

# Let Mercy Fall Like Rain: Thomas Merton and the Ox Mountain Parable

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In December of 1964 as Thomas Merton sat in his hermitage at Gethsemani the strategic air command bombers disturbed his silence, as did the thudding and thumping of the guns at Fort Knox, that quintessential symbol of American power and wealth, not quite thirty miles from the Abbey of Gethsemani as the crow flies.

Merton sat in his hermitage listening to the sound of the rain, allowing cornmeal to boil over as he toasted some bread at his log fire. In the isolation of his hermitage, an isolation deepened by the darkness of the night and the cold winter rain, he thought deeply about the modern world against the background of Philoxenus, a sixth century Syrian hermit whom he was reading, the theatre of the absurd, in particular Eugene Ionesco and his play *Rhinoceros*, and his own predicament—living the most solitary life anyone in his own Cistercian order had been permitted to live in centuries, as he moved towards becoming a full-time hermit in the summer of 1965. Against this background Merton drafted one of his finest essays, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros,' he worked on the manuscript of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and prepared novitiate conferences that he would begin delivering the following spring on Philoxenus.

In this paper I want to look in more detail at *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, and Merton's essay 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', as I think in them Merton sets out most clearly his understanding of the role of the monk, and his own role, as a Guilty Bystander, in an age when such voices could easily be overlooked against the bellowing of herds of rhinoceroses. Over forty years have passed since he penned 'Rain and the Rhinoceros' and yet his reflections on the role of the Guilty Bystander are still as relevant as when he wrote them, if not more so, and such voices are still mostly going unheard, still being drowned out by grunting and bellowing.

The very title of this book, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, points to some of the changes and developments that had taken place in Merton's life up to this point. In an essay Merton published in 1958 entitled 'Letter to an Innocent Bystander' he suggests that, if he, or another person, were 'bystanding' from a sense of inertia this could be a 'source of our guilt.'<sup>1</sup> He questions whether non-participation is possible and whether complicity can be avoided. Merton then looks at the role of intellectuals as bystanders, pondering how they could stand between those in power and authority and the majority who find themselves subject to such people. From

this position Merton suggests that the vocation of the innocent bystander is to speak the truth at all costs.

'Letter to an Innocent Bystander' was written in the year of Merton's Louisville epiphany<sup>2</sup> and at a time when his correspondence was burgeoning. It was a year marking a distinctive change in Merton. By 1959 Merton is beginning to use the term 'guilty' bystander instead, seen most clearly in letters to Czeslaw Milosz, where he questions his use of the term innocent suggesting that the only answer he knows is 'to be responsible to everybody, to take upon oneself *all* the guilt.'<sup>3</sup> So, by the time he was preparing *Conjectures* for publication, the enormous broadening of his horizons in the fifties and early sixties resulted in Merton changing his view of himself from that of an 'innocent bystander' to a 'guilty bystander'.

*Conjectures*, he writes, is 'a confrontation of twentieth-century questions in the light of a monastic commitment, which', Merton says, 'inevitably makes one something of a "bystander."<sup>4</sup> But during the challenging events of this period innocent bystanding was no longer possible; just to bystand made a person guilty because they were a part of the human race and therefore deeply implicated. In his introduction to a Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* in 1963, Merton expressed this succinctly writing:

... the monastery is not an 'escape from the world'. On the contrary, by being in the monastery I take my true part in all the struggles and sufferings of the world ... by my monastic life and vows I am

saying NO to all the concentration camps, the aerial bombardments, the staged political trials, the judicial murders, the racial injustices, the economic tyrannies, and the whole socio-economic apparatus.<sup>5</sup>

In his essay 'Is the World a Problem?' he addressed his involvement with the world in more personal terms:

That I should have been born in 1915, that I should be the contemporary of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Viet Nam and the Watts riots, are things about which I was not first consulted. Yet they are also events in which, whether I like it or not, I am deeply and personally involved.<sup>6</sup>

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Merton comes to the conclusion in *Conjectures* that instead of bystanding 'you must be willing, if necessary, to become a disturbing and therefore an undesired person, one who is not wanted because he upsets the general dream.'<sup>7</sup> Merton's awareness of events in the world

prompted him to become for some, including his own Cistercian order,<sup>8</sup> a disturbing and undesired person as he felt 'the time had come to move from the role of bystander (guilty by association and silence) to that of declared witness.'<sup>9</sup> His prophetic stance is reflected in one of the epigrams Merton used on the title page of *Conjectures*:

My life is like the crane who cries  
a few times  
under the pine tree  
And like the silent light from the  
lamp  
in the bamboo grove.<sup>10</sup>

The other epigram taken from Deuteronomy—'Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there'—reflects Merton's own experience of God's mercy, an experience which consequently enabled him to reach out to others with compassion and mercy.

