

Life of a Stranger: How Thomas Merton Pitched In By Dropping Out

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In 1965, Merton wrote a brief essay describing the activities of his day. He titled it, “Day of a Stranger.” These words reveal something important about Merton’s self-understanding as a monk and as a hermit. The essay celebrates the life of one who has intentionally become a stranger to society. By moving to the woods, cloistering himself in a monastery, and holing up in a hermitage, Merton has not only taken leave of “the world,” but has become unrecognizable and unknown to it. He has *estranged* himself – rendered himself alien to the world outside his hermitage.

That said, we are well aware of Merton’s awareness of and engagement with the events and actors of the 1940s, ’50s, and ’60s. Indeed, it is largely Merton’s revisioning of the previously dichotomous relationship between the monk and society that makes him so noteworthy. Merton has shown us that a religious life – even as a hermit – does not preclude concern and engagement on a socio-political level. Yet there is an apparent contradiction between the characters of the social critic and the social alien – the stranger. How are we to make sense of this? How are we supposed to hear the critical voice of one whose life is defined by the conscious choice to “return to the woods

where I am nobody”?

Many scholars and devotees have emphasized Merton’s success in reconciling the competing demands of inwardness (spirituality, solitude, prayer) and outwardness (social consciousness, political engagement). For example, Ross Labrie speaks of Merton’s attempts to “*balance the demands* of contemplation and action.”² Lawrence Cunningham notes that Merton “began to see that his own life had to *oscillate between* the anonymity of eremitical silence and an openness to the needs of others on both an individual and a social level.”³

Such language portrays Merton’s achievement as arriving at an effective combination (a “balance”) of two incompatible commitments. What does this mean, to “balance” the roles of social stranger and social participant? Is it that Merton divided his time equally between the two commitments, spending 50% of his days on each? Or that Merton played each role half-heartedly, with 50% conviction, thus ensuring a proper balance? Obviously not. Such a characterization inappropriately characterizes the relationship between inwardness and outwardness in Merton’s life.

I argue that the language of “balancing” contemplation and action does not ade-

quately represent Merton's self-understanding as a solitary, contemplative social critic. By explaining how Merton maintained a social voice "in spite of" his retreat from the world, we neglect to consider the deeply political content of the decision to retreat itself. To frame the question in terms of how Merton could speak to society "even though" he was an intentional stranger to it is to set solitude and social engagement against one another in a way that obscures the relation between the two. We should not interpret Merton's inclination toward solitude as competitive with his drive toward conversation and protest. Rather, his repeated affirmation of eremitic living signals his profoundly political understanding of the decision to "enter the silence." Merton's stranger's voice is not only valid *in spite of* his choice of solitude, but moreover *by virtue of* his choice.

Merton often describes the social role of the monk and/or hermit, in terms of 'usefulness.' He writes frequently on the utility or practical purpose of a solitary, contemplative life, and it is no secret that he rebels against those persons and ways of thinking that demand maximum productivity above all other things. By examining Merton's vision of "what good it does" for a person to live in unproductive seclusion, we may reveal his understanding of the role of the stranger's voice in society. We will consider three texts, which by no means exhaust his writings on usefulness, but which will nonetheless make clear Merton's thought in this area.

"Rain and the Rhinoceros"⁴

This opening essay to *Raids on the Un-speakable* employs two images to contrast the hermit life with the lives of his secular

contemporaries. First, he reflects on the rain falling on his hermitage roof, specifically imagining the attitudes of some of those worldly persons with whom he would disagree: "Let me say this before rain becomes a utility that they can plan and distribute for money. By 'they' I mean the people who cannot understand that rain is a festival, who do not appreciate its gratuity, who think that what has no price has no value, that what cannot be sold is not real..." (p.9) Merton declares himself a participant in the "festival of rain," and establishes his opposition to those forces that seek to manage and commoditize even such naturally spontaneous resources as the rain. Like the rain, the hermit's life is unproductive and profitless.

In contrast to the rain, Merton presents the image of the rhinoceros, borrowed from Eugene Ionesco's absurdist play *Rhinoceros* (p.19). The rhinoceros represents society and the state, or those who have become "prisoners of necessity," and are incapable of understanding that people or things might exist without serving a purpose – or without serving the purpose of dominant culture (p.21). They are thick-skinned, unyielding, and essentially inhuman. They are oblivious to the fall of the meaningless rain.

