Thomas Merton on William Blake: "To look through matter into eternity"

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Background

The literature on William Blake's impact on Thomas Merton is now extensive. At the 1998 Oakham Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain, Sonia Petisco presented a paper "Recovering our Innocence: the Influence of William Blake on the Poetry of Thomas Merton."[1] Later in the same year Michael Higgins published his book-length exploration of the shaping influences on Merton's radical spirituality: *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton*.[2] In that work Higgins proposed that

> The... key to [Merton's] spiritual geography... is William Blake... the arch-rebel, provoking the establishment of his day and defying all convention with his madly experimental art and poetry.[3]

Higgins qualifies: "Artistically, spiritually, and intellectually, Merton laboured to achieve for his own time something of that visionary imagination of Blake."[4] This is an important scholarly insight. More recently, in 2001, Ross Labrie published his rather more measured study *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*, which explores the links between Merton's spirituality and creativity and skillfully locates this centrally in what Merton learned from Blake. Labrie writes:

> As with Blake, for Merton, the font of the imagination, seen as a means of attaining a direct, ontological insight into being, awakened the mind at certain times to what, although frequently overlooked, was always and everywhere present.[5]

In support of these important claims I point out that in *New Seeds of Contemplation* Merton links poetry, music and art with the contemplative experience[6] and passionately expresses his belief that spiritual liberation can only be found through an acknowledgement of Blake's impulse of inclusiveness which, in its challenge to sanctimonious moralism, led to Blake's repeated declaration: "Everything that Lives is Holy":

> Let the Priests of the Raven of dawn, no longer in deadly black, with hoarse note curse the sons of joy. Nor his accepted brethren whom, tyrant, he calls free; lay the bound or build the roof. Nor pale religious letchery call that virginity, that wishes but acts not! For every thing that lives is Holy.

This is from Blake's "Song of Liberty" at the end of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Blake repeated this line in *Vision of the Daughters of Albion* and in *America a Prophecy*.[7] Merton, in his chapter "Everything That Is, Is Holy" in *New Seeds* translates this challenge to Catholic exclusiveness into the following exclamation:

> The only true joy on earth is to escape from the prison of our own false self, and enter by love into union with the Life Who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature and in the core of our own souls. In His love we possess all things and enjoy fruition of them, finding Him in them all. And thus as we go about the world, everything we meet and everything we see and hear and touch, far from defiling, purifies us and plants in us something more of contemplation and of heaven.[8]

There have also been numerous incidental references to Blake's impact on Merton's life and work prior to these recent sustained explorations. I am referring in particular to Monica Furlong's 1980 biography in which she places Blake at the center of Merton's spiritual development. About Merton's formative period she writes: "In a world of falsity and dangerous ambiguity, Blake seemed a trustworthy guide, prophet, and guru."[9] And she quotes Merton's own words:

> I have to acknowledge my own debt to him, and the truth which may appear curious to some, although it is really not so: that through Blake I would one day come, in a round-about way, to the only true Church, and to the One Living God, through His Son, Jesus Christ.[10]

So this essay, while not ground-breaking, attempts to bring together some of the key insights of all this good work. The essay also tries to present it from the context of someone working in Australia with a special interest focused on William Blake's impact on contemporary spirituality and the arts.

Blake's Presence in Merton's Life and Thought

My own chief interest is the way Blake's presence in Merton's life—both at the beginning and at the end— helps to throw into relief some of the most interesting tensions in Merton's spiritual and creative practice. These tensions are arguably the source of his true distinctiveness as poet and contemplative and are possibly the source of his liberating impact on his many audiences; these tensions lie behind the intensity of his commitment in every area of his life and they also lie behind the persistence of his revolt against solidifying structures: poetic, spiritual and personal.

Blake, I believe, was spiritually and artistically a profound influence on Merton's inner life and on the way that life ultimately found its deepest expression through the relationship between contemplative and creative practice. Briefly let me explain how I see the shape of this complex influence.

