues that discovering the action of Fra Angelico's "Temptation of St. Anthony" leads to an aesthetic stillness like that of contemplation: "Just as prayer leads to stillness and timelessness in contemplation, so the action of this picture leads to contemplation on an aesthetic level."<sup>4</sup> Thus, for the viewer, as much as for the artist, the task becomes one of "realizing what constitutes the action in a good picture" in order to gain "some basis for talking analogically about the joys of heaven" (*SJ*, p. 16). A viewer's efforts, then, will be an on-going discernment of the central action of a good picture. This discernment will not just alter a viewer's responses to the picture. It will effect a new response to its subject matter as well. Only when a viewer's initial perception of a good picture is reformed by the more hidden action or movement of the picture can the person be led into an experience like that of contemplation.

At this juncture, I want briefly to shift the focus from the viewer's responses to a work of art to the effect the artist's work has on a viewer. Some of Merton's thinking about what an artist does when he makes a good picture had already been formulated in his thesis on Blake. There Merton saw in Blake a model of a Christian artist who had "found in art a way of knowing and loving the principle of all Being" (*LE*, p. 430). As early as 1938, Merton was beginning to see the "way" of the artist, not as contradictory to,

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3. Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*; trans. by J. F. Scanlan (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), p. 66. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Art*.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1959), pp. 14-15. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SJ*.

but as complementary with the religious vocation he has in mind at the time. The quest in the thesis is an intellectual one, and it looks into a question about how the discipline of art brought about in Blake a unified awareness of God: "Everything Blake ever wrote, painted, or said," writes Merton later in his St. Bonaventure University teaching notes, "is directly or indirectly concerned with the steps towards achievement of mystical union with God."<sup>5</sup>

In the context of religious experience, then, the question became: how is the discipline of art related to the discipline of contemplation? Merton answered by analogy. Both the artist and the mystic, through their respective disciplines of poetry and contemplation, see alike because they share an awareness of "the possibility of direct intuitive contacts with pure intelligibility" (*LE*, p. 444).

Thomas Merton's analysis of Blake's Imagination brings to view his own early thinking about how the experience of the artist is like that of the mystic's. In the thesis Merton decided favorably on Blake's visionary genius as a defiantly uncritical force, which links the artist and mystic in relationship, and which consequently sets Blake apart from other poets. His genius, argues Merton, "implies a highly developed habitus of art" (*LE*, p. 433). The more usual experience, however, is that the "virtue or habitus of art does not spring fully grown in the artist's mind; [but] it has to be cultivated by definite means" (*LE*, p. 448). Just how the artist develops a habitus of art like Blake's seems to become a primary question for Merton in his life-long search to find a shared ground between mystic and aesthetic experience.<sup>6</sup>

While Thomas Merton recognizes the strength of Blake's poetic genius as making "no distinction between truth and beauty, knowing and loving, but puts them all together in 'Imagination'," he also decides that "it is here that Blake becomes an extremist." Instead St. Thomas becomes the

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

6. For example, in his essay "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," in *Figures from an Apocalypse* (1947), Merton pushes this discussion of aesthetic experience even further. Here he again invokes aesthetic experience as an analogue to "mystical experience which it resembles and imitates from afar." In this discussion he argues that the "mode of apprehension" of an aesthetic experience "is that of 'connaturality'" in that "it reaches out to grasp the inner reality, the vital substance of its object, by a kind of affective identification of itself with it." Recalling Blake in this context, Merton says: "So close is the resemblance between these two experiences that a poet like Blake could almost confuse the two and make them merge into one another as if they belonged to the same order of things" (pp. 101-102). In the 1947 essay, Merton argued that between aesthetic and mystical experience "there is an abyss." In his 1958 revision of this essay, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," although he maintains almost identical language in this passage, Merton cuts the sentence — "And yet there is an abyss between them" (i.e., a "division of life into formally separate compartments of action and contemplation"). In this essay aesthetic intuition becomes recognized as a way of participating in God's creative action: "Aesthetic intuition is not merely the act of a faculty, it is also a heightening and intensification of our personal identity and being by the perception of our connatural affinity with 'Being' in the beauty contemplated" (*LE*, p. 339).

model who best represents a "sense of balance" rather than an extreme for the artist, who is also a mystic. While Blake "inextricably link[ed] up the poetic instinct with his own mysticism," St. Thomas makes distinctions between the role of judgment in art and the artist's intuition of beauty. Thus Merton sees St. Thomas's balance achieved in his ability to couple an artist's delight in or love of beauty in created things with the artist's ability to use judgment: "St. Thomas balances the love of beauty with judgment in the artist: *perfectio artis consistit in iudicando*." Insofar as the "apprehension of beauty implies at once knowledge and ecstasy," St. Thomas recognizes, like Blake, the possibility of an artist enjoying beauty connaturally, that is, "directly and intuitively" and without "any effort of abstraction and analysis" (LE, pp. 445-446).

