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In a scandal-ridden church—with the barque of Peter taking on water, and a spiritual leadership compromised by malfeasance and panic—the presence of our mystics, holy activists, and prophets is a thing of yearning and desperation. Enter center stage: Thomas Merton.

This December is the fiftieth anniversary of Merton’s still highly controversial death in Thailand. A recent polemic, The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton, uses the strange inconsistencies surrounding that death to paint a dark picture of CIA intrigue, monastic complicity, and elaborate cover-up by the Gethsemani authorities—presenting Merton’s death as the final execution of the ‘68 triad that began with Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. But beyond such dramatic conspiracy theories, why should we still
care about Thomas Merton? Why should we still be drawn to a cloistered monk who had an affair with a nurse; to a priest-poet who preferred literature to pious tomes, entered the political arena with a vengeance, and eagerly, even faddishly, embodied the 1960s zeitgeist?

Yet we read Merton still. Countless readers who first encountered him in his celebrated autobiography, The Seven Storey Mountain, have remained disciples to this day. Some take inspiration from his writings on civil rights, nuclear war, and the tyranny of mass society; others find his innovative work on contemplation to be an enrichment of their prayer lives; still others find his diaries and journals an inspiration for their own writing. Of course, Merton inspired as much criticism as admiration. Heralded as the model monk who motivated hundreds of vocations, he was also derided as a trendy renegade sampling the unchecked liberties of the sixties. He was seen as a theological dilettante alighting on the newest heterodoxies, and denounced as a monk-manqué, more akin to Rabelais than Bernard of Clairvaux.

Even today, deep disagreement over him persists. One moment he's being removed from a secondary-school religious-studies text, and the next he's being identified as a great moral voice in American history—and by no less than the Pope, in an address to Congress. What's certain is that Merton's popularity shows no sign of abating. To date, the Merton industry includes over a hundred books by Merton himself, along with more than two hundred books and four hundred dissertations about him, in a broad array of disciplines; translations in scores of languages; documentaries aplenty; biannual conferences; and a plethora of retreat centers, social-justice institutes, schools, and pastoral-outreach programs named after him.

All that might seem a strange outcome for a disillusioned young man hell-bent on blessed anonymity in a French reform congregation located in a poor American state on the eve of Pearl Harbor. But it is perhaps fitting. For Merton lived a whirligig of a life: writing books, obsessively keeping up both his journals and a gargantuan correspondence, providing priestly counseling for nuns, lecturing, serving as translator for visiting French ecclesiastical dignitaries, and acting as trusted confidant and interlocutor for interfaith eminences. Though he remained a Trappist monk for half his life, his horarium was outside the monastic box.

Channeling Blake, Merton established monasticism as an act of spiritual and intellectual rebellion. The skill with which Merton choreographed the centripetal forces in his life—as he moved inexorably toward the divine center—had an exalted pedigree: he learned it from William Blake, the engraver, artist, and poet. First introduced to Blake and his paintings by his father, Owen, a New Zealander artist who died while Merton was a teenager, Merton returned to Blake while doing graduate studies at Columbia University in the 1930s. Writing a master’s thesis titled “Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation,” Merton embraced Blake’s visionary poetics and radical spirituality and made them his own. Blake entered his bloodstream completely.

Persuaded that Blake “was the most deeply religious artist of his time in England,” Merton sought to emulate him: an outlier, an epic poet in the paradise tradition, and a radical reshaper of the Christian narrative. And he did so in a traditional monastery, of all places. That action, in that setting, typified a life fraught with polarities and wild paradoxes. Merton knew that wholeness or holiness—“final
integration,” as he called it—would be achieved only through the balancing of what Blake called the Creative Contraries, “the marriage of heaven and hell.” Psychological and spiritual health, in this view, come not from the elimination of such polarities, but are found in their artful juxtaposition and harmony. Human flourishing is to be found in “the complementarity of opposites,” and for this Blake provided the aesthetic and mystical template.

In The Seven Storey Mountain, Merton publicly appropriated Blake’s rebellious posture, his strategy of response to the materialistic and myopic evils of his day. “It was Blake’s problem,” he wrote, to try and adjust himself to a society that understood neither himself nor his kind of faith and love. More than once, smug and inferior minds conceived it their duty to take this man Blake in hand and direct and form him, to try and “canalize” what they recognized as talent in some kind of a conventional channel. And always this meant the cold and heartless disparagement of all that was vital and real to him in art and in faith. There were years of all kinds of petty persecution, from many different quarters, until finally Blake departed 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.

It is not hard to see why Merton would find Blake sympatico. He was a rebel himself, and his decision to leave his graduate studies at Columbia University, his literary friends, and his promising future as a writer to embrace the severe conditions of contemptus mundi in a Trappist enclosure, replicated Blake’s decision to go his own way. Channeling Blake, Merton established monasticism as an act of spiritual and intellectual rebellion.