To begin with there is the paradoxical fact—we have heard Merton tell us—that Blake (iconoclast and hater of the established church) was the stimulus for his conversion to Catholicism; but it was not merely conversion to this faith, rather it was his taking on one of the most rigorous forms of this faith as a member of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance. Popularly known as Trappists, this Order sought to recover the strict asceticism and life of poverty expressed in the life and writings of St Bernard.[11] Against this background it seems initially paradoxical that Merton championed the author of "The Garden of Love" one of the great critics of the clerical garb and all it stood for:

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And Thou shalt not. writ over the door;
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore.

> And I saw it was filled with graves,
> And tomb-stones where flowers should be:
> And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
> And binding with briars, my joys & desires.[12]

Indeed rather than any kind of recoil, Merton's 1939 Master's thesis demonstrated a passionate interest into Blake as a poet and mystic expressing Thomistic and Maritainian insights into the nature of reality. As well as this, Blake served as a catalyst for Merton's own radicalism in artistic and spiritual matters. In the M.A. thesis, Merton drew on the aesthetics of Coomaraswamy, of Hinduism and of Neo-Platonism to indicate the ways in which Blake's thinking, artistically, religiously was a shaking of the foundations. Here is the conclusion of Chapter 1 of the thesis, where he quotes directly from Coomaraswamy; this clearly foreshadows Merton's own later search for "unitive," interfaith connections:

> ...because Blake is closer to Medieval Christians than to his own contemporaries, he is also closer to the religious thinkers of the East. Coomaraswamy says:
>
> There was a time when Europe and Asia could and did actually understand each other very well. Asia has remained herself, but subsequent to the extroversion of the European consciousness and its preoccupation with surfaces it has become more and more difficult for European minds to think in terms of unity.[13]

Merton was here attuned to an insight that would radicalize Christian thinking in decades to come. In 1993 Karen Armstrong in her chapter "The God of the Mystics" in *A History of God* summarizes what she sees as the recent shift that has led to a trenchant critique of a Christianity that does not listen to its mystics:

> Christianity made a human person the centre of the religious life in a way that was unique in the history of religion... Yet a personal God can become a grave liability. He can be a mere idol carved in our own image, a projection of our limited needs, fears and desires. We can assume that he loves what we love and hates what we hate, endorsing our prejudices instead of compelling us to transcend them... Since the West has never been very enthusiastic about mysticism, even during its heyday in other parts of the world, there is little understanding of

> the intelligence and discipline that is essential to this type of spirituality... Yet there are signs that the tide may be turning. Since the 1960's Western people have been discovering the benefits of certain types of Yoga and religions such as Buddhism, which have the advantage of being uncontaminated by an inadequate theism...[14]

Already in 1939, Merton was recognizing these limitations too and discovering, in the work of his hero William Blake, new sources for challenging "the extroversion of the European consciousness."

Merton's interest in William Blake did not stop with his 1939 thesis. In the year of his death, 1968, he published an essay "Blake and the New Theology." This was a review of Thomas Alteizer's book *The Radical Vision of William Blake.*[15] Merton strongly resists Alteizer's extreme appropriation of Blake into the "Death of God" movement and yet goes on to sing the author's praise for presenting a Blake who

> ...saw official Christendom as a *narrowing* of vision, a foreclosure of experience and of future expansion, a locking up of and securing of the doors of perception. He substituted for it a Christianity of openness, of total vision... not seeking to establish order in life by shutting off a little corner of chaos and subjecting it to laws and to police....[16]

From this perspective, Blake remained for Merton a potent source of the spiritual openness that he would develop in his last years, helping to express in practice and deepen the implications of the decree *Nostra Aetate,* which emerged out of Vatican Two in 1965:

> The Church therefore has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and cultures (NA 2).

In *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967) Merton would argue that without an acknowledgement of the "the spiritual heritage of the East" the West was hastening "the tragedy that threatens man and his civilizations."[17]

Merton's assimilation, at the core of his spiritual and creative life, of Blake's mystical poetry and painting, sheds further light on

the sources of ambivalence in Merton towards his own creativity. As is well known, Merton determined to give up poetry on entering the monastery—partly as a result of his conservative critique of what he saw as his reckless bohemian youth—but later in life he came to accept his poetry as central to his spiritual practice. His essay "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal" (1958) is a key document for illustrating this progression in his thinking. Here in the *Author's Note* he writes:

