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Director and Archivist  
Thomas Merton Center  
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**In the School of Prophets**  
The Formation of  
Thomas Merton's Prophetic Spirituality

*Ephrem Arcement, OSB*



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*For my parents,  
Warren and Nancy Arcement,  
whose unfailing support has made this book  
and so much more possible*



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# Abbreviations

CS	Cistercian Studies Series
ed.	edition, editor, edited by
MW	Monastic Wisdom Series
n.	note
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
ocso	Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance
RB	Rule of Saint Benedict
repr.	reprinted
trans.	translation, translator, translated by
vol(s).	volume(s)

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# Introduction

## A Life in Formation

Perhaps one of the most defining aspects of the personality of Thomas Merton (1915–1968), the popular and unconventional Trappist monk of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Kentucky, was his refusal ever to view his life as a finished product. Rather, life for him meant growth. Monastic life, in particular, was a call to live life vowed to intense and unending growth. Openness to new ideas thus marked his spiritual disposition. Curiosity propelled him toward the discovery of that longed-for insight that would expand his ever-widening consciousness. His unrelenting desire for deeper knowledge and understanding would lead him down varied and sometimes controversial paths (controversial, at least, according to the expectations for a Trappist monk of his era). Aware of the hazards that accompany such pursuits, he trod along, nonetheless, toward the goal of an integrated, unified life.<sup>1</sup>

Because of a high esteem for new ideas, Merton approached life with childlike eagerness. The humility that is the foundation of the monk's spiritual quest is evident in the way he allowed himself to be influenced by others, even when aspects of their ideas or lives were disagreeable to him. He had the unusual ability to engage, discriminate, sift, discern, and apply other people's valuable ideas to his life without ever causing these people to feel devalued because of ideas that he ignored or left by the wayside. He was a

<sup>1</sup> Interpreting Merton's spiritual journey through the lens of "integration" is highlighted by two books edited by M. Basil Pennington: *Thomas Merton, My Brother: His Journey to Freedom, Compassion, and Final Integration* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996); and *Toward an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton's Journey*, CS 103 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1988).

consummate ecumenist. Any assessment of Merton's life or thought must, therefore, consider its dynamic and evolving nature. Fortunately, those interested in evaluating the formation of the various aspects of his life and thought have a life vividly laid bare in his voluminous journal writing and thousands of letters.<sup>2</sup>

The seven volumes of journals published between 1995 and 1998 offer a rare glimpse into the motivating influences on Merton's life and demonstrate the formation of many of his evolving ideas.<sup>3</sup> In those journals he chronicled nearly thirty years of his life almost uninterrupted—beginning with his first entry on May 2, 1939, and concluding with his final entry on December 8, 1968, two days before his untimely death. Much of what he wrote in these journals was edited and published in his lifetime: *The Sign of Jonas* (1953), *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (1959), and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966). *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (1973), *Woods, Shore, Desert* (1983), *A Vow of Conversation* (1988), and *Thomas Merton in Alaska* (1988) were all published posthumously. With the publication of the entire seven-volume corpus, the arc of Merton's life is openly displayed and his life comes into clearer focus. The journals also give access to the many struggles, uncertainties, and frustrations as well as breakthroughs and triumphs of a man in pursuit of God and a meaningful existence.

Many commentators consider the journals Merton's greatest achievement as a writer. Merton's secretary, Br. Patrick Hart, writes, "There is no denying that Thomas Merton was an inveterate diarist. He clarified his ideas in writing especially by keeping a journal. Perhaps his best writing can be found in the journals, where he

<sup>2</sup> Although it is uncertain how many letters Merton actually wrote, William Shannon states, "Four thousand would be a conservative figure; probably, the number is much higher." See William H. Shannon, "Letters," in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, ed. William H. Shannon, et al. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 255 (hereafter *Encyclopedia*).

<sup>3</sup> Merton stipulated in the Merton Legacy Trust, drawn up the year before his death, that the journals could be published whole or in part at the discretion of the Merton Legacy Trust but only after the official biography had been published and at least twenty-five years after his death.

was expressing what was deepest in his heart with no thought of censorship."<sup>4</sup> And Lawrence Cunningham suggests, "It was in the published journal, especially, that one finds the most fecund of his spiritual insights. It is those books that will most endure not because they are interesting or timely but because they reflect the experiences of a person who was deeply centered and whose whole life was an exercise in absorbing knowledge in order to become a caring and wise person."<sup>5</sup>

The other major source that reveals Merton's progressive maturation is the five volumes of selected letters published between 1985 and 1994: volume 1, *The Hidden Ground of Love*; volume 2, *The Road to Joy*; volume 3, *The School of Charity*; volume 4, *The Courage for Truth*; and volume 5, *Witness to Freedom*. Published independently from this series is *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*, the correspondence between Merton and his longtime publisher and friend. It was Evelyn Waugh, the editor of the British edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, entitled *Elected Silence*, who advised Merton early in his writing career "to put books aside and write serious letters and to make an art of it."<sup>6</sup> Merton took the latter part of this admonition to heart and subsequently produced a prodigious collection of correspondence ranging from such topics as spirituality and monasticism to poetry and literature to social and religious concerns, as well as a substantial collection to his family and friends. William Shannon insightfully comments, "Letters are important sources of knowledge about a person and also about the age in which that person lived. . . . In reading letters, one meets persons in their full humanness; they reveal secret desires and ambitions. Often they uncover fears, imperfections, faults, and concerns. Merton's letters (as well as his journals) were the only

<sup>4</sup>Patrick Hart, preface to *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, by Thomas Merton (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), xi–xii, here xii.

<sup>5</sup>Lawrence S. Cunningham, ed., *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 36.

<sup>6</sup>William H. Shannon, preface to *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, by Thomas Merton (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), v–viii, here vi.

bit of his writing that did not have to be submitted to the censors; hence, he could be his own uninhibited self."<sup>7</sup>

John Henry Newman said, "The true life of a person is found in his letters."<sup>8</sup> The letters of Thomas Merton are, unfortunately, among the most underappreciated of his writings. It seems that they have been thus far overshadowed by his journals and spiritual books. Yet the letters reveal a side of Merton that is not found elsewhere. They reveal him as a man of deep, personal compassion and concern for a staggering variety of individuals. Here he writes with candor and vulnerability, yet with selfless interest and a genuine desire to connect with others on the most profound level. His letter writing demonstrates a true exercise in creative interchange.<sup>9</sup> In comparing Merton's journals and letters, Shannon notes, "there is an important difference between these two similar forms of writing. Merton's journals tend to be more introspective and self-occupied. In his journals, he is necessarily talking to himself (though he certainly saw the real possibility that these journals would be published), whereas in his letters he is talking to, and building a relationship with, another person."<sup>10</sup>

Merton's journals and letters can be likened to two eyes through which he viewed the world: the eye that viewed his inner world (journals) and the eye that viewed the world around him (letters). These sources of self-expression often served as platforms through which he made known his own distinctive vision—for the world, for the church, for monasticism, for himself. They testify to the ever-increasing burden that he would come to bear for making

<sup>7</sup> See Shannon, "Letters," 255.

<sup>8</sup> Newman to his sister, Mrs. John Mozley, May 18, 1863. Cited in Shannon, "Letters," 255.

<sup>9</sup> *Creative interchange* is a phrase used by the American philosopher of religion Henry Nelson Wieman to describe the process of integrating diverse perspectives that allow people to learn from each other, come to understand each other, be corrected by each other, form a community with each other, and live in peace with each other. See Henry Nelson Wieman, *The Source of Human Good* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1946).

<sup>10</sup> See William Shannon, "Letters," 256.

right all that was wrong in each of these spheres of his life. As the popular monk that he was to become, he would be offered a unique opportunity to become an influential voice—a prophetic voice calling for sense and justice in a most senseless and unjust century.

### A Prophetic Spirituality

Attention to the prophetic nature of Merton's spirituality in Merton studies has tended to focus mainly on his writings on peace and monastic renewal. These were the most obvious outlets for the exercise of his prophetic ministry and found their greatest expression there. What has received little consideration are the underlying impulses and the motivating and formative forces of this prophetic ministry, namely, its spirituality.