Merton actually understands Blake's concept of Imagination within the scholastic idea of "virtue" or "habitus" (i.e., "the permanent condition perfecting in the line of its own nature the [subject] which it informs"), and then suggests that Blake's genius "implies a highly developed habitus of art" (LE, p. 431).<sup>7</sup> Having noted Blake's genius as an exception to the usual circumstance of the artist, Merton then looks to St. Thomas Aquinas as one who models the necessary sense of balance between the artist's subjective or connatural involvement in some thing's beauty and the disciplined judgment inherent to art. In this context contemplation is integral to the artist's ability to judge, not just because as a discipline contemplation implies asceticism and sacrifice of physical pleasure for the sake of spiritual good. Contemplation also becomes the important discipline because it involves training the intellect to judge or discern God's essential self as it bursts forth from creation. Because judgment is seen as a practical sign of the habitus of art at work in the artist, the perfection of the artist consists in an on-going discernment of God's presence shining through created things (LE, pp. 442-448).

Merton also uses scholastic categories of thought to account for what the Imagination reveals to the poet when he sees God's splendor burst forth from matter. For example, he borrows again from Maritain's discussion ideas about "form," or the "principle determining the peculiar perfection of everything," and about "claritas," or "the glory of form shining through matter" (LE, p. 443). While Merton identifies form as the "revelation of essence," claritas is seen as the condition of form that best satisfies

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7. It should be noted that Merton reads "virtue" and "habitus" as the same in meaning: "The idea of virtue is the ancient's idea of *habitus*."

the intellect's demand, not just for intelligibility and light, but also for essential beauty.

Merton's analysis of Blake's Imagination suggests something about his own early thinking about the mission of the artist. While the mission of the artist is to reveal God's transcendent intelligence to the world, this mission also presupposes the artist's fundamental "virtue" to discern God's being already active in the world. Imagination in the thesis becomes understood as a process that directs the artist's attention to the transcendent in matter. It gives the artist the freedom to look through nature and "into the very essence of things" (*LE*, p. 445). The mission of the artist, then, is not just a transformation of the natural world, but a transformation of the attention one gives to that world. Because the Imagination directs the artist's attention to discern what is essentially there, the artist will necessarily "see" beyond the typical categories of thought and consequently be freed from the constraints of normal perception. Thus for an artist like Blake, the object of any portrait will always be to show a person's perfection, one's essential likeness to God (*LE*, pp. 435-436).

Christian response to art is based on the intellect's grasp of a portrait's form. What a viewer does when paying attention to a good picture is to share in the same kind of imaginative activity as the artist. That is, as a viewer is engaged by the central action of an artist's work, understanding about what constitutes normal perception is also reformed. One moves, albeit on a different level, towards an awareness of direct and intuitive contact with essential being. The Imagination, then, is a kind of discipline of art that engages perceptual activity in what is eternal and transcendent. Someone who has an intellectual grasp of a "good" picture shares in God's stillness and significance, participates in God's self-creative activity, learns what prayer is, and comes even to participate in the joys of heaven (*SJ*, pp. 14-16). What I have just described is in part a theory of reading, a poetics, that Thomas Merton began to develop while writing his 1939 Columbia Masters thesis. An analysis of Merton's early poetics tells readers something about what is involved in a "Christian response" to a created thing like a picture; but it also suggests how Merton constitutes his version of a "Christian artist." In order to demonstrate what may be involved in, or in this case excluded from, the Merton version of a Christian artist, I want to return to some of the early works and highlight the negative terms of his poetics.

I have already suggested how Merton's analysis of Blake's Imagination gains force through Thomistic assumptions and takes shape through

Thomistic language. In the thesis this analysis of Blake is set up against a critique of naturalism and idealism in art. The issues raised by this critique, especially when they are related to the identity of the artist, establish another model of the artist — the technician artist. The technician artist, as well as the landscapes he fashions, are represented in the novel *My Argument with the Gestapo*, written in 1941, just two years after Merton wrote his thesis. These artists and their landscapes seem to be a function of Merton's critique of naturalism and idealism in art and are therefore worthy of attention.

Merton's critique of artistic idealism actually begins with Plato whose emphasis is on the role of the intellect as it relates to the right working of the state. Thus his inquiry into the nature and function of art is made within the context of the question: what "pursuits make [human beings] better or worse in private or public life."<sup>8</sup> Plato's theory of knowledge makes an extreme distinction between true existence and human making. True existence presupposes that there is a transcendental idea or form for a particular class of created matter. (For all the shoes in the world there is a corresponding form or idea). A cobbler's knowledge about making shoes is closer to ultimate reality and therefore inherently more valuable to society than what an artist does when he makes a picture. Indeed, unlike the cobbler, the artist "will make a likeness of a cobbler though he understands nothing of cobbling." Thus, the work of the artist is an imitation of nature. It is a copy of a copy and therefore is "ruinous to the understanding of the hearers" (*Plato*, pp. 658, 666). Based on this rationale, Plato makes his moral condemnation of poetry.