In *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco's main character, Berenger, finds himself the lone remaining human after all of his fellow persons have been turned into rhinoceroses. Berenger realizes that he no longer resembles any member of what was once his species, that they no longer resemble him, and that he is alone. The play culminates with Berenger rushing out into the street to confront the herd – a doomed effort, which, in Merton's view, "only points up the futility of a commitment to

resistance" (p.20). Yet it is this character with whom Merton identifies.

By drawing the comparison between Berenger's situation and his own, Merton points first to the distorted mindset of those who are blind to the beauty and worth of the "useless," whether rain or monks. Second, he recognizes the futility (impracticality) of attempting to resist – even this effort is useless. Merton's commitment to social engagement and dissent does not depend on the surety, the probability, or even *the possibility*, of success. He sees that the only alternative is to join the herd and become a rhinoceros as well, and he, like Berenger, is unwilling to relinquish his humanity.

"Thomas Merton's View of Monasticism"⁵

The comparison of Merton to Berenger might give the impression that Merton was caught unawares by his estrangement from society, that he had no idea how alien he was becoming to the modern world. Yet, writing in his "View of Monasticism," as well in other places, Merton makes clear that he has no illusions about the monk's role in society.

Appearing as the third appendix to *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, this short essay was delivered as an informal talk in October 1968, in Calcutta. In it, Merton responds to the question, "Whom do you represent?" (p.305) In speaking for monks, he says, he represents "a very strange kind of person, a marginal person..." (p.305) The monk, in his view, is one who "withdraws deliberately to the margin of society..." (p.305) Here it is significant to note that Merton does not see the marginalization of the monk as accidental to the monastic vocation.

The monk does not pretend to remain in the mainstream of society, and does not rely on social standards and measures for justification. Merton refers to himself as "a statusless person, an insignificant person..." (p.306) The monk declines a position in mainstream society in favor of a position in the margins.

As Merton says, monks are "deliberately irrelevant" (p.306). This is a necessary consequence of a conscious choice to extract oneself from the conventional workings of a society. Again, the monk does not simply *accept* irrelevance as an accidental consequence of pursuit of another goal. The monk *seeks* irrelevance. Here we begin to grasp what Merton means by the word "stranger": "The monk in the modern world is no longer an established person with an established place in society" (p.305). In this "View of Monasticism," we see reiterated Merton's conviction that the monk necessarily and intentionally relates to society in a particular way – as an outsider, an irrelevant person, a useless person.

"A Signed Confession of Crimes Against the State"⁶

Published in *The Behavior of Titans*, "A Signed Confession" follows immediately after the chapter, "Letter to an Innocent Bystander," in which Merton interrogates the mentality of intellectuals who have remained silent in the face of injustice, feeling justified by their non-participation. Merton asserts that the monk must be held to the same moral standard as the secular bystander, and denies the notion that there exists a 'they' who are responsible for social problems, while 'we' stand innocently on the sidelines.

It is almost as if, upon finishing this self-indicting "Letter," Merton can no longer bear to dishonestly identify himself as an innocent bystander, and so sets out to define his crimes. The irony, however, is that society and the state see the bystander guilty of no crime. The crimes to which Merton must confess – the only crimes he has committed against the state – are of a much different nature:

I confess that I am sitting under a pine tree doing absolutely nothing. I have done nothing for one hour and firmly intend to continue to do nothing for an infinite period... I confess that there is nobody else around because I came here on purpose to get away from the state... I am therefore probably worse than all the rest, since I am neither a partisan nor a

traitor. The worst traitor is the one who simply takes no interest. That's me. Here I sit on the grass. I watch the clouds go by, and like it.⁷

Merton understands that by doing nothing more than wasting time, delighting in his natural surroundings, and declining to participate in the busyness of society, he commits an offence against that society. To absent oneself from the state is not as simple as merely disappearing. One who deserts the state thereby becomes an enemy of it. In Merton's view, to abandon the production-oriented rhinoceroses of modern society in favor of solitary contemplation constitutes no benign choice of preference, but is rather a profoundly political act. Furthermore, in confessing these "crimes," without even a hint of desire to be reformed, Merton declares

his defiant dissent – tantamount to rushing headlong into the herd.