In a conference given to the novices under his care on April 21, 1963, on the meaning of monastic spirituality, Merton described his understanding of the term *spirituality*. Spirituality, for Merton, was a way of life, a way of doing things for the salvation of one's soul. It involved the human way to God with its motives and responses to the Holy Spirit. It also involved one's ideas—how one thought about one's response to God. It was the life of one's whole being, not just mind or will. Most important, spirituality sought to unify the self. Monastic spirituality, in particular, was an intense, focused, and disciplined way of life that was completely devoted to the unification of the self in and with God.<sup>11</sup>

Merton's use of the terms *prophet*, *prophecy*, and *prophetic* is much more prevalent and varied than his use of the term *spirituality*. A chronological study of Merton's writings reveals a marked increase in the use of these terms after his epiphany on the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets in Louisville. In reflecting on this experience, he wrote, "In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Meaning of Monastic Spirituality*, Credence Cassettes AA2085, audiocassette (Kansas City, MO, n.d.).

though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream."<sup>12</sup> The date was March 18, 1958. Merton was forty-three years old and had ten years left to his life.

This decisive moment for Merton is often referred to as his "return to the world" after spending over sixteen years cut off from it within his strict enclosure.<sup>13</sup> His final decade would be subsequently characterized by an intense sense of responsibility and compassion for the world, which he saw as reeling under the effects of godlessness and bent toward self-destruction. In his writings during this period, particularly his journals and letters, Merton assumed not the role of savior, one who saw himself as the answer to the world's problems, but as prophet: one who communicates the truth of what God has revealed, no matter what the cost, in order to help reconcile the world to God.

Yet it would be a mistake to burden the "Fourth and Walnut" experience with too much significance in regard to Merton's prophetic interests. A study of Merton's early writings, particularly before he entered Gethsemani, reveals a young man very interested in the idea of the prophetic. Merton first referred to prophecy at the age of twenty-three, writing of William Blake. In a letter to his good friend from Columbia University, Robert Lax, dated August 11, 1938, he wrote, "I have studied William Blake, I have measured him with a ruler, I have sneaked at him with pencils and T squares, I have spied on him from a distance with a small spyglass, I have held him up to mirrors, and will shortly endeavor to prove the prophetic books were all written with lemon juice and must be held in front of a slow fire to be read."<sup>14</sup> What Merton alludes to

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966; New York: Image Books, 1989), 156. For a more thorough analysis of the significance of this event, see below, pp. xxi–xxiii.

<sup>13</sup> See Christine M. Bochen, "The 'Fourth and Walnut' Experience," in *Encyclopedia*, 158–60, here 160.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Merton to Robert Lax, New York, August 11, 1938, in *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E.

in this passage is his preparation of his master's thesis, "Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation," which he would complete the following year. Merton's interest in Blake as prophet and in the prophetic nature of his poetry resurfaced in his final decade.<sup>15</sup>

Merton's social concerns appeared very early, especially in his journals. The first issue that seems to have attracted his attention is race. In his journal entry on Good Friday 1940, after quoting a verse on the anointing at Bethany from the Gospel of Matthew, he wrote, "The apostles and, specifically in one Gospel, Judas, complained that this ointment was *wasted* in being poured upon Christ instead of being sold and the money given to the poor. Let the people, the so-called Catholics who argue against the 'imprudence' of certain actions—like, for example, admitting a Negro child to parochial school for fear all the white parents take away their children—remember the 'prudence' of Judas and freeze with horror!" (*Run*, 155). Concern for the racial situation in America had such an effect on Merton in his early twenties that he nearly moved to Harlem to work with Catherine de Hueck Doherty's Friendship House instead of entering Gethsemani.<sup>16</sup> Criticism of the war and America's role in it soon followed: "And if we go into the war, it will be first of all to defend our investments, our business, our money. In certain terms it may be useful to defend all these things, an expedient to protect our business so that everybody may have jobs, but if anybody holds up American business as a shining example of justice, or American politics as a shining example of honesty and purity, that is really quite a joke!" (*Run*, 221).

After Merton's entry into Gethsemani at the end of 1941, by far the most substantive source for his early prophetic formation

Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 142. Merton's correspondence with Robert Lax is consistently marked by a playful, Joycean style.

<sup>15</sup>For an extended treatment of Blake's influence on Merton's prophetic spirituality, see chap. 1.

<sup>16</sup>Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), 357–60.

as a monk was the biblical prophets. Three in particular appear frequently in his journals of this period, as well as in many of his early poems: Jonah, Elijah, and John the Baptist. Jonah first appears in a journal entry dated February 26, 1952. Reflecting on the meaning of Ash Wednesday, Merton wrote, "Receive, O monk, the holy truth concerning this thing called death. Know that there is in each man a deep will, potentially committed to freedom or captivity, ready to consent to life, born consenting to death, turned inside out, swallowed by its own self, prisoner of itself like Jonas in the whale."<sup>17</sup>

For Merton, the story of Jonah and the whale bore multiple layers of meaning. Fundamentally, it was the paradoxical, transformative experience everyone must undergo or perish. The whale was death, which brings forth life. Jonah is the sign of that life coming out of death—the sign of resurrection. Merton explains its significance in the prologue to his first collection of published journals, significantly titled *The Sign of Jonas*:

The sign Jesus promised to the generation that did not understand Him was the "sign of Jonas the prophet"—that is, the sign of His own resurrection. The life of every monk, of every priest, of every Christian is signed with the sign of Jonas, because we all live by the power of Christ's resurrection. But I feel that my own life is especially sealed with this great sign, which baptism and monastic profession and priestly ordination have burned into the roots of my being, because like Jonas himself I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox.<sup>18</sup>

In the prologue to *The Sign of Jonas* Merton for the first time likens the monk to a prophet: "A monk can always legitimately and significantly compare himself to a prophet, because the monks are the heirs of the prophets. The prophet is a man whose whole life is a living witness of the providential action of God in the world.

<sup>17</sup>Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 469.

<sup>18</sup>Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953), 11.

Every prophet is a sign and a witness of Christ. Every monk, in whom Christ lives, and in whom all the prophecies are therefore fulfilled, is a witness and a sign of the Kingdom of God" (Sign 11).

The prophet Elijah is an important figure in the early development of Merton's understanding of the relationship between contemplation and action. Merton's lengthy poem "Elias—Variations on a Theme," from his 1957 collection *The Strange Islands*, envisions the prophet as "one who has discovered his oneness with all reality, who resonates with the needs and hopes of others because he has found these very needs and hopes in his own depths, who has been made aware that because the center of the self is not the self but God, to experience one's true center is to pass beyond the self without leaving the self."<sup>19</sup>

With a large number of references to John the Baptist, Merton signals his favorite prophet. This preference was true in both his early monastic years and in his final decade. The earliest tribute to the Baptist is the poem from Merton's 1946 collection *A Man in the Divided Sea*, entitled "St. John Baptist."<sup>20</sup> John the Baptist reappears in Merton's 1947 collection *Figures for an Apocalypse*, in both "St. John's Night" (171–72) and "Winter Afternoon" (185–86), and in his 1949 collection *The Tears for the Blind Lions* in "The Quickening of St. John the Baptist" (199–202). These early references envision the Baptist as fulfilling a role similar to that of Elijah, namely, as the symbolic figure who unites the contemplative and the prophetic roles within a single vocation.

Reading these early references to the biblical prophets leads to an understanding that Merton believed that when a person makes the decision to enter a monastery, that person in effect makes the decision to assume a prophetic mantle. For Merton the vocation to be a monk was the vocation to live a prophetic life, even before the monk spoke or wrote. The early Merton understood that the silent communication of a life wholly devoted to God in humility and obedience speaks with a power and authority that leads others to

<sup>19</sup> See Patrick O'Connell, "The Strange Islands," in *Encyclopedia*, 455.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 122–26.

a confrontation with the divine. Yet Merton was also a writer—a writer who understood that his vocation to write was a vocation to make known the hidden truths of God. Thus in Merton this dual vocation of monk and writer would become a uniquely influential source for the exercise of his own prophetic spirituality and contribute significantly to his own personal integration.<sup>21</sup>

Nearly all of these early prophetic intimations reappeared with renewed interest and force after his epiphany in 1958. Still, as is abundantly evident from the citations above, the Louisville experience did not mark the beginning of Merton's interest in the prophetic. What significance, then, did it play in the formation of Merton's prophetic spirituality?

