

## Recovering Our Innocence: the Influence of William Blake on the Poetry of Thomas Merton

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MY PAPER IS GOING to focus on the fruitful dialogue between Thomas Merton (1915-1968) and William Blake (1757-1827), a dialogue between two interesting modern poets and thinkers who did not meet in time but in whom we find a connection of sensibilities, concepts, ways of expression and feelings. Both authors built one of the most solid paths of Modernity and tried to give a new shape to experience based on an emergent solidarity which will only flourish if we leave our individualism behind and develop our awareness of the cosmic unity, of the fact that we are ONE in the Spirit of God.

### *Religious transfiguration of reality*

The poetry of Blake and Merton cannot be separated from their mystical experience.<sup>1</sup> In both authors, poetry is identified with religion, understanding by religion the experience of the transcendence. They consider the poet as the intermediary between the individual soul and that soul which Renaissance man called the soul of the world or *anima mundi*. Through their aesthetic look, they wanted to go beyond the surface, beyond "the epidermis" in order to experience the sacredness of nature.

A good example of this religious transfiguration of reality can be found in Blake's book *America, a Prophecy*, where he wrote this beautiful and meaningful line which immediately reminds us of the sacred character of the whole Creation. It says: "For everything that lives is holy, life delights in life."<sup>2</sup> Merton also thought that everything we see in reality is an allegory of the immensity and love of God as we can realize in his poem "Stranger":

When no one listens  
To the quiet trees

When no one notices  
The sun in the pool

When no one feels  
The first drop of rain  
or sees the last star

Or hails the first morning  
of a giant world  
where peace begins  
and rages end:

One bird sits still  
watching the work of God:  
One turning leaf  
Two falling blossoms,  
Ten Circles upon the pond...<sup>3</sup>

Merton considered that everything that exists discloses something of its Maker and that Grace was everywhere, in the quiet trees, in the first drop of rain or the last star, hidden but ready to emerge for the eyes of those who want to see and the ears of those who wish to listen.

The reading of William Blake's poetry was going to influence Merton's sapiential and transcendental vision of reality, his conception of life, art and poetry, his search for totality and unity, and his interest in the East and Zen. In his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he acknowledges the importance of Blake in his life:

I think my love for William Blake had something in it of God's grace. It is a love that has never died, and which has entered very deeply into the development of my life.

Merton had heard about Blake since his childhood, when his father, Owen Merton, read to him the *Songs of Innocence*. Later on, he himself read Blake as a schoolboy at Oakham and in 1938, after finishing his degree in Columbia University, he decided to write his master's thesis on "Nature and Art in William Blake: an Essay in Interpretation." Moreover, it is possible that Blake, together with Gerard Manley Hopkins, influenced Merton's conversion to Catholicism and also his profound intuition of the inner God dwelling within us.

Both Blake and Merton had read St. Augustine<sup>4</sup> and Meister Eckhart and learnt from them that God flourishes in man's heart, that God is not to be found outside ourselves but that He is our most intimate reality. In his book *All Religions Are One and There Is No Natural Religion*, Blake points out that "God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is,"<sup>5</sup> thus presenting life as an inner journey towards God. Our soul is like a mirror. The end of the journey would be the unveiling of the mirror which is our soul, until on this mirror we can contemplate the image of God. Similarly, in the poem "Stranger" Merton addresses God saying:

Closer and clearer  
Than any wordy master,  
Thou inward Stranger  
Whom I have never seen

Deeper and cleaner  
Than the clamorous ocean,  
Seize up my silence  
Hold me in Thy Hand! <sup>6</sup>

#### *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: going beyond the opposites*

Besides this idea of the inner God, Blake taught Merton to love life, "to go beyond the dichotomy of life and death, and to be, therefore, a witness to Life."<sup>7</sup> Life with capital letters, that is Life which goes beyond opposites, beyond good and evil, beyond concepts, in order to achieve the virginal goodness and innocence of all that has been created. As it is said in the Bible: "And God saw every thing that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1, 31). In his book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake attempts to purify man's perception until things appear to him as they really are:

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite  
For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.

In the poem "Night," Blake believes that some day the contraries will "get married," and the lion (symbol of evil in Blake's poetry) will be "washed in life's river" and will sleep with the lamb, the symbol of innocence<sup>8</sup> and the symbol of Christ. The lion says:

"And now beside thee, bleating lamb,  
"I can lie down and sleep;

"Or think on him who bore thy name,  
 "Graze after thee and weep.  
 "For, wash'd in life's river,  
 "My bright mane for ever  
 "Shall shine like the gold  
 "As I guard o'er the fold."<sup>9</sup>

In the same way, Merton believed in the reconciliation of the contraries as we can read in a translation he did of one of Chuang Tzu's poems, "The Kingly Man," for whom "Long life is no ground for joy, nor early death for sorrow" and whose glory is "in knowing that all things come together in One/And life and death are equal."<sup>10</sup>

#### Finding the Extraordinary in the Ordinary: a Sapiential Vision

Going beyond opposites would be the key to regain Paradise and to recover our innocence. However, to achieve this, we have to learn to look at things without prejudices and from the bottom of our hearts, or as Blake says, we must learn to observe the extraordinary in the ordinary:

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.