Before moving on to reflect on the Ox Mountain Parable and the theme of mercy, I think it is worth looking briefly at Merton's arrangement of *Conjectures* as, like all the journals Merton himself prepared for publication, it is carefully structured.

*Conjectures* is divided into five parts, each of which has a sub-title and epigrams indicative of the essence of that chapter. In the first part, entitled 'Barth's Dream', Merton begins by recounting a dream experienced by Karl Barth, the theologian. In the dream the composer Mozart implies Barth would be saved more by 'the Mozart in himself than by his theology'. Merton suggests that Barth's attraction to the music of Mozart

was an attempt to awaken the 'hidden sophianic Mozart in himself, to awaken the "divine" child' and concludes his account by telling Barth to 'trust in the divine mercy' as 'Christ remains a child in you' and 'your books (and mine) matter less than we might think! There is in us a Mozart who will be our salvation.'<sup>11</sup> In the first part of *Conjectures* Merton presents a myriad of issues to his reader: questions about the monastery, the church, his relationship to the world, peace, Gandhi, and race issues. The title of this chapter, Barth's Dream, serves to present a contrast between the issues and questions Merton raises, and the presence of a higher wisdom, the wisdom of the monk on the margins.<sup>12</sup>

In the second part of *Conjectures*, 'Truth and Violence: An Interesting Era', Merton paints a picture of the early part of the sixties as 'an interesting era', a phrase taken from a story told by the novelist Albert Camus. In Camus's story a wise man prayed regularly to be spared 'from living in an interesting era' and Camus suggests that since we are not wise 'the Divinity has not spared us, and we are living in an interesting era'.<sup>13</sup> In this chapter Merton discusses many issues relating to truth and violence, suggesting that humanity has perverted its understanding of truth, everyone is convinced they 'desire the truth above all' but what 'we desire is not "the truth" so much as "to be in the right"'<sup>14</sup> and violence comes from this perversion of truth. Following the truth will then be a way of love, of mercy and of compassion. The period in which Merton was writing this was the height of the cold war when truth was being perverted in so many areas of life, leading Merton to conclude

this chapter by suggesting that calling this era 'interesting' could be to underestimate it.<sup>15</sup>

Part three, 'The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air'<sup>16</sup> is a pivotal chapter, drawing on the wisdom images of part one and laying key foundations for the remainder of the book. Earlier in the fifties Merton had read Pound's translations of 'The Ox Mountain Parable' by Meng Tzu, in which the 'night spirit' and the 'dawn breath' are important 'in restoring life to the forest that has been cut down'. Through rest and recuperation 'in the night and the dawn' the trees will return. Similarly 'with human nature. Without the night spirit, the dawn breath, silence, passivity, rest, our nature cannot be itself.'<sup>17</sup>

In a brief entry in the fourth section of *Conjectures* Merton points to Thoreau as someone who experienced the night spirit and the dawn air. Set against the industrial and affluent image of America, 'Thoreau's idleness (as 'inspector of snowstorms') was an incomparable gift and it's fruits were blessings that America has never really learned to appreciate'. After offering his gift to America Thoreau, in Merton's words, 'went his way, without following the advice of his neighbors. He took the fork in the road.'<sup>18</sup> Merton takes that phrase, 'The Fork in the Road', as his title for this chapter, reflecting a movement in his life. After Merton's awakening to the importance of the night spirit and the dawn air (a gradual discovery over many years but which, in *Conjectures*, he actually names for the first time) he can approach the questions and problems he was facing earlier in the book with a new sense of freedom and a lightness of touch.

The final chapter of *Conjectures*, 'The Madman Runs to the East', takes its title from one of Merton's epigrams for the chapter, a Zen Proverb:

The madman runs to the East  
and his keeper runs to the East:  
Both are running to the East,  
Their purposes differ.<sup>19</sup>

In writing *Conjectures* Merton has been asking questions about the problems facing society. Having turned his back on the world when he entered the monastery Merton is now returning to the world but from a different perspective, the difference between the madman and his keeper. Both are going in the same direction, but their reasons for doing so are vastly different. His final section of *Conjectures* focuses much more on the immediate, placing an emphasis on the beauty of life that is present at all times, the beauty he originally pointed to in Mozart at the beginning of the book. This beauty is continually renewed by the night spirit and the dawn air and signifies God's presence in the world.

I want to return now to part three of *Conjectures*, the section titled 'The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air', and in particular to look at 'The Ox Mountain Parable', Merton's source for this phrase.