### **An Insight of Reconciliation**

On a cold Saint John's Day in the final days of 1957, Merton found himself feeling overwhelmed by the stack of Christmas cards before him waiting to be opened. This moment, after spending six-

<sup>21</sup> A problem arises in defining the vocation of Thomas Merton. Should he be considered primarily a monk who was also a writer or primarily a writer who was also a monk? Or should the vocations be understood as more intertwined—a monk-writer or a writer-monk? It is important to note that Merton wrestled greatly over the reconciliation of these two vocations throughout his lifetime, especially during the first few years after entering Gethsemani. In his preface to *A Thomas Merton Reader*, he wrote, "If the monastic life is a life of hardship and sacrifice, I would say that for me most of the hardship has come in connection with writing. It is possible to doubt whether I have become a monk (a doubt I have to live with), but it is not possible to doubt that I am a writer, that I was born one and will most probably die as one. Disconcerting, disedifying as it is, this seems to be my lot and my vocation." See preface to *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1974), 13–18, here 17. In spite of this self-deprecating assertion of his own monastic vocation, I would argue that Merton's vocation should be fundamentally understood as being a monk and contemplative whose primary mode of expression and creativity appeared in writing. In short, it was not simply his ability as a writer that made Merton so influential—it was his ability to communicate the hidden things of God.

teen years in the enclosure of his monastery, spurred his first overt reflection about a new way of conceiving a monk's relationship to the world: "But a monk *should* have something to do with the world he lives in and should love the people in that world. How much they give us and how little we give them. My responsibility to be in all reality a peacemaker in the world, an apostle, to bring people to truth, to make my whole life a true and effective witness to God's Truth."<sup>22</sup> He expanded on this new stance toward the world just two days later: "Until my 'contemplation' is liberated from the sterilizing artificial limitations under which it has so far existed (and nearly been stifled out of existence) I cannot be a 'man of God' because I cannot live in the Truth, which is the first essential for being a man of God. It is absolutely true that here in this monastery we are enabled to systematically evade our real and ultimate social responsibilities. In any time, social responsibility is the keystone of the Christian life" (*Search*, 151).

These passages highlight Merton's mood leading up to the Louisville experience and are necessary components for a correct interpretation of the event. The unrest within his soul about the way he saw monasticism as evading its social responsibility for a so-called higher vocation was already percolating when he visited Louisville two and a half months later.

Merton wrote two versions of his Louisville epiphany, the first the day after the event occurred and the second eight years afterward, for publication in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. The first version of the experience begins with the insight of his radical unity with all humankind—his waking from "the dream of separateness"—waking to the illusion of a "'special' vocation to be different" (*Search*, 182). In this version Merton is overwhelmed with joy at his fundamental sameness with the rest of the world: "Thank God! Thank God! I am only another member of the human race, like all the rest of them. I have the immense joy of being a man!" (*Search*, 182). In reflecting on the women walking on the streets, he describes

<sup>22</sup>Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 149 (emphasis his).

how his vow of chastity has allowed him to recognize that the beauty of the “woman-ness that is in each of them is at once original and inexhaustibly fruitful bringing the image of God into the world. In this each one is Wisdom and Sophia and Our Lady” (*Search*, 182).

This insight led him to recount a dream he had had in late February in which he encountered “Proverb,” a young Jewish girl who personified the revelation of “virginal solitude” (*Search*, 176). On the streets of Louisville he recognized her once again: “Dear Proverb, I have kept one promise and I have refrained from speaking of you until seeing you again. I know that when I saw you again it would be very different, in a different place, in a different form, in the most unexpected circumstances. I shall never forget our meeting yesterday. The touch of your hand makes me a different person. To be with you is rest and truth. Only with you are these things found, dear child sent to me by God!” (*Search*, 182). Thus Merton had a mystical intuition of the radical humanness of his monastic vocation in his encounter with “Proverb,” the beauty of the hidden Wisdom of God revealed to him in the women walking along the streets of Louisville. Henceforth he conceived of monasticism as being grounded in the world and depending on this groundedness for its authentic existence.

The second account of the vision, which appears in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, interestingly leaves out any reference to “Proverb.” Instead, the “virginal solitude” of “Proverb” becomes the “secret beauty” of all hearts (*Conjectures*, 158). This extended reworking also includes Merton’s most significant reference to Louis Massignon’s notion of the expression *le point vierge* (*Conjectures*, 158). Merton explains the phrase: “At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us” (*Conjectures*, 158). Merton goes on to explain that this *le point vierge* “is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of

a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely" (*Conjectures*, 158).

In these two reflections of his epiphany in Louisville, Merton articulates an experiential insight of reconciliation; it is a certain validation of the movement of his spirit toward the world that had begun in the previous months. The experience gave him a mystical knowledge of the depth of a reality of which he had previously only seen glimpses. Everything now was one: the monk and the rest of humanity, contemplation and action, God and humankind. Henceforth, Merton saw differently—he became a different kind of contemplative. His contemplative awareness expanded from a myopic vision of God (limited, as interpreted within the confines of Catholic tradition) to a universal vision of God where “the gate of heaven is everywhere” (*Conjectures*, 158). He also became a different kind of monk—a monk liberated from isolationism and for dialogue and encounter. The experience did not signal the gradual distancing of himself from monasticism or the church, although he admittedly became disillusioned by many of the institutional aspects of each. His engagement with the world was consistently grounded in his vocation to contemplation and solitude. Therein, he insisted, rested the monk’s unique gift and prophetic word to the world.

### **Themes of Merton’s Prophetic Spirituality**

In the epiphany of March 18, 1958, Merton also reconciled himself with his past. Subsequent journal entries as well as subsequent letters (the number of which exponentially increases after this date) reveal how many of the interests and passions that had occupied his premonastic mind were suddenly regrafted onto the vine of his new identity. He began to revisit writers who had interested him in his young adulthood—rereading them, reinterpreting them, allowing them to inform his new consciousness as a monk for the world. He particularly returned to William Blake, and he experienced a renewal of his interest in poetry. A new voice emerged in *Original Child Bomb* (1962), *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963), and, especially, *Cables to the Ace* (1968) and *The Geography of Lograire*

(1968). He devoted a vast amount of energy in the years following the Louisville experience to analyzing and commenting on social issues, especially race and war—the two issues with which he had wrestled in his student days at Columbia. Merton was now becoming a whole man, integrating what was good in his past into his present life situation as a redefined monk.

Merton's prophetic interests were perhaps the most notable and significant aspect of this reintegration. It is as if before the redefining event in Louisville, Merton had only flirted with the prophetic, whereas now he accepted it as a divine mandate. Louisville released him to live prophetically without restraint. It also provided him with the content of his prophetic activity, namely, *the reconciliation of all things in Christ through the dismantling of the illusion of separateness*.

Because of his newfound openness to the world outside the strict walls of monasticism, this central theme of Merton's prophetic spirituality later found development and shape through his interaction with a number of thinkers with whom he came into contact for the first time. As the extensive and substantive correspondence and journal entries during his final decade revealed, writers like Boris Pasternak, Albert Camus, and William Faulkner, philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel, Latin American poets like Cesar Vallejo and Pablo Antonio Cuadra, social activists like Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., social theorists like Herbert Marcuse and Jacques Ellul, and religious thinkers like Abraham Heschel and Louis Massignon, each in his own way, helped to shape Merton's mature prophetic consciousness.

A number of themes arose from Merton's creative interchange with each of these thinkers, forming the basis of his prophetic spirituality; many of these have received little attention in Merton studies. The first theme, developed through his study of Pasternak, Camus, Faulkner, Blake, and the Latin American poets, was the special value and power of poetic imagery and literature to convey prophetic insights. According to Merton, these writers had assumed the prophetic mantle that many of the church's theologians of his day had chosen to ignore. Second, Ellul and Marcuse helped Merton see the problem of making prophetic communication rele-

vant to modern, technologized humanity. Third, the existentialists Kierkegaard and Marcel showed Merton that prophecy is grounded in a radical commitment to authenticity of life (i.e., to the true self) and compels one publicly to expose illusory social and personal structures of consciousness. Fourth, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., taught Merton that the proper Christian endeavor for the transformation of such illusory social structures is the prophetic stance of active non-violence, while his own spiritual tradition taught him that illusory personal structures are to be transformed in the life of contemplation. Thus the relationship between contemplative and prophetic spirituality became a major theme of Merton's final years.



