Art and Selfhood: Thomas Merton on William Blake

Rebecca Gould

Introduction

As a graduate student in Columbia University's Department of English and Comparative Literature, Thomas Merton was an avid reader. Having enrolled in graduate school immediately after his undergraduate studies, Merton looked forward to completing a doctorate and entering a career in academia. His goals shifted, of course, when he instead departed Columbia with a Master's degree and devoted himself entirely to his faith. Immediately preceding that transition, Merton completed a Master's thesis on William Blake.

Merton titled his 1939 Master of Arts thesis, 'Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation.'[1] As Furlong summarizes, 'His method in his thesis was to use the esthetic ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas (as interpreted by Jacques Maritain) as a touchstone by which to test Blake's thought.'[2] Though Blake is the primary subject of analysis, Merton's thesis does not dwell on close reading of either Blake's writing or visual art. Instead, Merton highlights Blake's mysticism and defends it passionately, claiming it as part of Christian thought. Also, Merton demonstrates more interest in the philosophy of art than in the features of any particular piece of artwork; for Merton, Blake epitomizes a pinnacle of artmaking because of how his work derives from imagination rather than from naturalistic copying. In his own summary of his thesis, Merton explains that, 'What it amounted to was a study of Blake's reaction against every kind of literalism and naturalism and narrow, classical realism in art, because of his own ideal which was essentially mystical and supernatural.'[3] Merton's focus on Blake's philosophy reveals his own growing commitment to spirituality and contemplation, which would soon become key elements of his faith practice.

What can Merton's Master's thesis on Blake teach us about him at this pivotal transitional moment in his life? What exactly about William Blake captured Merton's interest and imagination? How can Merton's Master's

thesis deepen our understanding of his intellectual development and theological trajectory? This article sets out to address these questions by situating Merton's Master's thesis in the context of his biography and later thought. Both the content of Merton's scholarship on Blake as well as his narrative of self in relation to Blake reveal his nascent faith identity.

How Merton Chose Blake

Merton's initial interest in William Blake was the result of his father's influence and his own natural curiosity. A professional artist himself, Merton's father apparently imparted his fondness for Blake to the young Merton: 'Father had always liked Blake, and had tried to explain to me what was good about him when I was a child of ten.'[4] The elder Merton's interest in Blake seems to have baffled him in his youth, as he initially found Blake more inscrutable than admirable. One can imagine, though, that the early loss of his father ignited an interest in this figure that his beloved father had lauded. Merton himself accounts for his evolution with regard to Blake:

> I was less literal when I was sixteen. I could accept Blake's metaphors and they already began, a little, to astound and to move me, although I had no real grasp of their depth and power. And I liked Blake immensely. I read him with more patience and attention than any other poet. I thought about him more. And I could not figure him out. I do not mean, I could not figure out the Prophetic Books—nobody can do that! But I could not place him in any kind of context, and I did not know how to make his ideas fit together.[5]

Merton's scholarly future is clear in this account of his adolescence, in which confusion begot intellectual curiosity rather than frustration. Of course, this account from Merton's autobiography is his retrospective narrative rather than a veritable record of his adolescent intellect. Nonetheless, Merton reflects that his early encounters with Blake sparked a curiosity that would later grow.

Just as Blake's metaphors intrigued Merton, so too was it art that initially attracted Merton to religion. Religious practice was not routine in Merton's youth and in fact seems to have been largely dismissed by those closest to him. Accordingly, Merton possessed an early religious ambivalence: 'while I admired Catholic *culture*, I had always been afraid of the Catholic *church*.'[6] For Merton, the church became a source of interest initially during his time in France. As he recounts of his 1925

travels, 'The whole landscape [of St. Antonin, France], unified by the church and its heavenward spire, seemed to say: this is the meaning of all created things: we have been made for no other purpose than that men may use us in raising themselves to God.'[7] While Merton admits to little knowledge of or belief in Christian theology at this stage of his life, he reflects an appreciation for how visual scenery and architecture are intertwined with religious identity and devotion. Merton's summer vacation in Rome prior to his undergraduate studies seems to have had a similar impact. Upon touring Roman church altars, mosaics, and frescoes, Merton was moved both intellectually and spiritually and subsequently began reading the Gospels and experimenting with prayer.[8] This experience was echoed in his later visit to Cuba, where he was especially impressed by Havana's church architecture and Christian iconography.[9] In his early years and his later reflection of them, Merton was deeply moved by Christian architecture and art.