Of course, Merton is critical of Plato's understanding of art. In fact, Plato's moral condemnation of poetry is, according to Merton, based on a misconception of the function of art. Plato, argues Merton, overemphasizes the role of cognition in the quest for truth. Plato's dependence on cognition, moreover, leads to a perception of the soul divided into good and bad parts, by means of "clear-cut, arbitrary distinctions." The philosopher in the quest for the true nature of things "relies on measurement and calculation" which is "the best part of the soul." By contrast, Plato saw the artist as merely one who imitates or copies nature and therefore as one who does not exercise well the rational principle of the soul. Consequently, the philosopher assumes poetry affects only emotions and not the intellect,

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8. Plato, *The Portable Plato* (New York: Viking Press, 1948), pp. 664-665. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Plato*.

and he understands poetry only as stirring up "the meaner instead of the better parts of the soul." Thus the artist's pictures would adversely affect the citizens of the Republic. Such a dichotomy, in Merton's view, leads ultimately to a "complete misunderstanding of the nature of the artistic process" (LE, p. 439).

As it is represented by Merton, the "generalizing" of the eighteenth century seems to be partly a consequence of Platonic idealism. Such idealism gives way to the creation of "a standard of beauty by which we might presumably judge all men." This impulse to generalizing Merton resists for a couple of reasons. First, Plato's understanding of the soul is based on an assumption that being is "external to the world, entirely separate from it, and above it; [and] . . . faintly reflected in the things of this contingent world." Because Merton assumes that being is integral to the matter of the world, he sees Plato's transcendentalism as a kind of distortion of a particular thing or subject's essential identity. As a consequence, Merton is critical of the eighteenth century's penchant for generalizing for the same reason (LE, p. 441).

Secondly, Merton resists Plato's transcendentalism and the eighteenth century's admiration for standards of beauty for a more pragmatic reason. Standards of beauty inevitably distort individual human feeling and lead to dehumanizing behavior. In other words, the people who utter abstractions, who reduce an individual's God given identity to an ideal form or type, are also the people who sanction the destruction of cities like London and Paris.

Within this critique of artistic idealism, Merton implies that a standard of beauty, because it is an abstraction, can easily be appropriated as propaganda to advance the political interests of the state. In *My Argument with the Gestapo*, the cinema is one artistic medium by which to represent the belief that destroying a city is a legitimate action, and by which to advance one nation's standards of "home" over another's. For example, a German officer, whom the Merton narrator meets in the deserted streets of Paris, speaks of his wish for an ideal home. When the narrator asks this officer where his home is, the German describes "a droll little house in a village or dorf."<sup>9</sup> This is an ideal home, fashioned from movies which he has seen. In fact, the officer claims the "house in the movies is more really Germany than the real places where [he] lived" (MAG, p. 216).

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9. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969), p. 216. Hereafter referred to in the text as MAG.

The German officer does not regard his own experience as valuable. Instead, it is the experience of the romanticized Lew Ayres character from the film of *All Quiet on the Western Front* who is regarded as worthy of attention. Moreover, while this officer emulates Ayres's sadness and loneliness, he also seems to use Ayres's death as the reason to justify his own army's role in the destruction of Paris:

When I entered Paris with the Fuehrer's victorious regiments . . . I remembered that little butterfly [which Ayres reached for before he was shot]. I thought then that Paris ought to have been leveled to the earth, but I really don't care. Besides, it was only a film. (MAG, p. 219)

The consequence of propaganda is clear: human feeling is constantly undermined by abstraction.

Thomas Merton's critique of naturalism in art is as severe as that leveled against idealism. Merton describes eighteenth century society as "largely skeptical or Deistic." The natural religion of this age sought God's will by consulting nature. This version of religion then presumes that human rationality will put one in touch with God's transcendental form. However, because their natural religion focuses exclusively on the use of human sensation and rationality as the means to mediate the quest for transcendental experience, the Deists and their natural religion only fostered a sharper split between humanity and God. As a result, Deists created a passionless religion that in Merton's eyes reduced God to "little more than a good feeling pervading the universe" (LE, p. 412).

Thus Merton reacts to another of this age's extremes: its emphasis on the senses and rationality as primary shaping agents of artistic vision. Because the naturalist artist relies "on the evidence of his senses," this artist copies nature and creates a work whose subject matter portrays an object's recognizable image. The danger here is that an extreme type of naturalism "aims to yield 'sensations as nearly as possible identical with those aroused by the model itself.'" This artist's purpose is not to reveal a person's "essential" portrait. The end instead is an emotional or sensual delight in the subject matter (LE, pp. 436-437).