> *...the implied conflict between "contemplation" as rest and poetic creation as activity is even more misleading. It is all wrong to imagine that in order to "contemplate" divine things, or what you will, it is necessary to abstain from every kind of action and enter into a kind of spiritual stillness where one waits for "something to happen".... Contemplation is not to be thought of as a separate department of life, cut off from all man's other interests and superseding them. It is the very fullness of a fully integrated life. It is the crown of life and of all life's activities.*[18]

Blake's Impact on Merton's Art

The comments on the nature of Blake's creativity in the M.A. thesis, also give insight into the nature of Merton's poetic practice and into the complexity of his relationship to this practice. At one point in this thesis, commenting on Blake's seeming lack of interest in the finished product, Merton writes mysteriously: "The created work is not art, it is the result of art."[19] What he means in the context is that art, poetry—their external forms—are the agents or tools for something higher; in and for themselves they are not so important. So Merton from this ground could be comfortable with a number of aspects of his own artistic practice.

Like Blake, he could often be less concerned with the finished product than some formalist artists. The essence was *in here*, not *out there* on the page; this will become evident in the discussions of particular poems later in this essay. Like Blake, Merton could also, paradoxically, be an artist *without* being an artist. There are those memorable last words of Blake recorded by the woman who heard him singing some of his songs on his deathbed and to whom he said: "they are not mine, not mine." So the insight that Merton had into Blake in 1939 would in fact develop and provide the ground for his mature assessment of the nature and purpose of his own creative output. There is a memorable journal entry in

1966 in which Merton explores the narrow line between that which is not art and that which is art. Indeed here "not art," mysteriously becomes the ground of that which is the basis of all art:

> I can't honestly say I know anything except that it is late, that I can't sleep, that there are fireflies all over the place, and that there is not the remotest possibility of making any poetic statement on this. You don't write poems about nothing.
>
> And yet somehow this nothing seems to be *everything*. I look at the south sky, and for some ungodly reason, for which there is no reason, everything is complete. I think of going back to bed in peace without knowing why, a peace that cannot be justified by anything, by any reason, any proof, any argument, any supposition. There are no suppositions left. Only fireflies.[20]

For the purpose of grounding some of these ideas in the texture of Merton's poetry, I would at this point like to return to the subtitle of this study "To look through matter into eternity" which is Merton's phrase for describing Blake's mode of seeing; "eternity" is also one of the most repeated words in Blake's Complete Works.[21] The phrase pinpoints the way Blake helped to evoke in Merton a creativity that looked to the transcendent and that could fly in the face of the canons of constructed, earthbound art. It also focuses attention on an outlook that would ultimately resolve Merton's conflicts between the poet and the contemplative and between the competing religious impulses in his life. While the phrase occurs in an early work, it is my contention that it is seminal in the effect it had on the rest of Merton's life.

This study will conclude with an exposition of how Merton illuminates this phrase and the bearing it has on two poems.

For Merton, as for that other great Catholic poet a century before him, Gerard Manley Hopkins (on whom Merton wanted to write a doctoral dissertation), poetic creativity would, from some points of view, seem at odds with the life of pure contemplation. Merton certainly experienced this tension and it took him a lifetime to come to a place where he could honour the experience of poetic creation as a vital tool in contemplative practice. To quote again from his 1958 essay "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," Merton affirmed *"true contemplation is inseparable from life and from the dynamism of life—which includes work, creation, production, fruitfulness, and above all love."*[22] But in the early forties, in the early days of his monastic life, as Michael Higgins records "Merton

was determined... to abandon poetry"[23] ... and may well have, had it not been for the work—behind the scenes—of Robert Lax and Mark Van Doren who helped to have his first poems published in 1944.[24]

With the hindsight of Merton's later development it is however possible to see that the groundwork for this understanding of the true relationship between creativity and the spiritual life was already being firmly laid in the 1939 M.A. essay on Blake. For Blake, while he was regarded with suspicion and contempt by the orthodox communities of his day, was profoundly committed to his experience of the spiritualising power of the imagination, both in its direct links to Jesus and in its liberating social power.

