

# Thomas Merton's Journey with William Blake

by  
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'And we are put on earth a little space,  
That we may learn to bear the beams of love.'

*Songs of Innocence*

The life and works of William Blake dwelt in the heart and mind of Thomas Merton for more than forty years, from his childhood, through his years at Oakham and Columbia, when he chose, as the subject of his MA thesis, *Nature and Art in William Blake*, to the last year of his life, when he reviewed Thomas Altizer's *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake*.

Through Merton's writings, and much that has been written about him, it is possible to produce a rich and detailed picture of the importance of Blake in his life. What he felt and wrote about Blake, how he identified with him, what he chose to emphasise about Blake's life and work, all reveal a great deal about Merton himself.

The lives of both poet-mystics, who lived two hundred and fifty years apart, bear certain similarities which, it seems to me, are significant. Both had a much loved younger brother, (Robert Blake and John Paul Merton) whose death was deeply felt. Their loss generated a flow of creative energy which for Merton, resulted in what is perhaps his most famous poem. In adult life, both lacked the security and comfort of conventional family bonding and both chose some manner of isolation and poverty with the pain and sacrifice which accompanied that choice. Both were deeply concerned with social issues, such as the marginalisation of people in society and the degradation in big cities. Both were appalled by war, for Blake it was the French Revolution – for Merton it was the war in Vietnam.

Merton's journey with Blake began when he was ten years old. His father, Owen, loved Blake and used to read the 'Songs of Innocence' to his young son. Merton recalls how his father,

'tried to explain [to me] what was good about him....' <sup>1</sup>

At the age of sixteen, Merton began reading Blake for himself. At this time, in January 1931, he was a schoolboy at Oakham, and, with the death of his father, orphaned. He could not comprehend his father's death. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he wrote,

'What could I make of so much suffering? It was a raw wound for which there was no adequate relief.' <sup>2</sup>

His father had nourished him and cared for him and 'shaped my soul' <sup>3</sup>. I like to think that Merton may have picked up his volume of Blake's poems as a kind of subconscious act, in order to be close and hold on to his dead father – for spiritual comfort. Perhaps God had filled the vacuum in a very special way, for Merton continues,

'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.' <sup>4</sup>

After his father's death, Merton spent time in London with his godfather, Tom Bennett, and he became acquainted with the dark side of the city. Monica Furlong in her biography, suggests Merton's loathing for London,

'spilled out into the bitterness and spleen of *My Argument with the Gestapo*.' <sup>5</sup>

She considers that this disquieting new awareness may have been the reason why Merton began to read Blake, but it seems to me to be unlikely that this would have been sufficient reason. Monica Furlong goes on to suggest that Blake,

'planted seeds in the boy's mind that a few years later would grow and blossom.' <sup>5</sup>

But Merton's life, for me, can only be described in Blake's own words, 'Man is born like a garden ready planted and sown.' <sup>6</sup> As his life unfolds before us, so the seeds spring to life.

At Oakham, during that summer term (1931), Merton slowly became aware of the importance of Blake for him. In *Seven Storey Mountain*, he wrote,

'One grey Sunday in the spring, I walked alone out the Brooke Road and up Brooke Hill ... and all the time I reflected, that afternoon, upon Blake. I remembered how I concentrated and applied myself to it. It was rare that I ever really thought about such a thing of my own accord. But I was trying to establish what manner of man he was. Where did he stand? What did he believe? What did he preach? ... How incapable I was of understanding anything of the ideals of a William Blake! How could I possibly realize that his rebellion, for all its strange heterodoxies, was fundamentally the rebellion of the saints. It was the rebellion of the lover of the living God...' <sup>7</sup>

In 1938, Merton obtained his degree at Columbia and he began his thesis on Blake. He wrote that he 'did not realise how providential a subject it actually was!' He considered that,

'... the topic, if I treated it at all sensibly, could not help but cure me of all the naturalism and materialism in my own philosophy, besides resolving all the inconsistencies and self-contradictions that had persisted in my mind for years, without my being able to explain them.' <sup>8</sup>

He was filled with the optimism of the young disciple, eager to swim in Blake's harsh sea of repentance.

Halfway through the writing period, on November 16th 1938, Merton was baptised into the Catholic Church. What part did Blake play in the timing of his decision? Blake's intense faith was an inspiration to Merton. Its intensity led him to recognise the necessity of a vital faith. There were other influences, notably Gerard Manley Hopkins, but Merton acknowledged his debt to Blake (qv note 20, page 11).

In the preface to his thesis, Merton stated his aims, and, in so doing, emphasised his distaste for deconstruction, for the analytical processes that can prove so destructive. He began,

'It is a pity that Blake, a good artist and, though scarcely orthodox, a good Christian, should be so often treated as some strange pagan freak, whom we draw upon for stray remarks to support whatever prejudices of the moment we happen to want to defend.'