For Merton the consequence of such an aim is clear: artists who forget to "stress the essential, intellectual character of art," reduce themselves to the status of "trickster, or a clown," who "achieve their effects by trickery, by technical dodges" (LE, pp. 437 & 438). In other words, manual dexterity, the artist's facility or technical achievement, does not constitute the true nature or function of art (LE, pp. 433-434). By implication, a person who views such a work can be seriously misled. In this case, response becomes identified with the subject matter of the picture. A viewer's



response to this kind of picture leads to “the love of creatures as they are in themselves and not as they are in God” (*LE*, p. 437). Such a response, that is, leads to idolatry.

In *My Argument with the Gestapo*, Merton uses landscapes to illustrate the impact idealism and naturalism in art have on the human spirit. For example, at one point the narrator and a group of friends go to the movies. Once inside the theater the narrator notices a little girl named Anne who “just looked solemnly at the screen” (*MAG*, p. 81).<sup>10</sup> This solemn child waiting for the movies to begin overwhelms the narrator with sadness, because she reminds him of his own childhood: “It was like remembering my whole life.” As in his own past experience, the inside of this theater is both gaudy and macabre. The walls are “painted up with marble columns” and are touched up “with the illusion of horrible balustrades over the top of the proscenium arch.” The “gray arching ceilings” are full of “dead decorations,” which are “peopled with distorted, half-draped figures among painted clouds . . . all asking to be swallowed up by the merciful darkness” (*MAG*, pp. 82).

The narrator’s memory of the little girl, Anne, and his description of the theater’s interior suggest the consequences of the technicians’ idealism upon the child’s belief and innocence. His memory of the particular place dramatizes his own recognition of how this landscape functions. In situating Anne within the midst of this place, the scene offers an image of a child buried within a landscape that promotes belief in illusion. In other words, the narrator’s description of the movie theater emphasizes that the theater functions as a kind of tomb. Thus, while inviting the child’s belief in what is fundamentally illusory — movies are copies of nature which in turn is a copy of eternity — the technician artist creates structures (of which the movie theater is a symbol) in the world that aggressively contradict the human spirit, and so form a world picture that denies the need human beings have for contact with transcendental being.<sup>11</sup>

10. In Michael Mott’s *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), he points out that the name Anne was important throughout Merton’s life: in “St. Anne’s (Soho), Anne Winsor, St. Ann, and many later Anns and Annes . . . there is a coincidence in the way the names come together and play off one another” (pp. 63-64; see also p. 424).

11. In a later work like *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), the need for, and the lack of, a radically transformed vision is often dramatized by the way the narrative episodes are organized. Merton’s rendering of his mother’s death is a case in point. In the autobiography, Ruth Merton writes a death bed letter to her son “informing [him] by mail, that she was about to die, and would never see [him] again” (p. 14). But while the narrative speaks of the original toll — “I was very sad” — that his early experience had taken, it is the way the scene is represented here which is telling. The structure of the scene emphasizes the boy’s isolation from his mother. In fact, his isolation is intensified through the writer’s focus on the place. The detail that supposedly absorbs the young Tom’s attention includes “buildings, thick with soot [with] rain dripping from the eaves.” The sky is “heavy with mist and smoke,” and the “sweet sick smell

That these structures of contradiction are integral to the landscape of the world is consistently dramatized throughout the novel. For instance, in chapter twelve the landscape of the present is first introduced when the narrator's car "swings over the brow of a hill" to reveal a "wide country [that] seesaws down and up with space full of fields, trees, lines of identical houses." In fact the landscape projects only a veneer of tranquility and peace in which its sky is like that "in an eighteenth century landscape painting" and its soldiers stand at ease "with their helmets off their heads and their arms folded" (MAG, p. 100).

But the reader may also notice that in this description there is a pattern that organizes the space itself: the "wide country seesaws down and up with space." The images of guns "all pointing at the southeast sky" and of "gunners" [who] stand against the sky" reproduce a pattern of potential violence hidden in the midst of this landscape. In other words, pervading this space is a shifting "down and up" pattern that reveals the landscape as an elaborate camouflage for the material of war. Moreover, by disclosing how the space in this landscape is organized, the narrator also exposes the manipulative and self-destructive actions of its creators (MAG, p. 100).