PART ONE

# **The Writer as Prophet**



## Chapter 1

# Learning How to See

## Thomas Merton and the Prophetic Vision of William Blake

*Simply put: Thomas Merton is the William Blake of our time.*<sup>1</sup>

—Michael Higgins

### Background

Merton grew up with William Blake. From Merton's earliest childhood days, his father, Owen, read to his firstborn the obscure yet fascinating and highly imaginative poetry of England's misunderstood eighteenth- and nineteenth-century visionary. The earliest interest that Merton's writings express toward Blake goes back to Merton's early letter to his friend Robert Lax from his student days at Columbia University. Referring to his meticulous study of the prophetic books of Blake, Merton informed Lax about his intention to make Blake the subject of his master's thesis. Merton submitted this thesis, "Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation," in February 1939. Patrick O'Connell has offered a concise synopsis of the thesis:

Merton's master's thesis consists of a short preface and two chapters. The first chapter, "Background and Development," surveys Blake's intellectual and artistic background and influences, both as writer and painter/engraver, with emphasis on his hostility toward rationalism and empiricism and defense of imagination and inspiration. The

<sup>1</sup>Michael W. Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co., 1998), 4.

second chapter, "Blake's Ideas on the Place of Nature in Art," contrasts nature as seen by the senses with nature transfigured by the imagination, and looks to insights from Thomist and Indian theories of art, as represented by Maritain and Coomaraswamy, not as influences on Blake but as a framework for understanding the nature of authentic artistic creativity.<sup>2</sup>

The topic of prophecy or any description of Blake as a prophet is not found in Merton's thesis. His focus, rather, is wholly on nature and art. The poetry analyzed, however, is that of Blake's prophetic books, a series of obscure and mythic works that seek to express Blake's ideas about the soul's effort to liberate itself from rationalism and organized religion. These prophetic ideas can certainly be found throughout the course of Merton's own spiritual journey, particularly in his penchant for apophatic spirituality and his critique of an overly institutional monasticism.

Besides the master's thesis, Merton's other major early references to Blake appear in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Reflecting back on his early years, Merton as a young monk reminisces about his particular attraction to one of the most instrumental sources for his own spiritual formation:

Meanwhile there was one discovery of mine, one poet who was a poet indeed, and a Romantic poet, but vastly different from those contemporaries, with whom he had so little to do. 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.

Father had always liked Blake, and had tried to explain to me what was good about him when I was a child of ten. The funny thing about Blake is that although the *Songs of Innocence* look like children's poems, and almost seem to have been written for children, they are, to most children, incomprehensible. Or at least, they were so to

<sup>2</sup>See Patrick O'Connell, "The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton," in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, ed. William H. Shannon, et al. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 260–63, at 262–63.

me. Perhaps if I had read them when I was four or five, it would have been different. But when I was ten, I knew too much. I knew that tigers did not burn in the forests of the night. That was very silly, I thought. Children are very literal-minded.<sup>3</sup>

In considering Blake's paradoxical nature, Merton continues: "How incapable I was of understanding anything like 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, the rebellion of the one whose desire of God was so intense and irresistible that it condemned, with all its might, all the hypocrisy and petty sensuality and skepticism and materialism which cold and trivial minds set up as unpassable barriers between God and the souls of men" (*Seven Storey Mountain*, 87). Writing directly of Blake's influence on him, Merton states,

The Providence of God was eventually to use Blake to awaken something of faith and love in my own soul—in spite of all the misleading notions, and all the almost infinite possibilities of error that underlie his weird and violent figures. I do not, therefore, want to seem to canonize him. But 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. (*Seven Storey Mountain*, 88)

Further along in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, when Merton is recounting his days at Columbia University preparing to write his master's thesis, he returns to Blake: "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!" (*Seven Storey Mountain*, 189–90). Comparing Blake to the other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), 85–86.

Romantics, he writes, "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" (*Seven Storey Mountain*, 190). Merton here offers an early assessment of his understanding of Blake as a prophet.

Although Blake is noted for his emphasis on imagination in the creative process, that is not what, according to Merton, makes him a prophet. There is a creative gift that exceeds the imagination—that goes beyond the mind's natural capacities. Blake was a prophet, Merton thought, because he was a *seer*: "He wrote better poetry when he was twelve than Shelley wrote in his whole life. And it was because at twelve he had already *seen*, I think, Elias, standing under a tree in the fields south of London" (*Seven Storey Mountain*, 190; emphasis added). In other words, Merton says that Blake was a prophet because he had the ability to see what others did not. This prophetic gift allowed Blake to know the solitude of Elijah even as a very young man. Elijah here also connotes Blake's uncompromising commitment to his own inspired vision of reality and the persecution that inevitably results from sharing it.

Merton concludes this section of his autobiography by telling of the tremendous effect his study of Blake had on him: "By the time the summer was over, I was to become conscious of the fact that the only way to live was to live in a world that was charged with the presence and reality of God" (*Seven Storey Mountain*, 191). For Merton, Blake was a Christian mystic, however heterodox, consumed with the vision of God. In a response to a letter from Mario Falsina, dated March 25, 1967, Merton answers a number of questions posed to him. One question concerns the reasons for his conversion: ". . . besides the grace of God. First of all the discovery of a metaphysical sense of Being, and an intuition of God as *ens a se*, pure actuality. Then the mystical ideas of William Blake."<sup>4</sup> It is precisely this sense of Blake as visionary mystic that awakened within Merton his own desire to be "charged with the presence and reality of God."

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 348.

## Blake Recapitulated

1959

After the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, William Blake rarely appears in Merton's journals, letters, or books. It was not until 1959 that Merton, somewhat accidentally, revisited his favorite Romantic poet: "When I was in Louisville I picked up, on the wing, 'by chance' Blake's poems and realized again how much I love them, how much I am at home with him. Reading the prophetic books with immense enjoyment—feeling thoroughly at home in them now, though I don't follow all the cast of characters. It is a life-long study in itself. . . . Blake is *never* merely indifferent. Always if not inspired, at least very alive. Never dead. I love Blake."<sup>5</sup>

About a month later, on September 12, Merton wrote Czesław Miłosz, "I have been reading William Blake again. His reply to Caesar seems like psychosis, but it is valid and consistent and prophetic: and involves no *Ketman* except perhaps a very little of it, on the surface, with some of his 'friends' who had money but did not understand him. And this did not get into any of his writing."<sup>6</sup> *Ketman*, as Christine Bochen explains, "is a term with an Arabic etymology, which in some Muslim circles means the practice of mental reservation whereby, in an unfriendly regime, one withholds the full statement of one's religious convictions. Miłosz adopts the term to name the ways in which people in Eastern Europe 'act' in ways that mask their views and values in order to survive in a society

<sup>5</sup>Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham, The Journals of Thomas Merton, vol. 3 (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 315–16.

<sup>6</sup>Czesław Miłosz, the Nobel Prize-winning author, was a regular correspondent of Merton. Miłosz's *The Captive Mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), about the plight of Polish intellectuals under a repressive regime, garnered Merton's attention and initiated a correspondence that lasted throughout Merton's final decade. See Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993), 64.

dominated by ‘the Party’” (*Courage*, 64). Merton’s reference to *Caesar* in his letter is the archetypal symbol of the “unfriendly regime.”

Merton is saying that Blake’s prophetic books, while difficult to unravel, are a “valid and consistent and prophetic” statement that fully bears his religious convictions—that holds no punches. Blake, according to Merton, was not one to mask his imaginative vision. He didn’t care whether others might misunderstand him. He was utterly convinced that the poet must write out of his most authentic self—to convey what he saw with his imagination, however subversive, shocking, or obtuse. This was, for Merton, the foundational element of what made Blake’s poetry prophetic.

### 1964

After this brief appearance of Blake in 1959, Merton did not mention Blake again until 1964, when he again accessed him as an interpretive lens through which to understand the spirituality of the Shakers. At the beginning of that summer, Merton found himself on one of his frequent visits to the hospital in Louisville. Writing to Ray Livingston on May 11, he mentions having recently read Blake: “I was in the hospital too, and got to read some Blake and some things about Blake in the U. of Louisville library on my way in and out. How few are the people who see.”<sup>7</sup> Then, a couple of months later on July 20, to Mrs. Edward Deming (Faith) Andrews, the wife of the Shaker scholar and enthusiast who had asked Merton to write an introduction to their book *Religion in Wood: A Book of Shaker Furniture*, he writes, “In the preface I have been bold enough to bring in quite a lot about William Blake. I hope you will not think this too venturesome, but I thought it would be worthwhile to write a preface that was an essay in its own right, and I hope it will add to the book.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton Letters*, vol. 5 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 247. Ray Livingston was chair of the Department of English at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), 40.

Merton opens his introduction with this passage from Blake's *Jerusalem*:

Prepare the furniture, O Lambeth, in thy pitying looms!  
The curtains, woven tears and sighs, wrought into lovely  
forms  
For comfort: there the secret furniture of Jerusalem's  
chamber is wrought.  
Lambeth, the Bride, the Lamb's Wife loveth thee:  
Thou art one with her, and knowest not of self in thy  
supreme joy.  
Go on, builders in hope, tho' Jerusalem wanders far  
away  
Without the gate of Los, among the dark Satanic wheels.<sup>9</sup>

Merton used these lines to draw immediate comparisons between Blake and the Shakers. As he noted in the opening paragraph, the more each is understood, the more comparisons will be made. Though Blake probably knew very little about the Shakers, if anything at all, his creative impulses, according to Merton, bore profound similarities to theirs.