He continued, prophetically,

'... the discussion in detail of Blake's relationship to India is no indication that I am yielding to the temptation to juggle with influences. I think that the affinities between Christian thinkers and Oriental mystics are interesting in themselves. To break them up into influences in one direction or another always encourages arbitrary, false, and pigheaded statements, without adding anything at all to our understanding of the way these thinkers and mystics looked at life.' <sup>9</sup>

It is noteworthy that Merton rose in defence of Blake, and not without humour,

'There is always a tendency on the part of those who have studied Blake's occult sources to leave their readers with the impression that he lived either out of the world altogether, or else only in the company of quacks, astrologers, and religious maniacs. As a matter of fact, he lived in a circle of fairly well-known and successful artists and engravers.' <sup>10</sup>

However, he qualified this by admitting that Blake knew 'a great many people belonging to out-of-way sects and cults.' <sup>11</sup>

Merton described Blake, the devoted artist, choosing to make sacrifices for the sake of his art, choosing poverty, choosing discipline. His thoughts revealed his own personality and they foreshadowed the step which he was so soon to make into the Monastery at Gethsemani,

'Blake was too great a man not to recognize instinctively the necessary balance between the uncontrolled energy of genius and the devotion of the artist to his work, which must involve a willing sacrifice of everything in the world. We are all too ready in this day to talk about the anti-asceticism of some of Blake's remarks and forget that he willingly bore the asceticism imposed on him by poverty – chose it in preference to sacrificing his art to a more comfortable living. Blake chose poverty as deliberately as any Franciscan brother.' <sup>12</sup>

Merton's own philosophy of life, his passions and his searchings, shone through his descriptions of Blake. He wrote of Blake's passionate indignation against pettiness and fakes; of the way that rigid and sweeping distinctions between right and wrong infuriated him; and of his desire, as a religious artist,

that the world should not be beautiful and appealing to him, but intelligible. He stressed that Blake was a voracious reader.

Blake's mysticism, his way of looking 'beyond Greece to the Orient for the origins of our heritage' was a theme which Merton developed in the essay and it was clearly a point of inspiration for him.<sup>13</sup>

Michael Mott points out that Merton returned again and again to Blake's comments on Roman Catholicism – that the Roman Catholic Church was the only one to teach forgiveness, and in that in her dwelt the one true liberty.<sup>14</sup> Mott also suggests that Merton almost totally neglected Blake as a visual artist.<sup>15</sup> Almost, but Merton's exception is important. He described Blake's *Last Judgement* as being,

'... not without its resemblance to Hindu art. Of course, the resemblance is remote, yet the way the picture is crowded with clear, well-rounded figures, flying up and down, all in a quite formal pattern, reminds us of a Hindu bas-relief, equally crowded and equally formalised, in a way which Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel could not possibly do.'<sup>16</sup>

Merton described Blake's technique, that he chose to... 'copy' a "vision"; not natural objects but "mental images", a practice which does not at all isolate him, for it was one of the fundamentals of Hindu art, besides being implicit in all Medieval art.' 'Blake is closer to Medieval Christians than to his contemporaries.'<sup>17</sup>

Alexander Lipski endorses Merton's view. He considers that very early on, Merton recognised that East and West had held similar views on art, in the past, and that Blake as a mystic, in defiance of modernism, had shared this view.<sup>18</sup>

However, it is George Woodcock who encapsulates Merton's relationships with Blake and the East. He writes,

'His thesis, perhaps predictably, was on William Blake, from studying whom he first acquired that fascination with the contemplative way which later so dominated his life.'

and

'Blake, read and barely comprehended by a teenage boy, helped in the conversion of a man ten years later; Buddhist texts, read with an understand-

able lack of attention when the revelation of Christian truth was the burning urgency in his mind, assisted him in a radical broadening of his mental and spiritual field of vision twenty years later.'<sup>19</sup>

Merton himself described that year in which he wrote the essay,

'But, oh, what a thing it was to live in contact with the genius and holiness of William Blake that year, that summer, writing the thesis ... He has done his work for me: and he did it very thoroughly. I hope that I will see him in heaven.'<sup>20</sup>

Among the few possessions which Merton took with him to Gethsemani, was his copy of Blake.