In 1960 Merton's arrangement of 'The Ox Mountain Parable', based on the translation of I.A. Richards from his book *Mencius on the Mind*, was printed by Victor Hammer.<sup>20</sup> Beside Richards' arrangement of the parable Merton was also familiar with both Arthur Waley's rendition in his book, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China*<sup>21</sup> where he called it the 'Bull Mountain' parable, and

also Albert Felix Verwilghen's book *Mencius: The Man and His Ideas*.<sup>22</sup>

Merton's interest in Chinese philosophy and thought developed from the early fifties onwards. In June 1950 Merton wrote to his publisher James Laughlin, asking him to send 'anything good from the Chinese—Mencius for instance'.<sup>23</sup> In response, Laughlin sent Merton Pound's translations of Mencius along with other books on Eastern philosophy. However Merton's first references to 'The Ox Mountain Parable' do not occur until 1960. In a journal entry for July 10 he writes:

Mencius—"The Ox Mountain Parable". Importance of 'night-spirit' and 'dawn-breath' in the restoration of the trees to life. Men cut them down, beasts browse on the new shoots, no night spirit and no dawn breath—no rest; no renewal—and then one is convinced at last that the mountain *never had* any trees on it.<sup>24</sup>

Section three of *Conjectures* begins with a description of the valley awakening in the early morning. Having spent the previous section looking at the challenges and questions raised by the modern world Merton, in his description of dawn and the gradual awakening of nature, points to a different kind of wisdom, the wisdom he had earlier pointed to in his references to Mozart. He describes the early morning as 'the most wonderful moment of the day...when creation in its innocence asks permission to "be" once again, as it did on the first morning that ever was'.<sup>25</sup>

In 'The Ox Mountain Parable' Merton found an expression of his experience of the effect nature had upon him, especially the effect of the woods and of nature in the very early hours of the morning, a time when he, as a Cistercian monk, was awake as nature itself began to awaken so, in the early morning, Merton discovers 'an unspeakable secret: paradise is all around us and we do not understand', the 'dawn deacon' cries out 'wisdom' but 'we don't attend'.<sup>26</sup> In a letter to Abdul Aziz Merton spoke of 'the hour of dawn when the world is silent and the new light is most pure', as 'symbolizing the dawning of divine light in the stillness of our hearts'<sup>27</sup>—a rekindling of Eckhart's spark of God in the soul.

In his introduction to the parable Merton draws a parallel between the violence, war and chaos of Meng Tzu's age and the sixties. He wrote:

One of his [Meng Tzu's] central intuitions was that human nature was basically good, but that this basic goodness was destroyed by evil acts, and had tactfully to be brought out by right education, education in 'humaneness'. The great man, said Mencius, is the man who has not lost the heart of a child. This statement was not meant to be sentimental. It implied the serious duty to preserve the spontaneous and deep natural instinct to love, that instinct which is protected by the mysterious action of life itself and of providence, but which is destroyed by the wilfulness, the passionate arbitrariness of man's greed... This is a parable of mercy.

Note especially the emphasis of Meng Tzu on the 'night wind' which is here rendered 'night spirit', the merciful, pervasive and mysterious influence of unconscious nature which, according to him, as long as it is not tampered with, heals and revives man's good tendencies, his 'right mind'.<sup>28</sup>

It is interesting to note here Merton's stress on both the need to keep 'the heart of a child',<sup>29</sup> and his understanding of the parable as a 'parable of mercy'. Arthur Waley, in his introduction to the thought of Mencius and to this parable, wrote that all of Mencius's teaching centered around the word Goodness—*jén*. Waley clarifies that for different schools within Confucianism this term could mean different things. But, for Mencius, in a paragraph underlined by Merton in his edition of Waley's book:

Goodness meant compassion; it meant not being able to bear that others should suffer. It meant a feeling of responsibility for the sufferings of others.<sup>30</sup>

In Merton's essay 'The Climate of Mercy'<sup>31</sup> he speaks of the way the mercy of God changes the inmost reality of the sinner so that it is 'no longer sinfulness but sonship'. This was Merton's experience of God's mercy and compassion. Having discovered himself in God's mercy he is able to extend that mercy to others. The revelatory experience Merton had on a visit to Louisville in March 1958 is a clear expression of these changes. On the

corner of a busy street in Louisville Merton was 'overwhelmed with the realization that I love all these people' seeing the 'secret beauty of their hearts' and knowing 'we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers'.<sup>32</sup> As the birds hear the call to awaken, so too Merton awakens at Fourth and Walnut. Significantly this incident is placed by Merton in the pivotal chapter of *Conjectures*.