Yet here we ought to recognize that Merton is not entirely antagonistic toward the state. To the contrary, in "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude," he makes clear that his withdrawal into solitude is not intended as an abandonment of society in general: "To despair of the illusions and facades which man builds around himself is certainly not to despair of man."⁸ Indeed, far from leaving "the world" out of contempt or even indifference, Merton retreats to Gethsemani in a particular form of social engagement. His absence from secular society is not a neutral fact; rather, he views it as his own positive contribution to society. He says that "the state and I are much better off when we have nothing to do with each other."⁹ Furthermore, he believes that hermits are absolutely essential to the life of the world: "There are always a few people who are in the woods at night, in the rain (because if there were not the world would have ended), and I am one of them."¹⁰

Merton, by absenting himself from society, by deliberately seeking the margins, does not compromise his capacity to offer social criticism; nor does he engage in a skilful balancing act to reconcile his social estrangement and his social engagement. Rather, he engages society *through* the paradoxical act of withdrawal. He offers himself as a *negative presence* in society; he is known by his absence. Precisely by rejecting the dominant system of value, which praises productivity, profit, and "usefulness" over all else, and by embracing a life that is fully and deliberately unproductive, unprofitable, and altogether "useless," Merton delivers his

most powerful statement. Solitude and social voice do not compete for Merton; his social voice is expressed through his choice of solitude.

Conclusion

The insights we glean from these three texts point us to a few conclusions regarding the relationship between Merton's social estrangement and his social engagement, and indicate some of the important characteristics of what we might call the contemplative-prophet.

First, we learn that **the contemplative-prophet is necessarily a stranger to society.** Merton is clear that the monk is one who *deliberately and intentionally* seeks the margins of society and who chooses to become "irrelevant." Like Berenger in the face of the rhinoceroses, the contemplative-prophet is markedly foreign amid the inhumanity of the modern world. The contemplative-prophet recognizes different values than does contemporary culture. The contemplative-prophet lives differently than the masses. The voice of the contemplative-prophet will always be heard as the voice of the stranger.

Second, **the contemplative-prophet exists in society as a negative presence.** The monastic decision to become a stranger to society is not equivalent to abandoning society altogether. The contemplative-prophet makes choices that move in deliberate opposition to social currents, and makes his or her presence known by the explicit rejection of social participation. Merton did not need a hermitage in Times Square; his clear refusal to join in the "hot" busyness that dominates secular (and even monastic) culture was sufficient to highlight the presence of his absence. Estrangement from society

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does not constitute a challenge to social engagement, but is itself a mode of engagement.

Third, **the likelihood of success is never a concern of the contemplative-prophet.** In “View of Monasticism,” Merton acknowledges his own irrelevance to society, and in “Rain and the Rhinoceros” he flat out admits the futility of resistance in the face of the herd. Merton chooses the ineffective life deliberately, *for the very reason* that flies in the face of temporal standards. He writes that the monk seeks relevance in God, and it is thus by God’s metric that the contemplative-prophet evaluates success.¹¹

Merton articulated this in his famous advice to young peacemaker Jim Forest: “Do not depend on the hope of results... The real hope, then, is not in something we think we can do, but in God who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see.”¹² The contemplative-prophet proceeds as if success were immaterial, because the contemplative-prophet knows that true success is beyond the grasp of a solitary, irrelevant human. True success – our real “usefulness” – lies in God, and for the contemplative-prophet, it is upon this truth that all hope rests.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, “Day of a Stranger,” in Lawrence S. Cunningham, ed., *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), p.221.
2. Ross Labrie, “Contemplation and Action in Thomas Merton,” *Christianity and Literature* 55 (Summer 2006), p.475. Also, p.484. Emphasis mine.
3. Lawrence S. Cunningham, “Thomas Merton: The Pursuit of Marginality,”

Christian Century 95 (December 6, 1978), p.1183. Emphasis mine.

4. Thomas Merton, “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1964), p.9-26. In this section, references to this essay are noted parenthetically.

5. Thomas Merton, “Appendix III: Thomas Merton’s View of Monasticism,” in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973), p.305-308. In this section, references to this essay are noted parenthetically.

6. Thomas Merton, “A Signed Confession of Crimes Against the State,” in *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p.65-71. In this section, references to this essay are noted parenthetically.

7. *Ibid.*, p.68.

8. Thomas Merton, “Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude,” in *Disputed Questions* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), p.192.

9. Merton, “A Signed Confession of Crimes Against the State,” p.68-69.

10. Merton, “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” p.307.

11. Merton, “View of Monasticism,” p.307.

12. Thomas Merton, Letter to James Forest, February 21, 1965. Published in *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings*, ed. Christine Bochen (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), p.135.

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