

Rhinocerotitis – Thomas Merton on Being Human

By Glenn Loughrey

“The problem of Berenger, in Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*, is the problem of the human person stranded and alone in what threatens to become a society of monsters.”

Thomas Merton¹

Thomas Merton transits from a simplistic world view which saw only two choices, monastic or world, which is evident in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, at the beginning of his spiritual journey, to an understanding in the 1960s that people are faced with another two choices, two very different choices. Now they had to choose between being persons and being individuals. This understanding of persons and individuals is evident in his article “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” a reflection on Eugene Ionesco’s play *Rhinoceros*.² Merton’s understanding of persons and individuals parallels the play between the subject and the object and explores how our understanding of ourselves as either persons or individuals identifies us as either subject or object in the world in which we live. Do we live in community as interconnected subjects, or as part of a mass collective where we are disconnected objects? It can be argued that both Ionesco and Merton saw solitude as experienced in community as the key to being human.

In originally preparing this article, I had committed myself to remaining the objective observer, reading the subject and providing an interpretation based on primary and secondary sources. Then my father died, and it became personal. I could no longer remain at arms’ length from the impact of Merton, Ionesco and the concept of rhinocerotitis. My relationship with my father was fraught and conflicted. Growing up with alcohol-fueled violence, anger and bitterness has left its mark on me, as did his perceived understanding that the world, and much of what was in it, was against him. He had experienced exile from his culture and had not found a way back. As the son of a white farmer and a part-aboriginal woman in Australia, he belonged neither in the culture of his mother nor in that of his father. Due to an ultimatum by his father, the true identity of his mother was denied and kept a secret by the family, and remains so, for all intents and purposes, today. This secret cast its shadow far and wide across the family. For my father, it meant no inheritance of farming land, and land or country meant everything to him. His efforts to buy a property were denied by the bank manager, a friend, who refused him a loan based on who he was. Unfortunately he walked out of the bank devastated and across the road to the hotel and got drunk. And he stayed that way for many years. As a result he remained an outsider in the dominant society, despite attempting to be a part of it. His later involvement in the Anglican Church, for example,



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was an attempt to be accepted by the descendants of those who exiled the local indigenous residents from a nearby town as a result of the outbreak of violence by a part-aboriginal outlaw.³ Despite many years of faithful service, no one from the church visited the house while he was sick. They came only after he had died, to see my mother.

His experience of exile was psychological, As Lori Brown suggests, “There are many ways to feel psychologically displaced or dislocated while remaining physically in the same place.”⁴ She goes on, “Psychological exile involves a disruption of a sense of self, of self’s place in the world, and of life as it has been imagined. It radiates and reverberates through a person’s life and often impacts those close to them.” It is the moment when a person ceases to be considered a subject, an equal, someone of value and valued. Instead one becomes an object. To those around him he was nicknamed “Blackfella” or “Darkie,” and I, as his son, became “Young Blackfella” or “Young Darkie.” These were not terms of endearment but a clear demarcation of them and us. As a young person, I was always in the middle of his actions, rarely allowed to do anything alone. I was always kept close in order to be available if he needed assistance. I remained always a disabled little boy in his eyes, for I suffered with poliomyelitis at 4 years of age but I only found this out after I challenged him a few months before his death about why I fall over, suffer joint pain, and have memory loss and struggle with swallowing. I am now 57 years of age.

It is, as Andrew Harlem suggests, what happens “when a self is ‘Lost in Transit.’”⁵ He suggests that this state occurs when one not only cannot return, but has so lost their identity, that there is nowhere to return to and they are lost in transit, unable to find their identity, place or belonging. For my father this meant subservience to the dominant culture, the inability to make major decisions and a loneliness that saw him slowly withdraw from society. He ceased to be a subject and became, for himself and others, an object to be discarded and pitied.

Eugene Ionesco’s response to exile, or what he referred to as the void, was, “It is the business of a free man to pull himself out of this void by his own power and not by the power of other people” (*RU* 21). My father’s validation of his existence came via those he made into enemies, even though they only wanted to be his friends. His subject needed an object to be real. In the end, he was no different from those whom he perceived to be against him. He became an object along with all the others, caught up in the modern collective of individuals who appear to treat their fellow individuals as they treat themselves, as objects.