For Merton, as for Blake, the imagination was not something that distracted the mind with images of the natural world, taking it away from the heart of contemplation. This was the complaint of Hopkins's superior who felt that nature was a distraction and therefore suggested that Hopkins burn all his poems. Rather, imagination was a profoundly transformative agent. This is how Merton describes Blake's relationship to nature at the conclusion of his M.A. thesis:

> One of the most important ideas in Blake is that nature, simply as the eye sees it, is utterly unimportant to art.... [Blake] found it literally impossible to draw directly from nature. We have seen what confusion and despair he fell into when he tried to do so. Yet once nature had been assimilated and transformed by his imagination, it blazed before him in a vision fired with the glory of God. Nature, for Wordsworth, was God's greatest and most important creation, and so he, too, saw God in nature. But for Blake, nature is only the hem of God's garment.[25]

My contention is, that this passage give an important insight into how Merton ultimately was able to reconcile what he experienced in his life as a destructive tension between creativity and contemplation. This passage also helps to give some explanation of the Blakean texture of Merton's verse which like Blake is often less concerned with perfection of form and verisimilitude, and more concerned with spontaneity and symbolic resonances.

The Poetry: "Elegy for the Monastery Barn" and "Evening"

A poem such as "Elegy for the Monastery Barn," for example, literally and metaphorically transfigures an event in nature into "a vision fired with the glory of God." Its tone is casual, almost conversational, yet filled with a profound symbolism. With his wry humor Merton begins by personifying the burning barn as a woman stricken with vanity:

As though an aged person were to wear
Too gay a dress
And walk about the neighbourhood
Announcing the hour of her death...
For: "Look!" she calls to the country,
"Look how fast I dress myself in fire!"[26] (lines 1–4, 9–10)

Soon the image shifts to a sense of nostalgia, past and present, at the meaning the barn has provided for all who knew her, the monks who laboured there during the summer & generations of cattle:

She, in whose airless heart
We burst our veins to fill her full of hay...

Look! They have all come back to speak their summary:
Fifty invisible cattle, the past years
Assume their solemn places one by one.
This is the little minute of their destiny.
Here is their meaning found. Here is their end. (lines 15–16, 28–32)

But the imagery of the flames rising from the barn here serves Merton's purpose to reach into the deeper significance of this event, a potent reminder of the awesome and terrifying sacramental dimension of creation:

Sweet Christ, how terribly her beauty burns us now! (line 19)

Laved in the flame as in a Sacrament
The brilliant walls are holy
In their first-last hour of joy.

Fly from within the barn! Fly from the silence
Of this creature sanctified by fire!
Let no man stay inside to look upon the Lord! (lines 33–38)

This terrifying "creature sanctified by fire!" echoes that mixture of awe and dread that accompanies Blake's reaction to the "fearful symmetry" of his Tyger:

> In what distant deeps or skies
> Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
> On what wings dare he aspire?
> What the hand dare seize the fire?

And the transfiguration of the wooden barn into something "brilliant," "holy" and sacramental echoes the poem "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire." Here Merton's other poetic mentor, Hopkins, also dramatizes the cleansing and sacramental power of conflagration, particularly the power to change the most ordinary "matchwood" into "diamond":

> In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
> I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and
> This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
> Is immortal diamond.[27]

About Merton's "Elegy for the Monastery Barn" Ross Labrie has written:

> .. the poem was not just an exercise in imaginative creation but also a technique by which the mind could be brought to apprehend different levels of reality at once, not unlike Blake's fourfold vision.[28]

While I agree with Labrie here with the purpose and outcome, I would question the word "technique." To me it seems more of an occasion of grace, of openness, which Merton allowed his pen to transcribe in response to this momentous event. Already in the 1939 essay Merton gave several telling examples of how he understands this mode of opening to different levels of reality to be operating in Blake's work; it is a mode that Merton links with that of the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart and with that of the Orient.

Merton writes:

> ... a special kind of artistic vision is necessary: vision to which the eye itself, by itself, is unimportant...