Merton’s Blake, his cantus firmus, is no reckless antinomian, nihilist, or enlightenment deist. He was a poet-mystic whose faith was not formulaic but vital and visionary, always seeking to cleanse the senses, “the doors of perception,” in order to see with the eye of the imagination, not the ‘I’ of the cogito. In a review essay published in the year of his death, Merton commented 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, in other words, calls for “a whole new form of theological understanding.”

In his art and in his spirituality, Blake offered Merton that new form—an integrated vision and a strategy to redress a shattered humanity. Both Blake and Merton opposed the constricting rule of what Blake termed the “Ratio”: the generalization; the “Mathematical Proportion” that is the negation of the “Living Proportion.” And both found it necessary, in the development of their alternative mythologies, to be wildly exploratory and idiosyncratic in their respective poetic styles; both expressed original and provocative ideas, as Peter Ackroyd wrote of Blake, that “could not be contained within the inherited forms of verse.” In this light, Blake’s Songs of Innocence and Experience appear in sharp contrast with his later epics, Jerusalem and The Four Zoas. Similarly, Merton’s early volumes of lyrical and conventional verse, Figures for an Apocalypse and Tears of the Blind Lions, are strikingly unlike his final two anti-poetic, Blakean epics, Cables to the Ace and The Geography of Lograire. Over time, both writers moved beyond “inherited forms of verse” and “conventional prosody.”
Blake and Merton are both poets rich in paradox, fed by deep, strange, and mystical sources; and in their own ways, both are defiantly and profoundly conservative at heart. They both accept the reality of the Fall—of a sundered humanity, riven by false oppositions—which must be overcome by a new and higher unity: Four-Fold Vision, Jesus Christ. For Blake, the Fall is best seen in the fragmented state of each human. In his mythology, every human consists of four components, identified as the Four Zoas, each struggling for ascendency over the others: Urizen (Reason), Urthona (Wisdom), Luvah (Emotion), and Tharmas (Instinct). The trick for Blake is not to subsume the warring Zoas under one of their number, or to perpetuate Single Vision, but rather, in Merton’s words, to create “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.”

Such reflections remind us that Merton didn’t just write about Blake; he interpreted him anew, absorbing the fundamentals of his visionary poetics and spirituality and struggling to live out the reality of the Creative Contraries in his own vocation. Merton’s own spiritual and poetic vision, deeply indebted to Blake’s, consisted of what he called his central “mythdream”: the disunity of the word/world and its reparation by the poet; the role of silence in this lifelong act of reparation; the tyranny of intellection, which he refers to in Camusian phrasing as a “plague of cerebration”; the need to recover “archaic wisdom”; and the ultimate realization of that Four-Fold Vision, representing imaginative and spiritual wholeness.

This is the Merton that his readers find difficulty reconciling with a fixed image of religious certitude and monastic rectitude. Yet the monk steeped in orthodox sources, committed to ressourcement and to restoring the primary texts of the Desert Fathers and the First and Second Generation Cistercian reformers to their proper place in contemporary monastic life, is also the monk engaged in serious dialogue with Zen Buddhism’s Daisetsu Suzuki, Hinduism’s Amiya Chakravarty, and Judaism’s Abraham Joshua Heschel. The monk vowed to celibacy and chastity, the credible spokesperson for the cenobitic life, is the same monk whose “episode of the heart” with the Louisville nurse, “M,” was revealed in his journals twenty-five years after his death. Another Contrary.

That Merton’s life was a stark and vibrant display of paradox is part of his enduring appeal. He was an extraterritorial writer who lived rooted in one place, a cosmopolitan figure with a taste for slang and the vernacular, a literary man in the habit of enclosure, a consecrated religious who repudiated a promiscuous past only to fall in love in his fifties. And we read him because he is the paradigmatic, postmodern pilgrim: trying to make sense of a world—political, cultural, and ecclesial—in violent flux; trying to remain expansive in heart and imagination in a time of constriction and fear; and seeking solitude amid a vortex of ubiquitous and truth-challenged communication.

Unlike other such Catholic heavyweights as Marshall McLuhan, Teilhard de Chardin, and Jacques Maritain, whose reputations fell after their deaths only to rise again, Merton’s has maintained a steady course. Interest in him has not waned, and this anniversary year of his death promises to sustain that interest. In the end, one of the more compelling reasons why we continue to be attracted by Merton’s life and thought may lie in a story told by one of his most devoted disciples, Henri Nouwen. In Life of the Beloved, Nouwen recalls attending a performance of the Leonard Bernstein Mass and finding himself especially moved by the priest, who topples from a human pyramid, his robes ripped off him, the glass chalice he is carrying shattering on the ground. “As he walks slowly through the debris of his former
glory—barefoot, wearing only blue jeans and a T-shirt,” Nouwen writes, “children’s voices are heard singing, ‘Laude, laude, laude’—‘Praise, praise, praise.’ Suddenly the priest notices the broken chalice. He looks at it for a long time and then, haltingly, he says, ‘I never realized that broken glass could shine so brightly.’ “

Thomas Merton’s life and his tragic death are like that broken glass, shining for multitudes, undimmed by controversy and time.