Blake's sapiential vision of reality had a great impact on Merton's life and writings. Blake was aware that Western society had separated knowledge from love. In these verses, Blake unites the rational knowledge with a loving intuition of things which is attained by listening to reality carefully, with the ears of a child (what Merton will call "the paradise ear"), looking at things as if it were the first time. For him, love and imagination were two essential means of knowledge, and in his book *Europe, a Prophecy* he writes:

"If you will feed me on love thoughts & give me now and then  
 "A cup of sparkling poetic fancies; so, when I am tipsie  
 "I'll sing to you to this soft lute; and shew you all alive  
 "The world, when every particle of dust breathes forth its joy."

As we all know, Merton made of love and imagination a way of living and a way of being in the world. He was a very imaginative person and in his essay "The True Legendary Sound" he defines imagination as

the power by which we apprehend living beings and living creatures in their individuality as they live and move, not in their ideas and

categories...it directs our eyes to beings in such a way as to feel the weight and uniqueness of their lives."<sup>11</sup>

In a French poem called "Le secret," Merton tells us that even our lives may be a product of God's expansive imagination and creative power, of God's dream:

Puisque je suis  
 Imaginaire  
 La belle vie  
 M'est familière

Et je m'en vais  
 Sur un nuage  
 Faire un serein  
 Petit voyage...

Sans figure  
 Et sans nom  
 Sans réputation  
 Ni renom,

Je suis un oiseau  
 Enchanté  
 Amour que Dieu  
 A inventé.<sup>12</sup>

Love and imagination lead us to a sapiential wisdom in Blake and Merton. Michael Higgins gives a good description of this kind of wisdom. He writes:

The wisdom that is sapiential is childlike; it is penetrative, immediate and unaffected. The child knows not only through the intellect but primarily through the imagination with the empathy and freedom it grants. Sapientia is the way of the poet, the child, the innocent dreamer and Christ: it is the way of knowing for the religious pastoralist, the Zen master, the visionary and the mystic. When the poet knows in the highest way and loves in the deepest way the poet has tasted the innocence of Wisdom."<sup>13</sup>

Once we have achieved this kind of wisdom, we are prepared to go beyond opposites and to perceive the hidden essence of the world and of ourselves which consists of the eternal desire for unity and love which is inherent in all creation, what Merton often refers to as "the hidden ground of love."

*A search for the original unity: Love*

In his *Songs of Innocence*, Blake wrote a wonderful poem about Love. The poem is called "The little black boy" and the mother of the little boy tells him:

"Look on the rising sun: there God does live,  
"And gives his light, and gives his heat away;  
"And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive  
"Comfort in morning, joy in noonday.

"And we are put on earth a little space,  
"That we may learn to bear the beams of love;"<sup>14</sup>

Blake was convinced that we are here in order to learn how to love. Love constituted for him the reason why we exist: "I cry, Love! Love! Love! Happy happy Love! Free as the mountain wind!" he exclaims in *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Merton shared the same thought. He has a poem entitled "Freedom as experience" which expresses Dante's idea of Love being the force which moves the whole universe:

Because our natures poise and point towards You  
Our loves revolve about You as the planets swing upon the sun  
And all suns sing together in their gravitational worlds.

And so, some days in prayer Your Love,  
Prisoning us in darkness from the values of Your universe,  
Delivers us from measure and from time,  
Melts all the barriers that stop our passage to eternity  
and solves the hours our chains.<sup>15</sup>

Love saves us from death. As the poem suggests, the Creation is a loving dialogue between God and His creatures and the final aim of the universe is Unity in God. "My dear brothers," says Merton in his *Asian Journal*, "we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we really are." It is only in the love of God found in my brothers that we can become one, and that we can be completely free.

*Freedom and Void: recovering our innocence*

Freedom is a recurrent idea in Merton and Blake. However, this freedom and happiness that fulfil a human heart can only be achieved by detachment from everything. Both authors were deeply influenced by Zen and the idea that we must learn to detach

ourselves from the sensual voluptuousness, from the desire to be or the desire not to be. In his long poem *Cables to the Ace* (1968), Merton talks about this need for returning to a point of nothingness, of absolute void, the void of innocence, from which men will be able to see things as they really are, to see things for the first time; from this void, everything that occurs becomes a pure Gift:

Desert and void... The Uncreated is waste land emptiness to the creature. Not even sand. Not even stone. Not even darkness and night. A burning wilderness would at least be 'something.' It burns and is wild. But the Uncreated is no something. Waste. Emptiness. Total poverty of the Creator: yet from this poverty springs everything...<sup>16</sup>

It is in this poverty that we reach perfect knowledge, perfect love, and perfect freedom and happiness. However, the journey into the void is not an easy one. God's ways are never easy. There is no road to follow: "The pathway dies/and the wilds begin"<sup>17</sup> says Merton's poem "Elias – Variation on a Theme." Our soul penetrates in the darkness of a knowledge which goes beyond any schema. And we begin to die in order to be born to a real life, we "forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance."<sup>18</sup> It is then that we recover the happiness of the innocent child, that happiness which Blake talks about in one of his *Songs of Innocence* called "Infant Joy:"

"I have no name  
"I am but two days old."  
What shall I call thee?  
"I happy am,  
"Joy is my name."  
Sweet joy befall thee!