From this initial perception about how the space of this landscape is organized, the narrator, some ten pages later, is able to "turn again and look once more at the landscape." As he sees it reappear within the context of war, the narrator understands not only why it seemed in the past to be "without harmony, in a state of contradictions," but also to see how the landscape itself now is "incomplete without the anti-aircraft battery." Responses to this landscape, especially as they pertain to the past and childhood, connect the narrator's new understanding of "the relation between idealism and ugliness" with the childhood penchant for romantic distortion and self-deception. The child's view of the landscape ranged from a nostalgic longing for "what the landscape had been once," to a vague and utopian wish for "what the technicians dreamed it ought to have

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of the hospital and gas-house" (p. 15). Like the little girl Anne in the novel, the narrator situates the boy within a landscape that virtually boxes him in: he sits in a car, which rests in a yard which is surrounded by "black brick buildings, thick with soot."

This episode relocates Merton's critique of naturalism and idealism within the conventional wisdom of the day. While the scene dramatizes a boy's separation from his mother, it also identified Ruth Merton as an important source of his isolation. Ruth Merton's ideas about child rearing help to create the situation of her son's isolation: "And since I was destined to grow up with a nice, clear, optimistic and well-balanced outlook on life, I was never even taken to the hospital to see mother . . . And this was entirely her own idea" (p. 14). The boy's "subconscious rejection" of the fact of his mother's dying reflects a critique, not so much of his mother, but of the conventions that create conditions offering no relief from the pain and grief of death. Indeed Merton asks what good it would have been for him to be exposed to death without the means — "any prayer, any Sacrament" — to "make some kind of meaning out of it."

been." Within the context of peace, then, childhood "misunderstandings" had, in effect, displaced the present landscape's reality and permanence: "I could never see what it' [i.e., the landscape] was, and I believed it was temporary" (MAG, pp. 110-111).

The child's romanticizing of the past is, however, only a part of the picture. It is finally the technician who makes the ugly believable and who legitimizes the ongoing "dialectic between disorder and all the confident techniques behind disorder" (MAG, p. 110). The so-called dreaming technician is the builder of a landscape that invites and sustains the childlike belief in what is fundamentally a pattern of aggressive contradiction. In this same chapter, the narrator meets another character who is tagged the "officer of artillery." This officer represents that class of technicians I have just described; and he reflects their fundamental misconceptions about the nature and function of art.

The officer speaks a paean of praise to Cambridge, but his praise takes shape within a dematerialized landscape. Images like shining "pools of ice" and "brittle buildings" characterize this supernatural place. The rooms and buildings, the very architecture of the place itself, become spiritualized and without foundation in the earth. Moreover, the officer celebrates Cambridge as a kind of sacred place in which "the most abstract whisper of discord" is expelled, leaving only the "cleanliness of mathematics" to "shine still in my mind." Meanwhile titles like "old Cambridge" and "Gray Cambridge" emphasize the personal feeling that the officer attaches to the place. Thus, besides describing it as a sacred place, the officer memorializes Cambridge as a great, wise parent who begets a happy society of faithful servants, of which he is an example (MAG, p. 107).

For the officer, Cambridge embodies a wish for a place secure from "the time of disorder." In his speech, images and terms of geometry shape his memory of Cambridge, but in so doing, they reorder life experience, turn memory into "new mental structures," and place both memory and experience outside of time. Within this landscape, life is realized within "one polygonal experience of order." Church bells sing out "Quantum, Quantum," and water sliding under a bridge bears the sound of the name of Euclid. Time itself becomes converted into "three lucid and concentric spheres" that "murmur the harmonious names of Newton and Kepler." The officer's memory of this place takes on the appearance of permanence and unity (MAG, pp. 106-107).

The world the officer represents, however, is available to him only indirectly, built as it is "upon the base of your' [i.e., Cambridge's] abstract

isosceles peace" (*MAG*, p. 106). Here disorder and discord are not a part of the picture, because the picture itself evolves out of the perspective of geometry. But the reality of a world of peace and harmony is undermined by the officer's own perceptual practices.

The so-called "mental structures" which the officer generates finally rely on evidence communicated by his senses. The officer produces a picture of a rigid and spiritualized landscape because his feelings of praise for Cambridge are identified with an intellectual activity that intends only to measure out and define the material world. Ultimately, immediate experience and transcendental intuition are shut out in order to accommodate his wish for a timeless order of peace and harmony. The mind's reliance on sensual evidence undermines the spirit of praise the officers intend to convey.

This discussion of Merton's early works has come to suggest the following: Thomas Merton puts into question the meaning of "normal perception," posits a series of opposing terms and produces any number of formulations for the differences between normal seeing and imagination, or the subject matter and the central action of the picture.

As I have represented them, the issues raised by both the critique of idealism and naturalism in art and the analysis of the Blakean Imagination, especially as they relate to the person of the artist in the world, establish two opposing identities. In the novel they are conveniently identified as the "crazy poet" and the "dreaming technician" artist. What I have tried to suggest thus far is that the technician's identity is a function of the critique and the analysis.