For Merton, both William Blake and Catholic faith shared a common defiance of norms. Merton views Blake as a rebellious figure:

> It was Blake's problem to try and adjust himself to a society that understood neither him nor his kind of faith and love. More than once, smug and inferior minds conceived it to be their duty to take this man Blake in hand and direct and form him, [...] until finally Blake parted from his would-be patrons, and gave up all hope of an alliance with a world that thought he was crazy, and went his own way.[10]

Merton admires Blake for maintaining a worldview that was neither comprehensible nor popular in his time. It is clear that Merton respects Blake for his nonconformity, which Merton sees in his art and in the belief system it depicts. Blake diverged from his peers in addition to his patrons: 'Perhaps all the romantic poets were capable of putting words together more sensibly than Blake, and yet he, with his mistakes of spelling, turned out the greater poet, because his was the deeper and more solid inspiration.'[11] Blake, then, possesses both a superior mind and imagination over his patrons and peers, according to Merton. Any imperfections in his work belie his true wisdom and aesthetic aptitude. Blake's nonconformity makes him an especially admirable figure to Merton.

Catholic faith, too, was a defiance of norms for both Blake and Merton. Merton understands Blake to have found peace late in his life following discovering Catholic faith, though Merton notes that Blake 'never seems to have felt any desire to hunt out a priest in the England where

Catholicism was still practically outlawed.'[12] In Merton's own upbringing, too, Catholic faith was illicit. Recalling a stay at his grandparents' home in Douglaston, New York, Merton remembers that he 'continued to read the Bible surreptitiously—I was afraid someone might make fun of me. And since I slept on the sleeping porch, which opened on the upstairs hall [...] I no longer dared to pray on my knees before going to sleep.'[13] Merton identifies with Blake for their shared experience of Catholic faith in defiance of the expectations of their respective contexts.

Merton's personal identification with Blake around Catholic faith explains a primary task of his Master's thesis, which is to claim Blake as belonging to Christian thought. Merton repeatedly explicitly states in his thesis that Blake is a Christian thinker. For example, 'Blake's point of view is entirely that of a religious and, specifically, a Christian thinker. But it happens that in these other essentially religious approaches to art the same hatred of naturalism and the identifying of it with idolatry is everywhere apparent.'[14] Merton here dispels the possibility of situating Blake in other religious traditions; while his anti-naturalist philosophy of art perhaps shares qualities with Oriental, Gnostic, or Neoplatonic traditions, Blake is fundamentally most aligned with Christianity. Although Merton does not contest the influence of Eastern traditions upon Blake, he nonetheless holds that Blake is primarily Christian through his social affiliations and most especially by virtue of his own beliefs: 'Blake as a devout Christian, as a mystic, as an artist, living a semi-retired and almost saintly life [...] could not help but live in the same kind of intellectual climate as a Saint Thomas, or a Saint Augustine, or a Saint Francis.'[15] Merton ostensibly canonizes Blake by juxtaposing him with such figures, a bold intellectual move in the context of his secular university affiliation. These are only some of many repeated, clear statements Merton makes to claim Blake as part of Christian thought and dispel efforts to classify him otherwise.

While Merton was immersed in the research and writing that led to the completion of this thesis in February 1939, he was also discovering Catholic faith. In November 1938, Merton was baptized at Corpus Christi Church near the Columbia University campus. Recalling his spiritual journey to that moment, Merton writes:

> All of a sudden, something began to stir within me, something began to push me, to prompt me. It was a movement that spoke like a verse. 'What are you waiting for?' it said [...] And then everything inside me began to sing—to sing with peace, to sing with strength and to sing with conviction.[16]

Merton recounts his conviction for his new faith as a revelation stemming from a visceral feeling; Catholicism spoke to something deep within him. His conviction in his personal faith makes sense in concert with his confident language claiming Blake as a member of that same tradition.