In 1948, Merton wrote an article entitled *Poetry and the Contemplative Life*, which he revised ten years later, as *Poetry and Contemplation: a reappraisal*. There is a passage in it in which Merton refers to Blake,

'In understanding the relation of poetry to contemplation the first thing that needs to be stressed is the essential dignity of the aesthetic experience ... A genuine aesthetic experience is something which transcends not only the sensible order (in which, however, it has its beginning) but also that of reason itself. Its immediacy outruns the speed of reasoning and leaves all analysis far behind ... It rests in the perfection of things by a kind of union which sometimes resembles the quiescence of the soul in its immediate affective union with God in the obscurity of mystical prayer. A true artist can contemplate a picture for hours, and it is real contemplation, too. So close is the resemblance between these two experiences (i.e. the aesthetic and the mystical) 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.'<sup>21</sup>

Merton made several visits to Shakertown during the last decade of his life. According to Michael Mott, when Merton visited in 1959,

'he found himself thinking of Blake. The quality of handworked wood and proportions created an atmosphere that was, at the same time, warm, human and yet visionary, clear, sane, supernatural. The craftsman loses himself and finds himself in his sense of work.'<sup>22</sup>

In 1964, Merton wrote the preface to a book about Shaker furniture, by Edward Deming Andrews, called *Religion in Wood*. Before the book was published, the author died, and in a letter of condolence to his widow, Merton wrote,

'In the preface I have been bold enough to bring in quite a lot about William Blake.'<sup>23</sup>

In fact, Mott tells us that Merton connected the vision of the Shaker Foundress, Mother Ann Lee, with that of her contemporary, William Blake.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, we come to 1968, that year of completion and resolution for Merton, as if his life was coming full circle for his second 10th December, his second entry into new life.

That year he wrote the book review of Thomas Altizer's *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake*.

Here we find the mature Merton. In his interpretation of Blake, we hear his own voice, expressing his deep concern about non-violence and the Church in the world.

'Since that time (thirty years ago) Blake has fared better. People have given up the idea that he was a madman who wrote a few good short poems and many bad long ones. They have shown themselves more and more inclined to recognize him as a prophet and apocalyptic visionary who had a very real insight into the world of his time and of ours. This, of course, has been made somewhat easier to accept by two world wars, the atom bomb, the gradual disruption of Western civilisation, and the emergence of a troubled and revolutionary Third World.'

'The revolutionary energy of Blake and his impassioned fight for charism and vision against dogma and institution make him an obvious saint for radical Christians . . . we can certainly agree that Blake was a radical Christian in his belief that Churches had perverted Christian truth and that the God of the Christian Churches was . . . not the lover of man who empties himself to become identified with Man, but a specter whom man sets up against himself, investing him with the trappings of power which are not "the things of God" but really "the things that are Caesar's."

'Blake saw official Christendom as a narrowing of vision, a foreclosure of experience and of future expansion, a locking up and securing of the doors of perception.'<sup>25</sup>

In these passages, the whole sweep of Merton's vision is affirmed.

In conclusion, let us move forward to the last week in Merton's life, in Ceylon, and that wonderfully fulfilling time for him when he visited the giant Buddhas at Polonnaruwa. What he wrote in his *Asian Journal* for December 4th, speaks so eloquently and poignantly, of the search for truth which both he and Blake experienced.

'Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious . . . I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.'<sup>26</sup>

Beyond the shadow and the disguise.

## Notes and References

1. Merton, T: *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Fourth impression 1995, p.85
2. Ibid, p.82
3. Ibid, p.84
4. Ibid, p.85
5. Furlong, M: *Merton A Biography*, 1980, p.48
6. Blake, William: annotation in Blake's copy of the Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1808. (Discourses published as part of *The Literary Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, 1819.)
7. S.S.M., op cit, pp.86/7
8. Ibid, p.202
9. Merton, T: *The Literary Essays*, 1981 impression, 'Nature and Art in William Blake: An essay in interpretation.' p.391

10. Ibid, p.398
11. Ibid, p.417
12. Ibid, p.449
13. Ibid, pp. 414/5
14. Mott, M: *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 1984. p.192
15. Ibid, p.116
16. *Literary Essays*, op cit, p.418
17. Ibid, pp. 422/3
18. Lipski, A: *Thomas Merton and Asia. His Quest for Utopia*, 19 , p.43
19. Woodcock, G: *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet*, 1978 , pp. 11/12. In his *Secular Journal*, 27.11.41 (just before entering Gethsemani) Merton wrote, 'read almost all Father Weiger's translations of Buddhist texts into French, without understanding them
20. *SSM*, op cit, pp. 189/90
21. *Literary Essays*, op cit, p.347
22. *The Seven Mountains*, op cit, p.343. Merton's last visit to Shakertown was with Donald Allchin, on April 4th 1968, the day Martin Luther King was assassinated.
23. Merton, T: *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 1990, letter 40.
24. *The Seven Mountains*, op cit, p.401
25. *Literary Essays*, op cit, pp.3/4/5
26. Merton, T: *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, 19