Merton's critique, on the one hand, calls into question the meaning of ordinary or normal perception. As we have seen, normal perception tends to maintain the negative and secondary terms of these early poetics. Normal perception suggests the technician artist creates a landscape, or fashions a subject matter, or devises a pattern that denies a person's fundamental need for direct and immediate experience of God.

The German officer, the woman character named B., the officer of the artillery, and the little girl Anne all suggest the power of the technician to circumscribe systematically the identity of a person to the will of the state. Although motivated by dreams of a world ordered by peace and harmony, these technicians achieve their ends through perceptual and intellectual practices ordered exclusively by the rules of empirical science and Platonic logocentrism. The effect of their efforts on the human community is political uniformity, moral deterioration of the institutions of

society, spiritual denial, and intellectual contradiction.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, Merton's analysis of Blake's Imagination brings to view the more hidden dynamics of visionary sight. I have already suggested that Merton saw Blake as the poet who perfectly realized a unified conception of the religious artist. For Merton, Blake's genius lay in his ability to know and love God through the Imagination. The category of the Imagination, then, becomes the special type of vision by which one comes to see God's glory bursting forth from the created world. This vision is not dependent on perception of natural phenomena as these are mediated through the senses. Nor does this vision especially value or even rely on the intellect's ability to reason or to have discourse about nature. Instead, Merton sees Blake's Imagination as the vehicle for a radical transformation of the individual's normal perceptual activity which, in its "usual" tendency towards analysis and definition, excludes transcendental intuition and shuts out immediate experience of God.

The process of moving from seeing things by virtue of normal perception to seeing things by virtue of a transformed perception is often reflected in Merton's journals. Certain episodes of a life, especially when represented in the act of writing, allow the writer to reflect on the differences between a pattern, event, or person as they exist in an apparently random physical space or context and the interpretive moves by which that pattern or event is made into a personal meaning, symbol, or history of one's own. One of these moves involves a distinction between normal perception and the "consciousness of perception," and for Merton, the

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12. The mythic figure inspiring Merton's critique of naturalism and idealism in the novel is Blake's Urizen, a figure who "represents empiricism and doubt, and also dogmatism, because he is blind to imagination, passion, and spirit" (*LE*, p. 427). In the character of Mrs. Frobisher is suggested the effects of Urizen upon daily, family life: manners, duty, allegiance to country, the worship of science, all of these take precedence over the individual, imagination, spontaneity, or love of God. Mrs. Frobisher makes speeches comparing horsemanship to good manners and *noblesse oblige*; she gives sermons on the duty the narrator has "to run with the pack;" and she teaches her children "a lot of lessons in utilitarian morality" (*MAG*, pp. 59-71).

The Merton narrator's analysis of Cambridge represents the moral deterioration of the institution to which the individual has been subjected. The narrator hears the decay of "dried scraps of putty falling from [Cambridge's] windows onto the linoleum floors," and sees the sun color the streets of Cambridge "like the parched skin of dying protestant bishops." The narrator smells a sort of pollution that bespeaks moral contradiction of "the awful cleanness of soap in the dank showers" but which cannot remove the stain of suicide "where the soccer player hanged himself." Even the "thought of Cambridge . . . empties like old gin out of a glass that has been standing several days, among the clean plates." Here the action of emptying out suggests how the thought pervades and unobtrusively contaminates "the clean plates" from which others will feed themselves.

The narrator's responses to his memory of Cambridge also depict one of the causes of past suffering. In an important way, these responses become a poetic anatomy of the more demonic aspects of Cambridge. This anatomy is achieved by generalizing particular memories in order to suggest the individual's suffering. For example, while we notice that the narrator tastes Cambridge "in the broken skin of [his] lips," the meaning of the sentence is completed by virtue of a comparison: "I taste you . . . like the bloody leather . . . boxing glove." The narrator tastes a force of physical violence, of which the broken skin of his lips is a sign. Thus the poet identifies Cambridge as an obscure and malevolent force which does psychological and finally even physical violence to the individual (*MAG*, pp. 107-109).

recognition of such a move yields an important moment of self-discovery.

"The big discovery I made there in 1938," writes Merton of a train ride he took through the Delaware Valley, "when riding with [Robert] Lax was only, after all, that I was capable of reflecting upon an act of consciousness of my own." It was only "since then that [he had] been able to write any poems." Some of what this discovery means is spelled out in an entry from his "Perry Street Journal" from the fall of 1939. In this entry, Merton indicates that the "big discovery" made clear the difference between simply seeing a random pattern of things and seeing the pattern in relation to an act of thought: "I recognized it [a billboard seen on another train ride, this time through Long Island] as something I had seen before, but I happened to be thinking about it, in relation to some telegraph poles moving in front of it." In other words, what is clarified is a "distinction between a normal perception and a reflection upon the consciousness of perception." The big discovery makes clear the relationship between, in this case, the random memory of "a series of things that just happen to be there" and which "never meant anything," and an action of consciousness which makes "something I had seen before" into a "part of a pattern" and, we might add parenthetically, into a meaning "of my own."<sup>13</sup>