Merton began his identification of these similarities by first highlighting the "wild and hermetic theology" of each. Yet he cautioned that neither was as incoherent or eccentric as many had initially seemed to believe. Imagination, he said, was another common feature. Merton had already come to see that Blake's understanding of imagination was fundamental to his understanding of reality: it is the essence of life—its very nature. The Shakers too, in Merton's view, held the imagination fundamental to their understanding of reality. But the imagination did not work alone in the creative process. It was intertwined with and dependent on religious inspiration. Merton certainly recognized that connection: "It is no exaggeration to say that the simple and 'lovely forms' which emerged

<sup>9</sup> William Blake, *Jerusalem*, i. Quoted in Merton, "Introduction," in *Religion in Wood: A Book of Shaker Furniture*, by Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1966), vii–xv, here vii.

from the fire of Shaker religious inspiration had something to do with what Blake called ‘the secret furniture of Jerusalem’s chamber’” (“Introduction,” *Religion in Wood*, viii). As Merton explained, the craft of Blake’s poetry and of the Shakers’ woodwork were both essentially spiritual. The outward expression of both found their source in inner inspiration and reflected their inner world. In this way, as he noted, their art revealed and communicated inner realities of meaning: “Neither the Shakers nor Blake would be disturbed at the thought that a work-a-day bench, cupboard, or table might also and at the same time be furniture in and for heaven: did not Blake protest mightily at the blindness of ‘single vision’ which saw only the outward and material surface of reality, not its inner and spiritual ‘form’ and the still more spiritual ‘force’ from which the form proceeds? These, for Blake, were not different realities. They are one” (“Introduction,” *Religion in Wood*, viii).

In this way, too, their art was prophetic: “And the ‘fourfold vision’ of religious and creative ‘imagination’ (more akin to prophetic vision than to phantasy) was needed if one were to be a ‘whole man,’ capable of seeing reality in its totality, and thus dwelling and expanding spiritually in ‘the four regions of human majesty’” (“Introduction,” *Religion in Wood*, viii). In order to expound his meaning of “fourfold vision,” Merton provided this poem from Blake:

Now I a fourfold vision see  
 And a fourfold vision is given me;  
 ‘Tis fourfold in my supreme delight  
 And threefold in soft Beulah’s night  
 And twofold always. May God us keep  
 From single vision and Newton’s sleep!<sup>10</sup>

John Beer, in his *William Blake: A Literary Life*, provides helpful commentary on the fourth level of Blake’s “fourfold vision”:

Single vision was the dead vision of contemporary mathematical rationalism, whereas the vision by which he

<sup>10</sup> William Blake, Letter to Thomas Butts, November 22, 1802. Quoted in Merton, “Introduction,” in *Religion in Wood*, viii.

customarily worked was the twofold, which customarily sought to find inner significance within the normal everyday, but which, as he is explaining, carried its own dangers of fear of the future along with the delights of creativity. Above the fear and vision granted to artists like himself he envisaged two further realms: the “threefold” vision of innocent pleasure given to those enjoying the pleasures of marriage and domesticity (termed “Beulah” from his reading of Isaiah and *The Pilgrim’s Progress*) and the supreme “fourfold” of supreme vision—at once absolute in its certainty and essentially unseizable for purposes of immediate visual representation.<sup>11</sup>

It is this “fourfold vision” of Blake that Merton describes as being “akin to prophetic vision.” Unfortunately, Merton does not specifically state what he means by “prophetic vision.” He simply describes it as being closely related to Blake’s “fourfold vision.” From this comparison, however, it can be deduced that Merton’s idea of “prophetic vision” comprises religious and creative imagination, like Blake’s “fourfold vision,” but may also in some way differ from it. The difference, however, need not be emphasized. Merton’s concern here is to highlight their similarities. What is most significant about this comparison is that Merton sees Blake’s fourth fold of his “fourfold vision” as a type of mystical vision. Perhaps Merton is saying that it is specifically this fourth fold that provides the necessary components for truly “prophetic vision.”

Shaker furniture, for Merton, was an expression of Shaker spirituality. In this way, the craftsmanship of the Shakers was like the poetry and drawings of Blake. Their art sprang from an inner force—out of the mystery of God within. Blake’s “fourfold vision” was the key to Merton’s understanding of the spirituality of Shaker craftsmanship. He described the work of the Shakers thus: “There were of course rules to be obeyed and principles by which the work was guided: but the work itself was free, spontaneous, itself responding to a new and unique situation. Nothing was done by rote or by slavish imitation.

<sup>11</sup> John Beer, *William Blake: A Literary Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 126.

The workman also had a vocation: he had to respond to the call of God pointing out to him the opportunity to make a new chest of drawers like the ones that had been made before, only better. Not necessarily better in an ideal and absolute sense, but better adapted to the particular need for which it was required. Thus the craftsman began each new chair as if it were the first chair ever to be made in the world!" ("Introduction," *Religion in Wood*, x). So in Merton's judgment this direct dependence on the Spirit of God grounded the work of the Shakers in a form of mysticism that added mystery and luminosity to their particular form of craftsmanship.

Merton goes on to observe that Shaker vision is "peculiarly and authentically American" ("Introduction," *Religion in Wood*, xi). While he was often quite critical of America, here his description of the American spirit of the Shakers is quite positive. The Shakers, according to Merton, unquestionably "felt themselves called to be a force for social renewal in the world which surrounded them. They had the gift to express much that is best in the American spirit. They exemplified the simplicity, the practicality, the earnestness, and the hope that have been associated with the United States. They exemplified these qualities in a mode of humility and dedication which one seeks in vain today in the hubris and exasperation of our country with its enormous power!" ("Introduction," *Religion in Wood*, xi). The Shakers, along with Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, and William Faulkner, represented for Merton the American spirit in its purest and most prophetic form, before America finally succumbed to the consumerism and materialism of his day.

The prophetic task of recovering the lost spirit of simplicity, innocence, and hope that characterized the Shakers was primarily the work of the spiritual imagination, Merton thought, arguing that it was because this religious and creative imagination had become impotent, sterile, and dead that America had fallen into "an era of violence, chaos, destruction, madness, and slaughter" ("Introduction," *Religion in Wood*, xiii). As he wrote, "'Imagination,' for Blake, is the faculty by which man penetrates ultimate reality and religious mystery" ("Introduction," *Religion in Wood*, xiii). For both Blake and the Shakers, it was the task of the creative imagination and religious vision to be more than "merely static and contempla-

tive" ("Introduction," *Religion in Wood*, xiv). They were to be "active and dynamic" ("Introduction," *Religion in Wood*, xiv) in expressing that vision in creative work—ultimately a work of redemption. Commenting on the dangers facing a world without this creative imagination and redemptive work, Blake offers a prophetic view of humankind's modern plight: "Art degraded, imagination denied, war governed the nations."<sup>12</sup>

The power of Shaker craftsmanship, according to Merton, lay in its chastity, simplicity, and honesty—and in the fact that "it is never conscious of itself, never seeks recognition, and is completely absorbed in the work to be done" ("Introduction," *Religion in Wood*, xiv). Such power, based on the Shakers' spirit of simple dependence on God, is, as Merton observes, "perhaps the last great expression of work in a purely human measure, a witness to the ancient, primitive, perfect totality of man before the final victory of machine technology" ("Introduction," *Religion in Wood*, xv). This observation led Merton to ask a series of probing and ominous questions: "is such a spirit, such work, possible to men whose lives are in full technological, sociological, and spiritual upheaval? Will such a spirit be possible in the future world that will emerge from the present technological revolution, that world whose outlines can barely be discerned? Is Shaker craftsmanship and its spirit necessarily bound up with a more primitive technology, or can it find a way to direct and inform machine production?" ("Introduction," *Religion in Wood*, xv).

Although Merton declines to answer any of these questions, by using Blake as a means of interpreting Shaker spirituality and craftsmanship, he means to say that there remains a hope that the future can be saved from total technological, sociological, and spiritual upheaval, but only by means of the recovery and exercise of the creative imagination and religious spirit that so characterized the prophetic vision of William Blake.

<sup>12</sup> William Blake, "Laocoön" (cited in Merton, "Introduction," *Religion in Wood*, xiv).