> The man of imagination, the artist, because of the "virtue" of his art, sees more than his eyes present to him. He does not rely like Urizen entirely on the evidence of his senses, accepting nothing else at all. Urizen is always blind and in chains, and is trying continually to impose that blindness on the whole world. Los and Enitharmon on the other hand. [Merton here quotes from Blake's Prophetic poem the *Four Zoas*]:
>
> ... walk'd forth on the dewy earth
> Contracting and expanding their all flexible senses
> At will to murmur in the flowers small as the honey bee
> At will to stretch across the heavens and step from star to star (*Four Zoas*, Night the Second, p 34).[29]

Merton comments: "By virtue of artistic vision, they enjoy nature *sub specie aeternitatis* and not merely as it is in itself." He then quotes from these quintessentially Blakean lines from "Auguries of Innocence" which express Blake's experience of what theologians might call "the incognito of revelation":

> To see a world in a grain of sand
> And a heaven in a wild flower
> Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
> And eternity in an hour

Merton concludes this section of his essay by arguing that while Blake clearly loves nature, he is far from being a naturalist who might "love nature for its own sake."[30]

Merton's insight into Blake here and his celebration of Blake's freedom from the constraints of reason and materialism centres on the idea of *claritas* arising from his study of Plotinus, Aquinas, Coomaraswamy and Maritain, all of whom he refers to in the 1939 essay.[31] Merton writes: "Now this beauty is not perceived by the intellect alone... the brightness of *claritas* is the *splendor formae*; the glory of form shining through matter."[32]

A key word for Merton in this context is "virtue" ("the artist, because of the 'virtue' of his art, sees more than his eyes present to him").[33] Merton defines this term in great depth, drawing on all the thinkers just mentioned. In essence "virtue" is a quality of seeing, a quality related to the terms "intelligibility" and "*claritas*." From Aquinas in particular, Merton draws the idea that material nature is not intelligible. Intelligibility is something that is imposed

by the creative imagination. Here Blake and Aquinas intertwine in Merton's thinking. Merton writes:

> ...it is the forms poetry imposes upon matter that help to give it significance and keep us from falling into despair, because we would otherwise see nothing but chaos around us. [34]

This is a key statement for understanding why, despite all the contrary counsels, Merton was ultimately so reluctant to give up the work imposed by his creative imagination. Here is the seed for his own later affirmation of the inseparability of creativity and contemplative practice that I quoted at the start of this paper. For Merton the act of writing poetry was again and again an occasion of grace, a unique vehicle for opening his sensibilities to the extraordinary dimension of mundane reality.

There is a beautiful short poem that quietly celebrates precisely this dimension. The poem "Evening"[35] has the contemplative quality of some of Merton's personal journals.[36] In this poem he is attuned to the pregnant silence of the evening, when he hears the sounds of approaching children and enters imaginatively into their fantastical conversation: "They say the sky is made of glass,/ They say the smiling moon's a bride." As he does so, the children's voices merge with their surroundings and blossom-laden apple trees are transfigured into communion dresses. The poem ends with the sound of a "wakeful bird" set like a diamond against a panorama of fading night sky and wind in the poplar tree. It is a wonderful, understated epiphany, in which bird song is heard as a celebration of a moment of grace and in which bird song, implicitly, also becomes the poet's quietly resonating poem:

> Now, in the middle of the limpid evening,
> The moon speaks clearly to the hill.
> The wheatfields make their simple music,
> Praise the quiet sky.
>
> And down the road, the way the stars come home,
> The cries of children
> Play on the empty air, a mile or more,
> And fall on our deserted hearing,
> Clear as water.
>
> They say the sky is made of glass,
> They say the smiling moon's a bride.

They say they love the orchards and apple trees,
The trees, their innocent sisters, dressed in blossoms,
Still wearing, in the blurring dusk,
White dresses from that morning's first communion.

And where blue heaven's fading fire last shines
They name the new come planets
With words that flower
On little voices, light as stems of lilies.

And where blue heaven's fading fire last shines,
Reflected in the poplar's ripple,
One little, wakeful bird
Sings like a shower.

The Poetry: Merton's "Grace's House" and Francis Webb's "Five Days Old."