By making the scene "a pattern of my own," Merton also discovers an identity that accounts for a change in the way he attends to the scene. Merton's negotiation of random events into a personal meaning suggests a symbolic transformation, not so much of material or events, but of the kind of attention he gives to the things or events within a particular scene or context. Perception is now transformed by virtue of his power to recognize or to make his own patterns. Thus the meanings he fashions as poet alter attention habitually tied to or associated with "normal perception." While this interpretive move yields a moment of self-discovery that shifts attention from perception of patterns to reflections "upon an act of consciousness of my own," such a move also links Merton to symbolic relationships friendly to his newly discovered identity as poet or writer.

In an October 1939 "Perry Street Journal" entry, Merton writes about various paintings of Fra Angelico, El Greco and Breughel that he saw while at the World's Fair Art Exhibition. In this entry he does a close analysis of one of Breughel's works, "Wedding Dance." This particular reflection is

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13. For the two journal entries to which I refer, see Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, pp. 114 and 136. I found Mott's chapter, "The Pasture, Merton's Heart," especially helpful in pointing out Merton's early concerns and struggles as a writer.

valuable because it manifests the major tendencies of the poetics which I have just outlined.

In this analysis of the Breughel, Merton identifies a “pyramidal arrangement of people formed by the central dance,” which he calls “the basis of composition” in the picture. This first pyramid contains the more active elements of the wedding feast, and these images seem ordinary enough at first glance. At the apex of the pyramid, Merton notices two cartoon-like couples. From this point, his perception of the work moves to the right, encompassing a first line of spectators, and then moving to a group of pipers in the lower right corner, finally to a sudden notice of the red and white colors which emerge from, but which also animate, the crowd of onlookers. Merton’s attention to the first pyramid then gives way to a second one; but the second pyramid captures his attention even more suddenly and forcefully. At its apex is “one, rigid, solitary, little man in grey with his back to the whole business, simply looking away at nothing” (*SJ*, p. 17).

Merton’s interest in how the artist and the mystic share in a direct and intuitive knowledge of God without the benefit of concepts finds expression, ironically enough, in his analysis of the Breughel painting. As viewer Merton participates in the action of this picture by virtue of the symbolic figure — the solitary, grey man. In this solitary figure, Merton has found the key to the whole composition because the grey man “is paying no attention to anything, doing nothing . . . ignoring everything about the subject matter.” The grey man, who is associated with a meaning of not paying attention to the subject matter, is the central “objective” action of the picture itself. However, this figure also directs Merton’s “subjective” response to the picture. The grey man, then, symbolically orders the attention Merton now gives to the subject matter. Thus, on one hand Merton is now free to review and discover an area of the picture that had gone previously unnoticed. On the other hand, Merton’s original response to Breughel’s accomplishment as an artist is profoundly reformed (*SJ*, pp. 17-18).

That his appreciation of Breughel as an artist has been deepened directs our attention as readers to at least one kind of relationship that Merton was choosing to establish and develop at this period of his life. But to see the importance of this kind of relationship, I want first to invoke another: the relationship possible here between Thomas Merton and his contemporaries who view the pictures with him at the exhibition. According to Merton, individuals in the crowd frequently reflect their own atti-

tudes to art as a sort of commodity. They memorize the subject matter of the picture and use the knowledge they have gained as a kind of currency to buy themselves social status. While they have appropriated a certain rote learning about great art from their guidebooks, there is no guarantee that they will penetrate to the unknowing heart of the picture's form. On the contrary, crowd responses to the El Grecos seem to reflect emotional reactions to the images of sickness and suffering which betray only the thinnest veneer of understanding, and which lead them away from a deeper sharing in, and even enjoyment of, what the artist has done (*SJ*, pp. 19-20).

Such reactions awaken in Merton a sort of horror about the "subject matter" of the world and towards his contemporaries. The people at the art exhibition do not wake up to themselves and talk like people when they view the El Grecos. Instead, they themselves talk "like the possessed." And in his own reaction to these responses, Merton indicts his age as one "of hypocondriacs and murderers and sterilisers." His question is finally about the pictures that "we" make: can "our pictures . . . be said to die, when the can't even come to life" in the first place? (*SJ*, pp. 20-21).