1968

While Merton took up Blake briefly in 1959 and a little more substantially in 1964, it was not until his final year, 1968, that he returned to Blake with full force. On March 9 of that year, Merton recorded in his journal, "Back to Blake—after thirty years. I remember the profound overturning of the roots that took place in my study of him. And the same—even much more profound, is required."<sup>13</sup> Merton articulated this "much more profound" overturning mainly in response to his grappling with Thomas J. J. Altizer's *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake*.<sup>14</sup> He primarily expressed his response in two essays, "The Death of God and the End of History"<sup>15</sup> and "Blake and the New Theology."<sup>16</sup>

Merton situated his essay "The Death of God and the End of History" in part four of *Faith and Violence*. Each of the four parts of the book deal with various themes of crisis that Merton saw as pressing issues for the church and for the world. Part four addresses the theme of belief and unbelief, with particular interest in the critique of the "death of God" movement on institutional religion and orthodox theology. Merton begins the essay by exploring the claims of the "death of God" advocates. They identified themselves as fervent Christian iconoclasts, who thought their ideas were vitally necessary for both Christianity and the world if Christianity was to maintain any relevance in the modern world. As Merton explained their position, "The kerygma of the 'death of God' is

<sup>13</sup>Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 63.

<sup>14</sup>Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1967).

<sup>15</sup>"The Death of God and the End of History" was initially printed in *Theoria to Theory*, 2, no. 1 (1967): 3–16, but was later published in *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 239–58.

<sup>16</sup>"Blake and the New Theology" first appeared in *The Sewanee Review* 76, no. 4 (1968): 673–82, but was later published in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1981), 3–11.

then, in fact, *not* a categorical affirmation that ‘God does not exist’ over against a dogma of his existence. Still less is it a declaration that he ‘never existed.’ It is rather a declaration that the question of God’s existence has now become irrelevant. An announcement of ‘good news’: God as a problem no longer requires our attention” (*Faith and Violence*, 240). John A. T. Robinson, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolph Bultmann, and Thomas J. J. Altizer are among the radical theologians (some more radical than others) with whom Merton dealt in his essay “The Death of God.”

Toward the end of the essay, Merton turns his attention to Altizer. According to Merton, Altizer, with his treatment of William Blake in *The New Apocalypse*, shed new light on the God-is-dead movement. What was unique about Altizer’s approach, Merton said, was that his death-of-God kenoticism did not simply imply “passive submission to power politics” (*Faith and Violence*, 256). On the contrary, Altizer made Blake the model for the “prophetic radical Christian” (*Faith and Violence*, 257). Blake’s power lay in the fact that he was a visionary who “chose to confront the awesome reality of history as the total epiphany of the sacred.”<sup>17</sup> Merton noted that according to Mircea Eliade, it is the tendency of religion “to dissolve history or to evade it” (*Faith and Violence*, 257), and it is the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament and the ongoing development of later Judaic and Christian prophecy that embraces history without evading it. For Altizer, said Merton, it was Blake, the radical Christian prophet, who had the faith to come face to face with a “totally fallen history” and find in it “the redemptive epiphany of Christ.”<sup>18</sup> Such faith is possible, he said, because it is at once both “acceptance and reversal” (*Faith and Violence*, 258). Merton explains the paradox:

the reversal is not a rejection of history in favor of something else that is totally outside history. The reversal comes from within history accepted, in its often shattering reality, as the focus of salvation and epiphany. It is not that

<sup>17</sup> Altizer, *The New Apocalypse*; quoted in Merton, *Faith and Violence*, 257.

<sup>18</sup> Altizer, *The New Apocalypse*; quoted in Merton, *Faith and Violence*, 257.

the world of Auschwitz, Vietnam and the Bomb has to be cursed and repudiated as the devil's own territory. That very world has to be accepted as the terrain of the triumph of love not in the condemnation of evil but in its forgiveness: and this is certainly not an easy truth when we confront the enormity of the evil! (*Faith and Violence*, 258)

Whereas "The Death of God and the End of History" only mentions *The New Apocalypse*, "Blake and the New Theology" is a review essay *in toto* of Altizer's book. Merton begins his essay by observing how many writers have dismissed Blake as being too esoteric and lost in his own subjective world of myth and symbol to say anything relevant or useful—"that he was a madman who wrote a few good poems and many bad long ones" ("Blake and the New Theology," 3). Perceptions were changing, however, and Blake was faring better with more contemporary readers: "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" ("Blake and the New Theology," 3). This change of perception, according to Merton, was probably due to the atrocities of two world wars, the atomic bomb, and the chaos that had resulted throughout the world. Merton goes on to explain what he means by describing Blake as a prophet: "In this situation Blake can be read as a 'prophet' not of course in the sense of one who exactly predicts future events, but in the more traditional sense of one who 'utters' and 'announces' news about man's own deepest trouble—news that emerges from the very ground of that trouble in man himself. And of course the intensity of Blake's prophetic fervor was increased by the anger with which he viewed the blind complacencies of rationalism, of Enlightenment deism, and of the established Churches" ("Blake and the New Theology," 3).

Merton saw Blake in light of his reading of the Hebrew prophets, whose function was to highlight the sin of Israel's disobedience and idolatry in order to influence their reconciliation with God. Fervor and anger were characteristic of both and denoted the passionate, uncompromising nature of the prophetic vocation of each. For Merton, Blake's prophecies were against "the blind

complacencies" that had suffocated the spontaneity of imagination and the creative impulse. Blake's prophetic task was to use his intuitive capabilities to recover spiritual vitality. A certain amount of righteous indignation was warranted—even necessary. As Michael Higgins observes, "Merton and Blake both possessed the spiritual qualities of the biblical prophet and rebel: the capacity for righteous anger mingled with insight" (*Heretic Blood*, 69).

At this point Merton begins his analysis of Altizer's *The New Apocalypse*. The first few paragraphs of the analysis of the book demonstrate just how well Blake's thought corresponded to the tenets of radical theology. As Merton stated, "Radical theology could hardly find a better and more persuasive prophet" ("Blake and the New Theology," 5). Merton was in agreement with Altizer in much of his treatment of Blake. He affirmed Altizer's reading of Blake as neither an orthodox Christian mystic nor a purely heterodox anti-Christian seer. Altizer considered Blake to be fundamentally a revolutionary seer. Blake's unique prophetic spirit could only be understood, Altizer said, by realizing Blake to have "passed through an interior reversal and transformation of the Western Christian tradition" (*New Apocalypse*, xvi).

With Altizer, Merton acknowledged Blake's virulent views of the church's having perverted Christian truth for its own power and prestige. Instead of becoming "the lover of man who empties himself to become identified with Man" ("Blake and the New Theology," 5), he had said, the church had become "a scepter 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 and the New Theology," 5). Again, Merton agreed with Altizer in seeing Blake as a visionary whose vision was "a total integration of mysticism and prophecy, a return to apocalyptic faith which arises from an intuitive protest against Christianity's estrangement from its own eschatological ground" ("Blake and the New Theology," 6). He also agreed with Altizer's judgment "that 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. He substituted for it a Christianity of openness, of total vision, a faith which dialectically

embraces both extremes, not seeking to establish order in life by shutting off a little corner of chaos and subjecting it to laws and to police, but moving freely between dialectical poles in a wild chaos, integrating sacred vision, in and through the experience of fallenness, as the only locus of creativity and redemption" ("Blake and the New Theology," 6).

But Merton criticized Altizer for his utilization of Hegel's dialectical method in interpreting Blake. Merton saw this employment of Hegel as superficial and forced. One obvious difference between Blake and Hegel, he pointed out, arose in their understanding of the nature of *coincidentia oppositorum*: "what for Hegel would be 'coincidence' . . . is for Blake something totally different, the fourfold creative and prophetic vision in which opposites do not merely come together and fuse in synthesis, but are restored to a higher unity, an alchemical wedding of loving and fiery elements made all the more ardent by separation" ("Blake and the New Theology," 6).

Thus Merton was not so sure that Altizer had "found the right key" ("Blake and the New Theology," 6) for interpreting Blake. Merton did, however, see in Blake a dialectical method in a more restricted sense: "But in any case there is a ground of dialectic in Blake which, though not Hegelian, is nevertheless fully concerned with man's predicament in the world and deals with history not with a simple 'yes' or a simple 'no' but with a 'total acceptance, if ultimate reversal, of the full reality of a fallen history'" ("Blake and the New Theology," 6). Blake's "fourfold creative and prophetic vision," Merton pointed out, served as the conduit through which humankind is redeemed and thrust into a "higher unity." This restoration of contraries is not simply the work of the intellect, but for Blake, "it was, and had to be, a mystical and prophetic experience involving the whole man" ("Blake and the New Theology," 7). This soteriological evolution transcends historical process.