Thomas Merton suggests in *No Man Is an Island* that “We can help one another to find out the meaning of life But in the last analysis the individual person is responsible for living his own life and ‘finding himself.’” For those living in exile without a viable cultural foundation, this task can seem impossible, and encourages “shifting this responsibility to somebody else.”⁶ The result? A soul lost in transit, unsure of who he was and unable to make the inner journey to reconnect with his true self.

The inner journey to the true self unites Eugene Ionesco, absurdist playwright, and Thomas Merton, Trappist monk, as unlikely collaborators. Born five years apart, Ionesco in 1909 (this date is queried with some asserting the correct date of birth was November 26, 1912) in Romania and Merton in 1915 in Prades, France, they lived through the aftermath of the both the First and Second World Wars and into the realignment of the world which followed. Ionesco moved with his family to Paris before moving back to Romania after his parents divorced. Here he studied French Literature at

the University of Bucharest before returning to Paris to continue his studies, which were interrupted by the German invasion in 1940. He left for Marseilles and returned after liberation. He did not write the first of his plays – or as he referred to them, “anti-plays” – until 1948: *The Bald Soprano*. Martin Esslen⁷ places Ionesco in the “Theatre of the Absurd” as, like Samuel Beckett and others of that school, he wrote of the meaninglessness, and paradoxically, the mystery of life. He plays used ideas, settings and language which seemed incongruous and out of place for the subject he was discussing. For him his theatre was “imagined truth” which was more interesting, he suggested, than realistic theatre. In *Rhinoceros*, which he wrote in 1959, Ionesco explores what it means to be a human in a world which is inhuman. How does one maintain one’s identity and resist the temptation to disappear into the dominant culture? He answers this question by suggesting one achieves that by staying true to who you know yourself to be within. Without that self-knowledge you cease to be human and become just another object lost in the collective “herd.”

Merton, too was a citizen of the world who moved from France to America, back to France, to England and back to America, who suffered the tragedy of both parents dying before he was out of high school. He found that he had been infected by the sickness of Europe⁸ and led a wayward life at Cambridge University. He was exiled to America where he continued a similar lifestyle at Columbia University in New York. Through a number of events and the influence of key Catholic thinkers, which Merton outlines in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton converted to Catholicism. At an early age he was committed to non-violence and had responded to the military draft as a non-combatant. After he was upgraded as fit to fight he bought forth his decision to join the Trappists at Gethsemani Monastery outside Louisville, Kentucky and became a Cistercian monk.

For the next twenty-seven years he lived the life of a monk, albeit a noisy one for he wrote an extensive list of books, poetry and pamphlets on subjects including his own life, the contemplative life, non-violence, justice, histories of the Order and much more. His primary search was to discover himself which he translated as discovering the true self. Without self-knowledge, Merton suggests, it is not possible to know God or others. In fact, knowledge of the true self is knowledge of God, in whose likeness we are made. In 1965 he was given permission to become a hermit, fulfilling a lifelong ambition. Sadly, he died tragically on his first overseas trip away from the monastery, electrocuted outside Bangkok in 1968, 27 years to the day that he entered the monastery.

There is no record of any communication between them and it is unsure whether Ionesco knew of Merton. But Merton knew of Ionesco and wrote about him in “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” the opening essay of *Raid on the Unspeakable* (RU 9-23). They both wrote of the ideological war being fought against the person as subject in modern society. The objectification of the person was for them the reason for the tragedy of war, propaganda and injustice abroad in their world. For Merton, this objectification becomes evident when humanity is divided into “us” and “them,” and is the root of all violence.⁹

Merton wrote from the solitude of a monastic existence, Ionesco from the edge of the theatre, but both spoke into the noise of the twentieth century. It could be argued they were outsiders looking in, like Berenger in Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*. There is a long-held view, reiterated by Merton in *No Man Is an Island* (see NMI 53), that suggests art and theatre provide a window through which we can look at ourselves and see who we truly are.¹⁰ Likewise, monks, particularly hermits, have long been seen as outsiders who have something valuable to say to the world. Peter France suggests that

“one of the ironies of the human situation is that those who have chosen to live outside of society have always been eagerly sought out for advice on how to live within it.”¹¹