That Merton chose to establish another kind of relationship during this period of his life is made apparent by the way he developed aspects of his own understanding about art. This particular passage makes us aware of the relationship that Merton attempts to create between himself and the absent artist, in this case, Breughel. By identifying the grey man as the key element or central action in the picture, Merton has enriched an implied relationship between himself and the absent artist. Merton comes more fully to appreciate Breughel and then to situate him in a modern context of experience. Even more importantly, however, the grey man brings together in tentative synthesis earlier reflections about William Blake and St. Thomas. I have already suggested that, with his back turned to the wedding dance, the grey man becomes the central action of the Breughel painting. But the grey man also recalls the Blakean identity, that is his genius, and the "meaning" of that identity — that the artist and the mystic share the same kinds of intuitions about God. In their own way, either meet God "face to face," without using concepts or having recourse to analysis. The grey man suggests just this aspect of such a meeting.

The grey man, however, also reintroduces some of the values that St. Thomas represents in his ability to strike a balance between emotions and the intellect. As transforming agent of the way Merton initially attended to the scene, the grey man represents an identity that is free from habitual



control or domination by "normal perception," as suggested, for example, by the responses of the people at the exhibition. In this sense, the grey man does not come to mean "rejection" of these responses or of the subject matter. Instead, the figure represents an attitude of refusal to have attention shaped or identity claimed by responses like these alone. Merton's negotiation of the subject matter into a personal meaning suggests a symbolic transformation, not of the patterns perceived, but of the attention he gives to possible life-giving relationships which are otherwise hidden by the subject matter, distorted by contemporary responses, or finally excluded altogether by the technicians' empiricism and idealism.

As a result of following Merton's perceptual activities through from the dance to the grey man, one begins to gain a feeling for the quality of this transformed attention. While perceived in relation to the subject matter, the grey man disappears from sight, the sight that is of the people watching the celebration of the wedding feast. (I have tried to suggest that the people caught up in the dance include not just the figures of the painting but also the people at the art exhibition who are moved only by the subject matter of the painting.) If, as we have seen, the "meaning" of the grey man is "not paying attention to the subject matter," what is left out, or what has gained Merton's attention as the central action of the picture, is a figure or a form which undermines the very importance, the significance, the very meaning of the wedding dance. The grey man at the margin of this dance appears as the secret center or activity of the dance itself and sustains this center only insofar as he disappears from the view of the crowd which engages the general dance.

Ultimately, the grey man represents the sort of identity necessary for Merton actually to participate in the subject matter of the picture, if not the world. As "perceived" in relation to this secret center, the grey man presents the most radical and enlivening action in the picture, because he revives in Merton a response of wonder or admiration. This figure is a new revelation of the self, of a free and creative identity, situated in the midst of a subject matter, or world, that is normally perceived as being hostile to such identity. Thus Merton's response of profound admiration for, if not wonder at, "just how much Breughel had done with his pattern" enforces, in this case, a movement away from the world's apparent hostility and towards the artist's efforts to bring good pictures to life. Such a response makes the absent artist present, or in Merton's language, "very modern looking." What is also made available for Merton is the healthy, fertile, and life-giving meaning that the artist and his picture has come to represent. In

establishing this link between himself and the absent artist, whether he be Breughel, Blake, or Aquinas, Thomas Merton has chosen relationships, largely symbolic, but vitally friendly to his own creative efforts within the domain of the modern and public world.

By way of conclusion, I would like to reflect briefly on my “method” of reading some of Merton’s early texts because out of this activity of mine has come a different view, I think, of the origins of an “identity” of interest to many readers of this historical person named Thomas Merton.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence of my analysis, I am able to establish the grey man’s status within the picture. This suggests two things: first, that there is something strange or paradoxical about the quality of experience inherent to Merton’s interests and perceptual practices; second, that my account of the grey man is possible because I become aware of the operations Merton used to make sense of a concern he had about artistic experience leading him to contemplation. From this concern, so goes my argument, Merton created a poetics, or a set of “reading procedures” that allowed him to distinguish between other related concerns: for example, to distinguish between the historical person of Blake and the Blakean Imagination, between genius and judgment, between contemplative and artistic experience, between normal perception and artistic vision, between the subject matter and the central action of the picture. I have called these procedures Merton’s early poetics because they reflect some of the rules he uses to reduce the strangeness or the paradox of someone like Blake, who came to know and love God through his art.

My observation of his perceptual practices or my outlining of some of the conventions he makes use of when writing are ways I have, or anyone has, to talk about an identity of interest to us — in this case, the artist-contemplative. But this is not really the point of this reflection on “my method of reading” Merton’s early texts. The point is to suggest that my method has an effect on me. In other words, producing a text which pays attention to Merton’s practices of observation and response has influenced what I do when I read or write. And when this awareness is situated within a particular community of readers, as I am attempting to do here, I believe a shift will occur in the way readers of Merton will read and discuss this person and the concerns he laid before us.

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14. Jonathan Culler’s *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975) helped me to find the language I needed to describe my reading experience of Merton’s early works. See especially his chapter, “Convention and Naturalization.”