At this point in his analysis of Altizer, Merton becomes critical of the new theology's total negation of the transcendence of God in favor of his immanence in history alone. This total *kenosis* of the so-called static God into the dynamic God, or, put philosophically, the *act of Being* into the *activity of becoming* is critiqued by Merton, who saw process philosophy and theology as "considerably less alive

and dynamic" ("Blake and the New Theology," 9) than scholasticism. Altizer's depiction of life stuck on the historical plain without the capacity for transcendence was, for Merton, a misreading of Blake: "The revelation of God as life-giving Spirit is surely a revelation of him as *not* solitary and remote but as completely 'given,' 'poured out' in the world and man, and so, if you will, kenotic. But Altizer completely ignores all this and hence has to try to reach this same end by the fuzzy romanticism of a Godhead-process, immanent within history" ("Blake and the New Theology," 10).

This critique set aside, Merton did find Altizer's reading of Blake commendable, particularly in Altizer's treatment of Blake's eschatological vision, which Merton believed to be "the most important thing about this book" ("Blake and the New Theology," 10):

He has certainly not toned down the apocalyptic and prophetic character of Blake's vision, but has sought to do it full justice. In so doing, he has also frankly faced the central importance of that most odious and unpopular of Christian doctrines: the fall. Without the fall not only is Christianity itself emptied of meaning, but Blake too becomes incomprehensible. Eschatology is the vision of a totally new and final reality, a cosmic reversal that brings ultimate meaning and salvation to the fallen world. That reality is, in effect, the total integration of God and Man in Christ—that is to say, in concrete and communal Mankind united not by politics but by mercy. ("Blake and the New Theology," 6)

### Prophetic Anti-poetry?

According to Michael Higgins,<sup>19</sup> Blake's influence on Merton is expressed most fully in Merton's so called anti-poetry, which

<sup>19</sup>No writer has done more to demonstrate Blake's influence on Merton. Besides his book *Heretic Blood*, Higgins has also published a number of essays: "A Study of the Influence of William Blake on Thomas Merton," *The American Benedictine Review* 25, no. 3 (1974): 377–88; "Monasticism as Rebellion: Blakean Roots of Merton's Thought," *The American Benedictine Review* 39 (1988): 177–88; and "Merton and the Real Poets: Paradise Re-Bugged,"

Higgins describes as “a poetry replete with irony and protest, a method of coping with the contemporary disarray of language and meaning, a latter-day Blakean strategy” (*Heretic Blood*, 57). This notion of anti-poetry, which Merton espoused in the final year of his life, was provided to him by the Chilean poet Nicanor Parra. Merton himself describes the anti-poet as one who “‘suggests’ a tertiary meaning which is *not* ‘creative’ and ‘original’ but a deliberate ironic feedback of cliché, a further referential meaning, alluding, by its tone, banality, etc., to a *customary and abused context*, that of an impoverished and routine sensibility, and of the ‘mass-mind,’ the stereotyped creation of quantitative preordained response by ‘mass-culture.’”<sup>20</sup>

Merton’s two final books of poetry, *Cables to the Ace or, Familiar Liturgies of Misunderstanding* and *The Geography of Lograire*, are his contribution to this genre of anti-poetry. Higgins describes these works as Merton’s “two great Blakean ‘myth-dreams,’” which “reflect Merton’s conviction that the tyranny of mind and power in Western culture suppresses the genuine spirituality and life-affirming imagination, the meaning-generating capacity of words and silence, so integral to other cultures: aboriginal; oriental; extinct” (*Heretic Blood*, 56–57). Higgins’s description of Merton’s anti-poetry is reminiscent of Blake’s understanding of the prophetic function in the spiritual life. Anti-poetry’s prophetic role is to parody the nonsense and confusion of modernity’s suppressed imagination and spirit. In so doing, its mimicry exposes the irrational and illogical thought patterns that, Merton thought, characterized much of the twentieth century in the Western world. Words have become empty and meaningless—only noise. Anti-poetry’s metaphorical “gibberish” ultimately seeks to reveal the great need for silence and true communication.

Higgins offers this important insight into understanding *Cables to the Ace*: “In *Cables* form *is* content; it does not contain or trans-

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Merton Annual v. 3. *Studies in Culture, Spirituality and Social Concerns*, ed. E. E. Daggy and Robert Daggy (New York: AMS Press, 1991), 175–86.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 286.

mit a message, it simply *is* a message. The title of the poem itself suggests the identification of the means of transmission with the content transmitted, for a cable is both the electrical apparatus by which the message is channeled and the message or cablegram itself. The medium is the message" (*Heretic Blood*, 182). Higgins sees Merton's *Cables* as a culminating fulfillment of the Blakean imperative of reconstituting, by means of vision and imagination, humankind's wholeness and spiritual unity:

In Blake's poetry the vision is worked out in his prophetic books, with the Apocalypse, Jerusalem, and the final reintegration through Jesus or the Spiritual Imagination. In *Cables* Merton resolved to "assist once again at the marriage of heaven and hell" (Cable 1); he continues the Blakean dream: "These words were once heard, uttered by a lonely, disembodied voice, seemingly in a cloud" (Cable 9). (*Heretic Blood*, 180–81)

Further, Higgins's Blakean reading of *Cables* leads him to interpret the poet's prophetic job as a recovering of Paradise:

Although the poet is nurtured "by the fancies / Of female benefactors," these benefactors are in fact emanations from the one female, Sophia/Virgin/Urthona, the love of whom is paradise. To see paradise, to know wisdom, one must love and wait for the *point vierge*, "that moment of awe and inexpressible innocence." The "unspeakable secret," this "ace of freedoms," is the poet's discovery, the full perfection of which means death. In a powerfully Jungian and prophetic conclusion to Cable 74 Merton speaks of the mandala, the ancient symbol in integration and fulfillment, in connection with the "distant country" of his approaching death:

Better to study the germinating waters of my wood  
 And know this fever: or die in a distant country  
 Having become a pure cone  
 Or turn to my eastern abstinence  
 With that old inscrutable love cry  
 And describe a perfect circle

Before the poet's annihilation by Wisdom, an experience which he describes as "a perfect circle," "having become a pure cone," he assists in the recovery of paradise through poetry—the language of his vision, the sacrament of his "discovery"—freeing Imagination from the shackles of Urizenic perception. Authentic paradisaical poetry explores new possibilities through a daring revitalization of idea, word, and sound and, in his anti-poetic epics, Merton attempts to give "the world another chance." (Higgins, "Merton and the Real Poets," 181)

"Urizenic perception" represents, for Merton, perception that is inhibited by empiricism and doubt because it is blind to imagination, passion, and spiritual realities. Thus such perception is only superficial, prohibited from truly seeing. Even more, such perception leads to dangerous consequences: "The tyranny of Urizen consists in trying to govern by abstract codes based on mathematical reasoning and materialism, and it brings about a vicious circle of oppressions and wars."<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Blake and Merton, for Higgins, are poets who seek to recover Paradise through prophetic perception. Such poetry, for Merton, is the only truly "valid poetry":

All really valid poetry (poetry that is fully alive and asserts its reality by its power to generate imaginative life) is a kind of recovery of paradise. Not that the poet comes up with a report that he, an unusual man, has found his own way back into Eden: but the living line and the generative association, the new sound, the music, the structure, are somehow grounded in a renewal of vision and hearing so that he who reads and understands recognizes that here is a new start, a new creation. Here the world gets another chance. Here man, here the reader discovers himself getting another start in life, in hope, in imagination, and why? Hard to say, but probably because the language itself is get-

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Merton, "Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation," M.A. Thesis, Columbia University, February 1939; in Merton, *Literary Essays*, 385–451, here 428.

ting another chance, through the innocence, the teaching,  
the good faith, the honest senses of the workman poet.<sup>22</sup>

With *The Geography of Lograire*, left unfinished at the time of his death, Merton continues his anti-poetic myth-dream by means of a literary journey to the four corners of the earth. The four quadrants—north, south, east, and west—represent facets of Merton's own spiritual quest, recounting personal experiences and historical incidents mixed together with past legends and primitive beliefs. Higgins sees Merton's final poetic work as a fitting culmination for one of the twentieth century's greatest spiritual explorers. Yet he also sees *Geography* as a starting point of future exploration: "This final testament to his poetic powers was merely the beginning of an effort to expand the range of his poetic genius by 'imploding' his vision through fragmenting his language, torturing meanings, desecrating all Reason's Laws, and exorcizing the demon within that bid him serve the Master, Thought and all his minions, Words" ("A Study," 385).