Not only does Merton affirm that Blake belongs to Christian thought, but he also virulently negates anyone who suggests otherwise. In the preface of his thesis Merton colorfully opines, '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.'[17] Merton's candor conveys an impassionate defense of Blake and a feeling of affront towards those who may dismiss him. He sustains this tone throughout his thesis, repeatedly invoking Blake's religion:

> 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.[18]

Merton here positions himself as a staunch defender of Blake, most especially refuting those who diminish Blake due to his non-Christian influences. Merton names those accusations and dismisses them unequivocally. For Merton, Blake's merit is inextricable from his Christian faith.

Later in the thesis, Blake's opposition takes the form of a specific writer, John Middleton Murry. Merton readily dismisses Murry: 'Blake was perfectly right when he pointed out that there was no natural religion. It is an impossibility and a contradiction in terms. Incidentally, how can Mr. Middleton Murry so glibly say Blake did not believe in the supernatural in the face of this.'[19] Merton's faith in Blake and in Blake's Christianity is so strong that he intrepidly demeans a writer far more established than him. Merton's language towards Murry here and throughout his thesis could be read as irreverent and self-righteous, though perhaps a more generous view characterizes it as impassioned and youthful. Merton is methodical in his counterarguments for Murry, even using legalistic language to refute him 'without any shadow of doubt.'[20] Throughout his thesis, Merton dispenses with any inclination towards scholarly neutrality and reveals his deep partiality towards Blake, especially because of Blake's Christian faith.

How Blake Chose Merton

The palpable passion that Merton employs in defense of Blake points to an affinity for him that exceeds pure academic interest. Merton's very selection of Blake as his thesis topic apparently resulted from a spiritual revelation: 'One day I came running down out of Carpenter Library, and passed along the wire fences by the tennis courts, in the sun, with my mind made up that there was only one possible man in the eighteenth century for me to work on: the one poet who had least to do with his age, and was most in opposition to everything it stood for.'[21] Sources suggest that Merton's selection of Blake as his thesis topic was perhaps less of an epiphany than he construes; apparently two of his earlier thesis proposals had been rejected, one on the novelist Richard Graves[22] and another on the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.[23] Nevertheless, Merton's autobiography narrates his selection of Blake as a kind of divine event, an echo of his realization that he wished to be baptized. Merton's self-narrative reflects a feeling of having been chosen by Blake for his thesis topic.

Merton extends the premise that Blake selected him beyond just his Master's thesis; indeed, Merton credits Blake with leading him to his very faith:

> The Providence of God was eventually to use Blake to awaken something of faith and love in my own soul. [...] 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 roundabout way, to the only true Church, and to the One Living God, through His Son, Jesus Christ.[24]

It makes sense that a Trappist monk would feel the kind of soul awakening Merton describes here. To attribute that awakening to Blake, Merton concedes, is less intuitive. From Merton's retrospective view, studying Blake was the clear causal source of his future life of faith. While Merton ostensibly chose Blake for his essay, Blake chose Merton for a life of devotion.

Furlong points to an earlier childhood revelatory experience that may have foreshadowed the Blake revelation at Columbia. On an outing near Oakham during his secondary school days, apparently Merton had an impactful experience of contemplating Blake while admiring the landscape. By Furlong's analysis, 'In a world of falsity and dangerous ambiguity, Blake seemed a trustworthy guide, prophet, and guru. He

planted seeds in the young boy's mind that a few years later would grow and blossom.'[25] While it is possible that epiphanies about Blake were a repeat event in Merton's formative years, it is perhaps more likely that the retrospective Merton amplified his feeling of having been selected by Blake in his self-narrative. Furlong most likely picks up on the latter in her characterization of this moment.

