

Mapping Merton Through Blake

Review of

Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton

by Michael Higgins

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Reviewed by **Robert F. Keeler**

It's a precarious enterprise to use one poet's imaginative conception of the world as the framework for studying the life and poetry of another. But that's the goal that Canadian scholar Michael W. Higgins sets for himself in examining Thomas Merton and the visionary British poet William Blake.

The result is *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton*. It is a useful book, though it will be more useful to scholars than to non-scholarly students of Merton, primarily because its prose style sometimes tends toward the murky and inaccessible. Despite the occasionally labyrinthine tangles of his sentences, Higgins succeeds in detailing the centrality of the connection between Merton and Blake. That connection remained intact and important from Merton's youth to his death.

In 1938, the same year that Merton became a Catholic, he chose Blake as the subject of his master's thesis: "Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation." And in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton attributed some of his early spiritual growth to Blake's influence. "As Blake worked himself into my system," Merton wrote, "I became more and more conscious of the necessity of a vital faith, and the total unreality and unsubstantiality of the dead, selfish rationalism which had been freezing my mind" (quoted, 26).

That fascination with Blake lasted many years beyond his thesis-writing days at Columbia University. "Blake was more than a temporary obsession, a scholar's preoccupation, a passing fascination; Blake was at the core of Merton's self-definition both as an artist and as a religious visionary," Higgins writes. "Blake provided the working myth, the architecture of Merton's thought, his eschatology" (28). Merton's final mention of Blake in his journals occurs less than two weeks before his death. On November 28, 1968, recording a conversation with Dr. V. Raghavan, an internationally preeminent Sanskrit scholar, Merton wrote this: "I spoke of William Blake and his fourfold vision" (cf. 60).

In *Heretic Blood*, Higgins uses that vision as his map and outline. "In Blake's mythology every human consists of four components, each struggling for ascendancy over the others;

Robert F. Keeler is a long-time ITMS member who has been on the staff of *Newsday* as writer and editor since 1971. He is the author of *Newsday: A Candid History of the Respectable Tabloid* and of *Parish!*, the book version of a series of articles on a Long Island Catholic parish for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. He has taught journalism at Columbia University and at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

they are identified as the Four Zoas, Urizen (Reason), Urthona (Wisdom), Luvah (Emotion), and Tharmas (Instinct)," Higgins writes (71). In four of the five chapters, one of the Four Zoas provides the theme. (The first chapter is a well-crafted introduction to Merton's life, which would be an excellent one-hour course in Merton for anyone approaching him for the first time.) For example, in the second chapter, "Tharmas: The Rebel," Higgins guides us through the rebellions of Merton's youth – first against the oppressive atmosphere of the Lycée Ingres at Montauban, and later against his buttoned-down abbot, Dom James Fox.

In that rebellion, Merton was not alone. He was reflecting the reality of Blake's unconventional life, his unorthodox and imaginative thinking. "Blake helps us to understand Merton, and he helped Merton to understand himself," Higgins writes. "In short, Merton is a Blakean character, the contours of his personal geography mapped by Blake himself" (76).

The chapter on "Tharmas: The Rebel" offers useful analysis of Merton's evolving attitudes toward monasticism. His entry into that tight little world served as his "statement of rebellion" against the larger world. As every Merton reader knows, however, he soon began to rebel against Cistercian life as it existed in the 1940s and 1950s. He did not hesitate to criticize some aspects of that life and seek monastic renewal. "Monasticism itself is a form of institutionalized rebellion, precariously situated on the fringes of society, a stark and disturbing reminder of those truths obscured by human self-absorption and rapacity," Higgins writes (88).

For Merton, however, that monastic rebellion entailed much more. It meant "adopting a stance of scrupulous self-critique, of positioning yourself on the periphery of the peripheral, of living on the margins as monk both *vis-à-vis* the world and *vis-à-vis* the monastery" (99). The "Tharmas" chapter examines this rebellion in the light of Merton's eight-part 1947 poem, "Figures for an Apocalypse." It also reviews Merton's later struggle with his Cistercian superiors over permission to write about war and peace issues. Merton was moving clearly toward the pacifist position and away from the "just war theory" theology that had allowed Christianity to bless wars for centuries. When the censors stopped him, his rebellion took the form of the "Cold War Letters," which explained his peace positions to his friends in 1961 and 1962.

In his chapter on "Urizen: The Marginal Critic," Higgins explores Merton's growing role in the American peace movement. The lens for this study is Blake's concept of Urizen: reason as a runaway force strangling both the church and the world. "What must collapse is Urizenic Christianity, a Christianity of law, logic, and control, a Christianity so utterly enmeshed in the established order that its prophetic power is muted irretrievably," Higgins writes (121).

As Merton sharpened his own understanding of the perverse logic of war, he rebelled with increasing clarity and vigor against this Urizenic Christianity. Coming from a much admired spiritual writer, this prophetic opposition to war provided a cover of respectability for the peace movement. In a nation that often equates peace activism with disloyalty to country, that cloak of respectability was an immense contribution.

In this endeavor, Merton received important affirmation from the great German moral theologian, Bernard Häring. On a 1963 visit to Gethsemani, Häring used an apt comparison with St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Merton had written about Bernard extensively and consid-

ered him the greatest Cistercian, but Bernard was also a fierce advocate of the crusading mentality, Häring reminded him. “He said I should be writing about peace to make reparation for St. Bernard’s preaching of crusades – and that if a monk could preach a crusade then a monk could certainly be allowed to write about peace,” Merton recorded in his journal. “Needless to say I agree” (174).

Not surprisingly, the chapter on “Luvah: The Lover” focuses on Merton’s brief, un consummated affair with a student nurse. It is the most human part of the book and probably the most readable. “The heart must be heard, and for too long Merton’s emotions, his sexual yearnings, his need for affectivity, had been sublimated, shelved, and denied,” Higgins writes. “As a consequence, he was far from the complete monk” (196).

In the final chapter, “Urthona: The Wise One,” Higgins links Merton’s fascination with Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) to Blake’s mythological concept of Urthona. He traces Merton’s restless reaching out for the wisdom of the Muslims, the Buddhists and the Hindus. “Merton’s effort to unify, to balance the Contraries, in his life and work was his supreme Blakean task,” Higgins writes. “He wanted to be genuinely catholic, excluding nothing, including all” (259). Higgins caps his interpretive effort with a long analysis of *The Geography of Lograire*, which he calls Merton’s “Blakean masterpiece” (261).

Though Higgins richly mines the meaning of the Four Zoas as they apply to Merton’s life, he does not offer us nearly enough about Blake himself. He tells us that Merton is Blakean, but he doesn’t describe Blake’s “deliriously heretical genius”(76) enough to demonstrate this claim definitively. If we are to see in Merton and Blake a literary and spiritual equation, we need more data on the Blake side of the equal sign. In the end, that lack makes this useful book feel less than fully satisfying.