For Merton, the wind and the rain and the darkness and the solitude of the night in his hermitage had a restoring effect, similar to the night spirit and the dawn air. The rain helped to heal the damage

### ***Merton paints a picture of his life as a life lived in protest to the herd mentality of his day***

done to the woods by men who had 'stripped the hillside' and it also had a similar effect on Merton:

In this wilderness I have learned how to sleep again. The trees I know, the night I know, the rain I know. I close my eyes and instantly sink into the whole rainy world of which I am a part, and the world goes on with me in it, for I am not alien to it.<sup>33</sup>

In contrast rhinocerositis is the sickness that lies in wait 'for those who have lost the sense and the taste for solitude'.

In his essay, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', Merton paints a picture of his life as a life lived in protest to the herd mentality of

his day—whether the monastic or ecclesial herd, the political herd, the commercial herd, or we could add today, the technological herd. His solitude in the forest and the rain in this essay are contrasted with modern society, especially through the SAC plane flying overhead and through the guns of Fort Knox thumping in the distance. The rain, the noise of the guns and the SAC plane occur again and again in Merton's personal journal at this time:

A constant thumping and pummelling of guns at Fort Knox. It began last night when I was going to bed.<sup>34</sup>

Later the same day he adds:

2:15. Bumps and punches at Fort Knox faster and faster.<sup>35</sup>

Or again:

...the guns were pounding at Fort Knox while I was making my afternoon meditation, and I thought that after all this is no mere 'distraction', and that I am here because they are there so that, indeed, I am supposed to hear them.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

The age in which Mencius lived Merton parallels to our time and the message of 'The Ox Mountain Parable' is as relevant to our present age of violence, war and chaos, technological upheaval and ecological vulnerability, as it was for the times in which Merton and Mencius lived. Merton came to realize that the

night spirit and the dawn air gave him life and enhanced his prophetic and poetic voice. Merton calls us to awaken:

- to awaken to the mysterious action of the night spirit and the dawn air in our lives and in our world today;
- to awaken to the mercy of God that continues to fall like rain in our lives;
- and then to share that mercy, our Christian hope, with a world so desperately in need of that message.

## Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (London, Burns & Oates, 1977), p.34, p.37.
2. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London, Burns & Oates, 1968), pp.140-2.
3. *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers* edited by Christine M. Bochen (New York, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993), p.62 and p.64.
4. Merton, *Conjectures*, p.vi.
5. Thomas Merton, *Reflections on My Work* edited by Robert E. Daggy (London, Fount Paperbacks, 1989), p.74.
6. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1971), p.145.
7. Merton, *Conjectures*, p.83.
8. For a period in the early sixties Merton was prevented by his order from publishing on issues of war and the arms race.
9. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (London, Sheldon Press, 1986), p.368.
10. Merton, *Conjectures*, p.iii. A quote from Po Chu-i.
11. *ibid.* pp.3-4.
12. His epigrams for this chapter reflect this contrast. The first from Kabir is a

few lines from a song to Sadhu advising him to stop his 'buying and selling' and to 'have done with your good and your bad' as 'there are no markets and shops in the land to which you go'. The other quote from Thomas Traherne suggests that, though an infant does not often realise it, when compared to the world and all its treasures the child is 'the cream and crown of all that round about did lie,' (*ibid.* p.1.) pointing the reader in the direction of the important themes in part one, the wisdom figure of the child and the Mozart figure.

13. *ibid.* p.51.

14. *ibid.* p.65.

15. *ibid.* p.113.

16. *ibid.* p.115.

17. *ibid.* pp.122-3.

18. *ibid.* p.227.

19. *ibid.* p.251.

20. Hammer's edition was printed as Broadside 2 on his Stamperia del Santuccio press in Lexington, Kentucky, in a limited edition of one hundred copies. Merton's arrangement of 'The Ox Mountain Parable,' along with his introduction to it, were also subsequently published in a number of other places—*Commonweal* 74 (12 May 1961), p.174. Merton's book, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1967), pp.65-68 and in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (London, Sheldon Press, 1978), pp.970-971, though Merton's introduction was not included in *The Collected Poems*.

21. Arthur Waley, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China* (New York, Doubleday, 1956).

22. Albert Felix Verwilghen, *Mencius: The Man and His Ideas* (New York, St. John's University Press, 1967).

23. Thomas Merton to James Laughlin, June 1st, 1950.

24. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years* edited by Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco, HarperSan Francisco, 1996), p.19.

25. Merton, *Conjectures*, p.117.

26. *ibid.* pp.117-18.

27. *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* edited by William H. Shannon (New York, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), p.46.

28. The Ox Mountain parable. [With notes and text arrangement (after the translation of I. A. Richards) by Thomas Merton] Lexington, KY., Stamperia del Santuccio, 1960.

29. *ibid.*

30. Waley, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China*, p.83.

31. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (New York, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), p. 205.

32. Merton, *Conjectures*, p.140.

33. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, pp.7-8.

34. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* edited by Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1997), p.177.

35. *ibid.*

36. *ibid.* p.182.

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