In a similar way, Merton wrote a nostalgic poem about the paradise of childhood called "Grace's House," Grace being the name of a little girl and also a synonym for "authenticity:"

On the summit: it stands on a fair summit  
Prepared by winds: and solid smoke  
Rolls from the chimney like a snow cloud.  
Grace's house is secure.

No blade of grass is not counted,  
No blade of grass forgotten on this hill.  
Twelve flowers make a token garden.  
There is no path to the summit –  
No path drawn



To Grace's House...

O paradise, O child's world!  
Where all the grass lives  
And all the animals are aware!  
The huge sun, bigger than the house  
Stand and streams with life in the east  
While in the west a thunder cloud  
Moves away forever.

Grace's House is the house of Truth, the house of Innocence, the new Jerusalem. It is the origin, where everybody wants to return, where everything is blessed, where everything is sacramental. However, there is "the uncrossed crystal water between our ignorance and Grace's truth." And there is no road, no path to her House because this house is nowhere and at the same time everywhere. As Anthony T. Padovano said,

Grace and Love surround the human spirit as quietly, mysteriously and comprehensively as rain might have surrounded Merton's hermitage the night he wrote his essay on Rain and the Rhinoceros... Grace appears in the most simple, familiar, ordinary situations of life. Because the ordinary is mysterious, eventually infinite, inevitably divine.

I would like to finish by saying that Blake and Merton were aware that grace is everywhere and that God sends us messages through each of our senses:

**Taste:** Ripe peaches, cold spring water, the first cup of coffee in the morning, sharp cheddar cheese, Jesus extending himself to you in bread and wine, an ice-cream cone shared with a child.

**Sight:** Shimmering shades of grey in full moonlight, soft silver circles surrounding that moon on a moist night, undulating water ripples, mountains, rivers, lakes, seas, and the shape and smile of the one you love.

**Hearing:** Wind in the leaves before they fall, rustling feet in the leaves later on, raindrops falling from the branches when the storm has passed, church bells in the distance, fire crackling on the hearth, waves crashing, newborns crying, the words "I love you and I always will". And silence.

**Smell:** Steely air in your lungs on a winter day, fresh-mown grass, bread in the oven, the pages of a new book, a salt sea breeze, orange groves.

**Touch:** Rough tree bark, dewy grass on bare feet, moist earth at planting time, snowflakes on your cheek, spring sunshine warming your face, a child folded in your arms, yourself folded in the arms of another.

These are the notes of the symphony of God. We must defend our innocence in order to be able to listen to them. As Merton said in a letter to Latin American poets, "Come, dervishes: here is the Water of Life. Dance in it."<sup>19</sup>

### Notes and References

1. In his essay "Poetry and the Contemplative Life" (*Commonweal*, 44, July 4, 1948), Merton relates the aesthetic experience to the mystical experience: "aesthetic experience transcends not only the sensible order...but also that of reason itself. In the natural order, as Jacques Maritain has often insisted, it is analogue of the mystical experience which it resembles and imitates from afar."
2. *Blake's Poetry and Designs* ed. Mary Lynn Johnson, New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 1979, p.113
3. Extract from the poem "Stranger," *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York, New Directions, 1977, pp.289-290
4. In his thesis, Merton defines Blake as a mystic who belongs to the Christian tradition of the Augustinians and the Franciscans.
5. W. Blake, "All Religions are One and There is No Natural Religion," in *Blake's Poetry and Design*, op.cit., p.15
6. Merton, "Stranger", *Collected Poems*, op.cit., p.290
7. Thomas Merton, *Asian Journal*, New York, New Directions, 1973
8. See the poem "The Lamb" in *Songs of Innocence*, where Blake identifies the goodness of God with the lamb and the child.
9. *Songs of Innocence*. In writing this poem, Blake followed the Bible very closely. The topic of the friendship between the lion and the lamb that we see in this poem reminds us of some verses from Isaiah, 11-6: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the faling together; and a little child shall lead them."
10. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, op.cit., p.911
11. In *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. by Patrick Hart, New York, New Directions, 1985, p.30
12. Since I am  
an imaginary being  
Wonderful life  
is familiar to me  
and I set out on a cloud to make a quiet and small trip..  
Without figure  
and without name  
neither reputation  
nor fame  
I am

a delighted bird

Love invented by God. (Author's translation)

13. Michael Higgins, "The laboratory of the Spirit: Pastoral Vision in the Age of Technology," *Cistercian Studies* 16:2, 1981, p.122
14. Blake: *Songs of Innocence*. op.cit.,
15. Merton: *Collected Poems*, op.cit., p.187
16. *ibid.* p.452
17. "Elias - Variation on a Theme," *ibid.* p.240
18. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New York, New Directions, 1972, p.297
19. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, New York, New Directions, 1966, pp.160-161