A poem that helps to draw together many of the ideas developed in this essay is "Grace's House," which as Ross Labrie notes, was written in response to a child's drawing.[37] The last few stanzas reveal Merton's extraordinary appreciation of the mundane, his opening to the mysterious luminous life contained in the drawing. Whether the child's name was actually Grace or not is in some ways irrelevant; this is an experience of the transfiguring power of Grace, while the last line is simultaneously an acknowledgement of how fleeting, even inaccessible is the path to this condition—especially for the adult immersed in the world of experience.[38]

O paradise, O child's world!
Where all the grass lives
And all the animals are aware!
The huge sun, bigger than the house
Stands and streams with life in the east
While in the west a thunder cloud
Moves away forever.
No blade of grass is not blessed
On this archetypal, cosmic hill,
This womb of mysteries.

I must not omit to mention a rabbit
And two birds, bathing in the stream
Which is no road, because
Alas, there is no road to Grace's house!

With a wonderful sense of paradox and the symbolic power in words, Merton transfigures the sense of distance or remoteness of Grace's world from ours (the fact that there is "no road" to this house) into the source of life, the stream harbouring these icons of spring—the rabbit and the two birds.

Merton has taken this child's drawing and poetically made its inner meaning "intelligible," made it glow with significance.

I think it is especially important in the light of what I said earlier, that he here chooses for his subject a child's primitive drawing for the locus of this quiet revelation. I understand the significance of this by comparison with two lines from a poem by our own Australian Francis Webb, Merton's contemporary, who in celebrating the awesome wonder of a five-day old child, represents the incognito of revelation in the lines:

To blown straw was given
All the fullness of heaven.

Just as Webb's "blown straw" is a wonderful metonymy for Christ in the manger, so the casual drawing of a child becomes a radiating source of "Grace," beckoning the jaded adult with wonder and gratuitous joy.

Here are a few more lines from Francis Webb's poem "Five Days Old"; they seem pertinent to an understanding of the inner meaning of Merton's "Grace's House":

The tiny not the immense,
Will teach our groping eyes...
So cloud-voice in war and trouble
Is at last Christ in the stable.

Now wonderingly engrossed
In your fearless delicacies,
I am launched upon sacred seas,

Humbly and utterly lost

In the mystery of creation,
Bells, bells of ocean.[39]

It may be valuable to know that while Merton was beginning his Trappist training, Francis Webb was training to be a Lancaster Bomber air-gunner here in Vancouver.

It is with reference to Merton's poem "Grace's House" that the other key term "*claritas*"—from Merton's Blake essay—comes into focus.[40] This term, like "intelligibility" is, for Merton connected with "Virtue" and is defined by Maritain, drawing on Aquinas and Plotinus, as "the glory of form shining through matter," indeed it is that which produces "intelligibility," revealing the essence of things, evoking God's Glory, enabling the mystical vision of heaven in a wild flower or the world in a grain of sand... or maybe even the Grace in the child's "huge sun."

For Merton, as for Blake "intelligibility," "*claritas*," "virtue," were especially aspects of the vision of innocence of childhood; but they were also something that the poet, by virtue of his creative openness, could keep in touch with. Merton here, again using a Thomistic reference point, describes virtue, as it inheres in the artist, as "a quality which *perfects* the soul, and enables it to strive towards its ends with a stronger and purer life..."[41]

Lying behind both these ideas is Blake's profound belief in art and poetry as agents in the reconstitution, the awakening of the soul from its sleep of selfhood. In the text surrounding his engraving *The Laocoön*, which was his testament to the nature and function of art, Blake mysteriously wrote:

> Adam is only The Natural Man & not the Soul or Imagination
> The Eternal Body of Man is The IMAGINATION
> God himself
> That is JESUS we are his Members
> The Divine Body
> It manifests itself in his Works of Art (In Eternity All is Vision)

The most dramatic allusion to the state of sleep from which Art can have the power to arouse us is heard in the opening chapter of Blake's *Jerusalem*. In this poem Blake affirms his role as a poet whose primary function is to awaken us to our true nature, one that is open to others, informed by humility and not cramped by Selfhood. By virtue of these qualities it is also, by extension a gateway "into Eternity." The passage, which in its entirety, is beyond all theologizing, underscores the deepest motivations for Merton's phrase

"to look through matter into eternity" which I took as the subtitle for this paper:

Awake! Awake O sleepers of the land of shadows, wake! expand!
Trembling I sit day and night... I rest not from my great task!
To open the Eternal Worlds, to open **the immortal Eyes**
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought, into Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination.
O Saviour pour upon me thy Spirit of meekness & love!
Annihilate the Selfhood in me: be thou all my life![42]

Notes

1. *Thomas Merton: Poet, Monk, Prophet*, eds., P. Pearson, D.Sullivan and I.Thomson (Abergavenny: Three Peaks Press, 1998), pp. 109-118.