Merton is aware of his own retrospective bias, though he does not consider it to diminish his authentic feelings of revelation around Blake. In his words:

> But oh, what a thing it was to live in contact with the genius and the holiness of William Blake that year, that summer, writing the thesis! I had some beginning of an appreciation of his greatness above the other men of his time in England: but from this distance, from the hill where I now stand, looking back I can really appreciate his stature.[26]

Merton's conversational interjection and ecstatic punctuation convey his continued belief in the divinity of his encounter with Blake during his graduate studies. Nevertheless, he acknowledges his position of retrospect, metaphorically naming it 'the hill where I now stand'. Merton appreciates that retrospection implies some amount of bias. Merton's particular bias serves to amplify the connectedness of his Blake studies and his faith trajectory. However true this may have been in 1939, it is clear that the retrospective Merton embraces his story as one of unity—especially around Blake and Christianity.

Merton's thesis itself gives us a view of his developing spirituality without the inherent bias of retrospect. Merton uses his thesis to work out some of his evolving religious beliefs. In particular, Blake gives Merton a route to philosophize about the nature of art and of the human essence. Merton's concept of art vis-à-vis Blake addresses both a negative and a positive definition. The negative definition is that art is not for the purpose of a viewer's pleasure, for realistic depiction, or for cognitive information. In his words, 'the delight of the senses must never become the artist's only end'[27] and the standard of beauty ought not derive from an ideal model.[28] Neither should art aim to imitate nature, since realism lacks inspiration and embodies optical trickery.[29] Nor is art meant to serve only as a 'means of cognition,' a view Plato apparently wrongly espoused.[30]

Alternatively, the positive definition of art is that it derives from the imagination of the artist. According to Merton, 'the work should be

already half done in the artist's mind before he begins to study any natural model. And even then he does not copy it slavishly but imposes upon it the form which his mind, his intellect, is prepared to see in it.'[31] The artist is far more than an intermediary in this artistic process. Rather, the artist's imagination is the true source of art and occupies a place of much greater importance than technical skill. In this view of art, pure naturalism 'is idolatrous, for idolatry is the love of creatures as they are in themselves and not as they are in God.'[32] The artist, then, is a divine agent because he is himself sacred and his artwork gives expression to some internal imagined work that derives from him. Art is not, in essence, external to the artist but is instead 'lying dormant in the artist' until its outward expression.[33] This is a sharp contrast to sensuous frivolity or naturalistic depictions derived from life, which constitute blasphemy by subjugating the artist's imagination. For Merton, generating a positive definition of art is also a task of defining divinity in humanity.

If the artist holds such a prime place in the artistic process, then it follows that he becomes a kind of prophetic figure. This is how Merton views Blake and—aspiringly—himself. Merton is perhaps most explicit about Blake's prophetic role in his autobiography, when he contrasts Blake to other Romantics and concludes, 'Even Coleridge, in the rare moments when his imagination struck the pitch of true creativeness, was still only an artist, an imaginer, not a seer; a maker but not a prophet.'[34] Blake, then, must have been a prophet. Although Merton had not yet termed him thus at the time of his graduate studies, the term 'mystic' has the same function: distinct from Thomist interest in truth and its metaphysics, 'Blake, on the other hand, has forgotten all intellectual distinctions, all labels and categories, in the ecstasy of the mystic who surely knows God, and is dazzled by the glory of all His attributes at once.'[35] In this characterization, Blake is not only a product of Christian thought but very much a prophet participating in it. One cannot help but surmise that Merton, too, aspired to such a connection with the divine. When Merton elevates Blake as a prophet in the context of philosophy without textual or visual evidence, it is more a reflection of his spiritual view of Blake than it is scholarly analysis. For Merton, Blake embodies a prophetic ideal.