For Merton, the monk was an outsider, someone who stood outside the world and spoke into it. In his last talk before he died, he said, “The monk is essentially someone who takes up a critical attitude toward the world and its structures.” He goes on, a little further, and says, “In other words, the monk is somebody who says, in one way or another, that the claims of the world are fraudulent.”¹²

Ionesco appealed to absurdity to make obvious what he experienced. He is known to have said that his writings were often misunderstood and misinterpreted by those who produced them, perhaps because his plays could be prophetic and menacing. *Rhinoceros* deals with the dangers of totalitarianism as seen through the then-recent experience of Adolf Hitler and the Holocaust. The Theatre of the Absurd has been associated with existentialism and the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. It is documented that Ionesco didn’t care for Sartre and wrote *Rhinoceros* as a criticism of blind conformity to any form of ideology, in Sartre’s case, Ionesco’s perception of Sartre’s lack of criticism of Communist atrocities as against those committed by Nazism. Based on his own life-experience, Ionesco saw any totalitarian regime as being capable of atrocities, regardless of its philosophical underpinnings.

Merton shared Ionesco’s view of Hitler and World War II, and was equally critical of the actions of his own country’s actions in Japan and Vietnam. From his isolation and solitude, he used the absurdist style to comment through poems such as “Chant to be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces.” He writes:

How we made them sleep and purified them

How we perfectly cleaned up the people and worked a bigger heater
I was the commander I made improvements and installed a guaranteed system
taking account of human weakness I purified and I remained decent

How I commanded

I made cleaning appointments and then made the travelers sleep and after that I
made soap.¹³

Living as he did near Fort Knox, Kentucky, under the flight path of planes practicing bombing runs, accentuated for him the importance of the person who stands outside the collective mass of individuals, and speaks out of inner silence as an authentic human being.

He wrote extensively on the issue of nuclear war, producing more than 100 letters to correspondents of all backgrounds; these have become known as the Cold War Letters.¹⁴ Merton argued against war in any form, but particularly nuclear war, and the arguments used to support the use of nuclear weapons. He asserted that war is not an option for solving social or political problems and only succeeds in either continuing the violence or laying the foundations for future violence. He suggests that war is an addiction and, like all addictions, it will destroy humanity.¹⁵

Merton’s opposition to the Vietnam War was well-documented with his allegiance being with the Vietnamese people and the American soldiers who were victims of an ideology underpinned by

the ruthless use of technology that saw all others as being dispensable. In *The Road to Joy* he writes that the Vietnam War was “one of the greatest and most stupid blunders in American history.”¹⁶

Merton was concerned with the rise of technology and the potential evident for the debasing and dehumanizing of humanity. Merton writes prophetically in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* that “Technology can elevate and improve man’s life” providing it remembers that God is pre-eminently the source and object of all life. If not, technology “merely exploits” and “then it degrades man, despoils the world, ravages life, and leads to ruin.”¹⁷ If technology remained in the service of “what is higher than itself,” it has some usefulness, but once it becomes “autonomous” and “existing only for itself,” it has the potential to “destroy” (CGB 64).

Merton was concerned about propaganda and information technology. He notes that propaganda makes up our minds for us in a way that allows us to think we have arrived at the conclusion ourselves. He suggests that the success of propaganda depends on how effectively aligned it is with what people want. Merton concludes that “This is one of the few real pleasures left to modern man: this illusion that he is thinking for himself when, in fact, someone else is doing his thinking for him” (CGB 216).

Both Merton and Ionesco wrote during and after World War II, in the midst of the battle for human rights, justice, and the looming and lasting cold war. They watched as logic and technology superseded faith and love, and left a cold haze hanging over all creation. For them, the objectification of persons to consumers and the means of production reduced a human being to little more than an animal.