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

3. Higgins, p. 3.

4. Higgins, p. 3.

5. Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001) p. 129.

6. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) p. 2.

7. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Books, 1988) 45. See also Blake's *Vision of the Daughters of Albion*, ibid. p. 51 and *America*, ibid. p. 54.

8. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 25.

9. Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980) p. 49.

10. Furlong, p. 49: quoted from Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948) p. 88.

11. Basil M. Pennington, Towards Discerning the Spirit and Aims of the Founders of the Order of Cîteaux in *The Cistercian Spirit: A Symposium in Memory of Thomas Merton* (ed. M. Basil Pennington, CS3, 1970) pp. 1-16; reprinted in Pennington, *The Last of the Fathers: The Cistercian Fathers of the Twelfth Century* (Still River MA; St. Bede's, 1983) pp. 3-14.

12. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, p. 26.

13. "Nature and Art in William Blake" *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1985) pp. 422-423. The passage quoted from A.K. Coomaraswamy is from *Transformation of Nature in Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1934) p. 3.

14. Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (Mandarin: London, 1994) pp. 242-245.

15. Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Vision of William Blake* (Michigan: The Michigan State University Press, 1967).

16. *Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, p. 6.

17. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) p. 46.

18. *Literary* Essays, p. 339.

19. "Nature and Art in William Blake" *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed., Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1985) p. 434.

20. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, ed., Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) p. 316.

21. This can be demonstrated by a search for "Eternity" in the *Digital Text Blake Project* at http://virtual.park.uga.edu/wblake/home1.html.

22. "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal" *Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, p. 339.

23. Higgins, p. 34.

24. "... through the combined efforts of Lax and Van Doren [Merton] succeeded... in having his *Thirty Poems* published by New Directions in 1944, an achievement in which he took great, if slightly guilty, pleasure" (Higgins, p. 34).

25. "Nature and Art in William Blake" *Literary Essays*, p. 451.

26. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) p. 288.

27. *The Collected Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W.H. Gardner (Oxford: OUP, 1970) p. 106.

28. Labrie, p. 155.

29. "Nature and Art in William Blake" *Literary Essays*, pp. 435, 436. Blake's terminology may need some explanation. Urizen is the domineering and limiting God of Reason of this world; Los, his antithesis, is poetry and the creative imagination: an aspect of the human psyche often buried; Enitharmon is spiritual beauty and Los's inspiration.

30. "Nature and Art in William Blake," *Literary* Essays, p. 436.

31. "Nature and Art in William Blake," *Literary Essays*, pp. 441-446.

32. "Nature and Art in William Blake," *Literary Essays*, p. 443.

33. "Nature and Art in William Blake," *Literary Essays*, p. 436.

34. "Nature and Art in William Blake," *Literary Essays*, p. 429.

35. First published in Thomas Merton, A *Man in the Divided Sea* (New York: New Directions, 1946). Republished in *A Thomas Merton Reader, Revised Edition*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Image Books, 1974) pp. 331-332.

36. See for example the following: "In the silence of the afternoon all is present and all is inscrutable in one central tonic note to which every other sound ascends or descends, to which every other meaning aspires in order to find its true fulfilment. To ask when the note will sound is to lose the afternoon: it has already sounded, and all things now hum with the resonance of its sounding", *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*, eds. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (New York: HarperCollins, 1999) p. 248.

37. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 330-331.

38. See Merton's letter to Fulbert Sisson, *Road To Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends* (Harvest Books, 1993).

39. *Cap and Bells, The Poetry of Francis Webb*, eds. Michael Griffith and James McGlade (Sydney: HarperCollins, 1991) p. 156.

40. "Nature and Art in William Blake," *Literary Essays*, p 444.

41. "Nature and Art in William Blake," *Literary Essays*, p 432.

42. *Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, pp. 146-147.