Asceticism is an inherent part of the prophetic role, and Merton views it favorably. For Merton, asceticism serves the purpose of forgoing physical needs in favor of the spiritual and artistic ones.[36] Blake is a model of this because he appreciates '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.'[37] For Merton during his pivotal graduate school year, then, asceticism was already an inevitability for an authentic artist and divine servant. Merton notes that asceticism was a conscious choice for Blake, who apparently devoted himself so totally to his art that he willingly subsisted on meager provisions during his volunteer work painting the Society of Arts in 1777.[38] Merton's tone in recounting this anecdote about Blake is adulatory. Similarly, Merton admires that Blake '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.'[39] Asceticism is a point of pride and the sign of artistic devotion. When Merton admiringly likens Blake's asceticism to that of a monk, he presages his own monastic aspirations.

Conclusion

Through grappling with the meaning and purpose of art for Blake, Merton finds a model for the imagination, devotion, and asceticism that would soon define his own life. Merton's initial curiosity about Blake evolves into veneration and, ultimately, a kind of canonization. That Merton's intellectual wrestling with Blake occurred simultaneously with his baptism is no coincidence; Merton's religious trajectory reflects his wish to emulate the qualities he most admired in Blake. His impassioned defense of Blake's place in Christian thought and his refutation of anyone who suggested otherwise reflect his own early religious conviction. Blake served for Merton as an instrument for testing the strength of his developing faith. The strength of those convictions—and the power of Blake—withstood his intellectual acrobatics and led him to pivot completely to a life of faith.

In his own retrospective accounts of his time studying Blake, Merton describes spiritual revelation. While it is difficult to discern the veracity of his epiphanies around Blake, it is clear that he cared to curate a self-narrative in which Blake spoke to him on a level deeper than pure intellect. Merton repeatedly credits Blake with leading him to his faith. For Merton, Blake becomes an instrument for constructing his own desired identity.

Merton's work on Blake highlights the many powers of art. The literary and visual art we consume can challenge and affirm our beliefs, or it can altogether shift them. Art can provide a model of a desired lifestyle or illuminate a route to contemplation and imagination. Art can suggest an alternative career or faith path. Art can be an instrument for

dispensing with undesired voices of dissent. Art can enable us to construct the self-narrative we aspire to, or it can transform a present one.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, 'Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation,' Master's Thesis, Columbia University, New York, February 1939. The text is included in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1985), pp. 385-453. Page references are to this latter volume.
2. Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 75.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, 1948), p. 224.
4. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 95.
5. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 95.
6. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 190.
7. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 41.
8. *Merton: A Biography*, pp. 55-6.
9. *Merton: A Biography*, p .90.
10. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 211.
11. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.211.
12. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.211.
13. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.128.
14. *The Literary Essays*, p. 422.
15. *The Literary Essays*, p. 451.
16. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 239.
17. *The Literary Essays*, p. 392.
18. *The Literary Essays*, p. 398.
19. *The Literary Essays*, p. 32.
20. *The Literary Essays*, p. 54.
21. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 210.
22. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 210.
23. Jill Robson, 'Ripples in Spiritual Space: Hopkins and Merton' (*The Merton Journal*: 2022, vol. 29.1), p.10.
24. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 97-8.
25. *Merton: A Biography*, p.49.
26. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 210.
27. *The Literary Essays*, p. 437.
28. *The Literary Essays*, p. 441.
29. *The Literary Essays*, p .435.
30. *The Literary Essays*, p. 440.
31. *The Literary Essays*, p. 434.

32. *The Literary Essays*, p. 437.
33. *The Literary Essays*, p. 419.
34. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 210-11.
35. *The Literary Essays*, p. 446.
36. *The Literary Essays*, p. 448.
37. *The Literary Essays*, p. 449.
38. *The Literary Essays*, p. 403
39. *The Literary Essays*, p. 449.

Rebecca Gould teaches English literacy at the International Community High School in the Bronx, NY. A newcomer to Thomas Merton scholarship, she is a longtime admirer of William Blake and especially recommends the Blake room at the Tate Britain. When she is not reading with her wonderful students, she can be found wandering art museums, biking in Central Park, or consuming fiction in English, Hebrew, Spanish, or Yiddish.