The animal Ionesco chose was the rhinoceros, a beast with few social skills, brute strength, the gift of being so short-sighted it charges at shadows, thick-skinned and blessed with a relatively small brain. It is no wonder a herd of rhinoceroses is called a crash! The rhinoceros epitomized for Ionesco the brutality of totalitarian societies and the subsequent loss of the individual within the mass movement of the herd. The person as subject is subverted for the individual as part of a mass collective, no longer retaining her person-hood, but becoming just another object to be used and manipulated for the purposes of those in charge. It is no accident that rhinoceroses are “all but indistinguishable from one another.”¹⁸

Ionesco’s play deals with the experience of its protagonist, Berenger, who lives in a small village in France. Berenger “can’t get used to my self. I don’t even know if I *am me*” (Ionesco 18); he drinks too much and has little of the dedication and responsibility shown by others in the play.

We watch as one by one the characters in Berenger’s world succumb to a disease transforming people into rhinoceroses and joining a growing herd rampaging through the village. Each employs a range of arguments in an attempt to make the transformation something normal and appropriate. In the end, Berenger is left alone, abandoned by all, including his best friend and his lover, Daisy. He remains where he has always been, on the outside of society, unsure of himself but, ironically, “content to be who I am.”

Dudard, Berenger’s rival for the affections of Daisy, is a lawyer and a logician, yet represents those who, in the face of totalitarianism, do nothing to oppose it. His cowardice and inaction lead to acceptance and compliance when the movement becomes widespread. Over the course of the play, he becomes convinced of the “righteousness of the rhinoceroses” and joins the herd.

Unlike Dudard, Berenger is an ordinary person who knows his own mind and trusts his instincts. He is not easily swayed by ideas and rhetoric, and represents the person who knows who they are

and is unwilling to sacrifice their personhood for the individuality of joining the faceless mob. His strength is his acceptance of the paradox he lives with; he both knows and does not know himself, and that makes him human and free to remain so.

He resists Dudard's capitulation and Daisy's temptation to escape the troubles of the world through pleasure. Berenger, a realist, cannot ignore what is happening, and refusing to escape, remains the only human left. He remains human, not just because he stands on the outside, but because he is aware of who he is on the inside.

In *The Road to Joy*, Merton suggests, "Our real journey in life is interior." For Merton this journey "is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts" (*RJ* 118). Merton spent his life searching for his true self and a life distinct from the superficial worldly life he had previously lived. Merton's passion found a voice in the silence and solitude where he began to let go, tentatively, of the need to belong and be remembered by the world.

Merton's life story, as outlined in his journals, reveals that freedom is elusive and is only found through a protracted inner journey to "recover your basic natural unity"¹⁹ at our center. William Shannon suggests²⁰ Merton's search for freedom included three very distinct stages. The first that Merton outlines in *The Seven Storey Mountain* pertains to the freedom of youth, the desire to behave as one wishes and without any thought for tomorrow and the consequences it will bring. His life as a young man at Cambridge, and to a lesser degree at Columbia, was one of immature freedom. His hedonistic lifestyle resulted in his guardian exiling him to America and his leaving behind a pregnant girl whom he never names in any of his writing. He alludes in the same biography to a life of partying, drinking and girls at Columbia. It seems the move to another continent did little to change the sense of "freedom" Merton enjoyed.

Prior to his conversion to Catholicism, Merton had begun to understand the bankrupt nature of the life he was pursuing. His solution to the problem of his "freedom" was to seek another "freedom," the freedom of cloistered obedience. At Gethsemani, as Brother Matthew closed the gates behind him on his arrival he comments, "I was enclosed in the four walls of my new freedom" (*SSM* 372). This new freedom was one of obedience, stability and penance, a life of spiritual exercises and work, the daily observance of the Benedictine *Rule* with no room for the type of freedom that had caused all his difficulties in his previous life.

Yet his vocation was the reason for his discovery of a freedom far greater than he had imagined. He understood that his youthful freedom led to depravity and had begun to understand that the freedom he lauded at his entry into the monastic life could lead to an equal "evil," rigid obedience, something he had witnessed in those around him as a spiritual infantilism.

In the silence and solitude of contemplation, Merton discovered the freedom that comes from within when one is reconciled with the God in whose image one is created. This spiritual freedom is grounded in the mystery of God. For Merton, this was "a sacred and religious reality" which had "Its roots . . . not in man, but in God" (*IE* 153).

Letting go of his place in the external world, he entered the "abyss" within which he was nothing and everything, unimportant and important, of no value but valued, unlovely but loved. Here, he found his voice and a new way of seeing himself, the world and all within it, and he wanted to invite people to discover that for themselves (see *RU* 21).