Higgins's insightful reading of *Geography* continues: "Merton, in quest for the God within, followed his imaginative pulse that chartered new regions of the spirit through a panoply of discordant images and shattered metaphors, dared oblivion and thirsted for a widening of vision, that brought him not death but life. The tyranny of language was to be undone by Word" ("A Study," 386–87). As Merton himself writes, "A poet spends his life in repeated projects, over and over again attempting to build or to dream the world in which he lives."<sup>23</sup>

In this brief excerpt, Merton once again emphasizes the role imagination plays in the life of the poet. He defines the poet as one who "dream(s)," or the one who lives and creates from his or her own imagination. The task of the poet is to "build" and create a better world. It is to see what only he or she can see and

<sup>22</sup> Merton, "Louis Zukofsky—The Paradise Ear," in *Literary Essays*, 128–33, here 128.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 457.

write that vision into existence. *The Geography of Lograire* is about a geography of imagination described cryptically in mythic form, mostly employing the tragic experiences of the past in order to hold out the possibility of a future of eschatological hope. It is a geography of spiritual longing for a place of rest after a lifetime of intense soul searching.

How effective, though, has Merton's anti-poetry been in building up the world in which he longed to live? Not everyone is as enthusiastic as Higgins in evaluating Merton's experimentation in "myth-dreams." The most significant criticism of such an approach can be found in Dennis McNerny's *Thomas Merton: The Man and His Work*:

One could say . . . that in my critique of *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire* I simply miss the point, that if these two works are fragmented and disjointed it is because they were deliberately intended to be such in order to mirror and pass judgment upon the fragmented and disjointed nature of our age. The message, in other words, is as much in the form as in the content. To stand in judgment of a chaotic age, as a poet and prophet, one must speak chaotically. All I can say in response to this is that I am perfectly aware of the point; it is just that I do not agree with it. One does not intimidate or dispel linguistic chaos by yet more linguistic chaos. I stand with E. B. Strunk who claimed that the only way to cope adequately with confusion was unconfusedly. To write about confusion confusedly only compounds the confusion, and that was what Merton was doing by his anti-poetry.<sup>24</sup>

Higgins himself cautions of the insufficiency of anti-poetry: "Antipoetry has its purposes, but it also has its very clear limitation" (*Heretic Blood*, 263). These criticisms highlight the ambiguous nature of anti-poetry. While it seeks to imagine and create a better world through its mimicry and intended confusion, it ultimately

<sup>24</sup> Dennis Q. McNerny, *Thomas Merton: The Man and His Work*, CS 27 (Washington, DC: Consortium Press, 1974), 43–44.

fails to accomplish its goal because it forfeits one of the primary tasks of the poetic/prophetic imagination, to communicate symbolically, yet concretely, a reality of possibility that is not yet but that is somehow attainable.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps one way of understanding the prophetic nature of anti-poetry is by distinguishing between *negative* and *positive* modes of prophecy.<sup>26</sup> A *negative* mode of prophecy is purely iconoclastic—it seeks to reveal and destroy what is contrary to the will of God. A *positive* mode of prophecy seeks to express the will of God in the context of a situation that has forsaken that will. Anti-poetry, with its assault on language itself as a way of revealing the confusion and inner contradictions of a given age, would be a purely *negative* mode of prophecy. It reveals and seeks to destroy without offering a positive and meaningful alternative.

### Concluding Remarks

Merton's revisitation of Blake at the different periods of his life reveals some notable particularities about Blake's impact on the formation of Merton's prophetic spirituality. First, Blake's prophetic spirituality was an *expression of his mysticism*. For Merton, identifying Blake as a prophet meant primarily identifying Blake as a *seer*—a visionary. This is the main theme of Merton's treatment of Blake in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Second, the letter to Czesław Miłosz in 1959 shows that Merton considered Blake a prophet because Blake boldly asserted his own imaginative vision in the face of ridicule and misunderstanding. He had decided that his creative

<sup>25</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 49–50, offers three tasks of the prophetic imagination: (1) "To offer symbols that are adequate to the horror and massiveness of the experience which evokes numbness and requires denial," (2) "To bring to public expression those very fears and terrors that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that we do not know they are there," (3) "To speak metaphorically but concretely about the real deathliness that hovers over us and gnaws within us, and to speak neither in rage nor in cheap grace, but with the candor born of anguish and passion."

<sup>26</sup> Brueggemann speaks about the two tasks of prophecy: dismantling and energizing (*The Prophetic Imagination*, 109).

spiritual intuitions held too much significance to be made more palatable for the sake of the status quo. Third, through his treatment of the Shakers in his introduction to *Religion in Wood*, Merton gave concrete application to his appreciation and understanding of Blake's prophetic vision and imagination. Shaker spirituality, for Merton, embodied the prophetic spirit of William Blake. The Shakers were those whose vision penetrated into ultimate reality and religious mystery and who lived in the creative vitality of a pure and simple imaginative spirit. The spirit of the Shakers was prophetic because they sought to recover through their imagination the lost innocence, simplicity, and hope that had become threatened by the technological advances of modernity.

Fourth, Merton developed his interest in Blake's ideas about the prophetic imagination by grappling with Thomas J. J. Altizer's *The New Apocalypse*. While Merton was not keen on Altizer's interpretive approach to Blake, he saw great strength in Altizer's book for demonstrating Blake's relevant value as a true prophet and apocalyptic visionary. Merton argued that this book showed Blake as a prophet because he was one who "'utters' and 'announces' news about man's own deepest trouble—which is man himself" ("Blake and the New Theology," 3). Out of this "trouble," Merton believed, the prophetic imagination envisions and creates a hopeful future of greater peace and justice. This eschatological hope becomes all the more real in light of the extent of humankind's fallenness.

Commentators, especially Higgins, considered Merton's Blakean poetic experimentation in anti-poetry prophetic because of its implicit critique of the way "one-dimensional man"<sup>27</sup> had for-

<sup>27</sup> Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), which Merton read in 1968, describes the consciousness that results from a technological, mass-production society. Merton, writing in his journal on November 7, 1968, says, "Marcuse has shown how mass culture tends to be anticulture—to stifle creative work by the sheer volume of what is 'produced,' or reproduced. In which case, poetry, for example, must start with an awareness of its contradiction and *use* it—as anti-poetry—which freely draws on the material of superabundant nonsense at its disposal. One no longer has to parody, it is enough to quote—and feed back quotations

feited metaphysical realities for a purely pragmatic consciousness. Its muddled mimicry while trying to parody such a consciousness ultimately lost much of its prophetic power because it faltered in being faithful to one of the basic tenets of the poetic/prophetic imagination, which is to be concrete enough to move people toward higher consciousness.<sup>28</sup>

The significance of William Blake's influence on Merton is revealed in both its perduring value, from childhood until death, and in the immense personal affection that Merton consistently showed toward someone who may be described as a kindred spirit, even when not always being in full agreement with him. Merton saw in Blake an imaginative mind and prophetic spirit that lived in a certain immediacy of spiritual realities. Even as a student at Columbia University, Merton held Blake to be a Christian mystic, in spite of all his heterodox ideas. As he recounted many years later, it was this Blake, the mystic, who would influence him to embrace Roman Catholicism. The irony of this action was surely not far from Merton's own mind. He was certainly aware that Blake was an intense critic of organized religion.

This fact demonstrates something significant about Merton's ability to learn from others yet think for himself, even as an impressionable college student. Merton never wholeheartedly swallowed the ideas or worldview of a particular thinker. Rather, he studied them with an open mind, integrated what rang true, and dismissed what didn't. This ability to study discriminatingly was certainly the

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into the mass consumption of pseudoculture" (Merton, *Other Side*, 262). For further treatment of Marcuse and anti-poetry, see David D. Cooper, "From Prophecy to Parody: Thomas Merton's *Cables to the Ace*," *The Merton Annual*, vol. 1 (New York: AMS Press, 1988), 215-33.

<sup>28</sup> It is apparent that Merton understood Blake's prophetic books as nonetheless truly prophetic. He believed that it was the task of the reader to do the hard work of comprehending and interpreting the poetry. The prophetic nature of the poetry would then become obvious. It is my opinion that this view is true insofar as Blake's prophetic books carry comprehensible meaning. With anti-poetry, however, which may be meaningfully meaningless, such words, in so far as they are meaningless, lose their positive prophetic significance.

case with Blake, who Merton felt was misunderstood by a culture that had forsaken the intuitive for the scientific. In a sense, Merton believed Blake had lived in the wrong century (something that can also be said of Merton!). Yet, as Merton saw it, this feeling of being a fish out of water, of going against the grain, gave Blake the psychological impetus to develop his prophetic spirituality. In Merton's reading, the vitality of Blake's imaginative spirit refused to be smothered by Enlightenment rationalism. Rather, Blake chose to live from his authentic self and become a "prophet against empire."<sup>29</sup> It was this prophetic restlessness and need for authentic self-expression that Merton appreciated most about Blake and with which he most identified.

<sup>29</sup>This description of Blake was used by David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire: A Poet's Interpretation of the History of His Own Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969).