Merton wrote of the difference between the individual (or object) and the person (or subject). In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he writes, “The person must be rescued from the individual.”²¹ For Merton, the rise of the individual ends in a collective mass, seemingly moving as one but each seeking their own fulfillment at the expense of those around them. He refers to the individual lost in the mass of humanity as being little more than an automaton who does not know what they are thinking, saying or doing. “He [the individual] does not think, he secretes clichés” (*NSC* 43). In contrast, persons may appear to be separate from those around them but seek, not their own fulfillment, but the fulfillment of those they live in relationship with, treating all as subjects, equally valued and valuable. The “person” “is constituted by a . . . radical ability to care for all beings made by God and loved by Him” (*NSC* 42). This radical ability to live in relationship with both God and humanity is found, for Merton, within solitude and silence. This is the antidote to the noise, activity and forgetfulness of others which occurs “when a man is lost in the wheels of a social machine” (*NSC* 42). The person is the true self which appears as we spend time in silence and the false self, the mass individual, begins to fall away.

In “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” he quotes Ionesco commenting on the mass individual living in the popular rush of life, as one “who has no time, who is a prisoner of necessity” and who simply is unable to stop, having “*lost the sense and the taste for solitude*” or the inner life (*RU* 21). This rush to be objectified by consumption and busyness Merton named “rhinocerotitis.”

Merton writes: “To reach a true awareness of . . . ourselves, we have to renounce our selfish and limited self and enter into a whole new kind of existence, discovering an inner center of motivation and love which makes us see ourselves and everything else in an entirely new light What was lost and dispersed in the relative meaninglessness and triviality of purposeless behavior (living like a machine, pushed around by impulses and suggestions from others) is brought together in fully integrated conscious significance.”²²

So we rejoin Merton and Ionesco at the intersection of solitude, silence and the true self. The meaning of being human is to remain the subject in relation to all other subjects, and to resist the temptation to objectify self and others. This is only available to someone who is, as Berenger says, “content to be who I am,” and by implication, content to let others be who they are.

My father was not aware of Merton and Ionesco, as they were not aware of him. Yet their living out of their individual journeys speak into the experience of exile, of being on the outside of the dominant culture and of the importance of being reconciled to self. Each of them chose a very different way to live and express their experience, but each has something valuable to say about being human. So where am I now my father has gone? Like him, I grew up in exile, aware that I was different and always on the outside of my community. Like him, I have, at various stages turned my isolation outward and onto those around me. And like him, I have been too eager to blame him and others for my exile. Yet, through the character of Berenger in Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*, and the life and writings of a flawed person in the shape of Thomas Merton, I am on a journey discovering who I am at my center. The result? I am learning to live out of the inside while avoiding the trap of objectification. Living out of the in-side allows you to live authentically, not more comfortably, on the out-side.

1. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 19; subsequent references will be cited as “RU” parenthetically in the text.
2. Eugene Ionesco, *Rhinoceros and Other Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 3-107; subsequent references will be cited as “Ionesco” parenthetically in the text.
3. See Brian Davies, *The Life of Jimmy Governor – The True Story behind The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1979).
4. Lori Lyn Brown, “On the Return from Exile: A Phenomenological, Depth-Psychological Investigation,” (Carpinteria, CA: Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2008) [ProQuest Dissertations & Theses].
5. Andrew Harlem, “Exile as a Dissociative State: When a Self is ‘Lost in Transit,’” *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 27.4 (2010) 460-74.
6. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) xii; subsequent references will be cited as “NMI” parenthetically in the text.
7. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1969).
8. See Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 126; subsequent references will be cited as “SSM” parenthetically in the text.
9. See Patrick F. O’Connell, “Nonviolence,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 330.
10. See Anneli Saro, “The Interaction of Theatre and Society: The Example of Estonia,” *Global Changes, Local Stages. How Theatre Functions in Smaller European Countries* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2009) 41-62.
11. Peter France, *Hermits* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998) xiii.
12. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 329.
13. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 345.
14. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).
15. See Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 129.
16. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 107; subsequent references will be cited as “RJ” parenthetically in the text.
17. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 230; subsequent references will be cited as “CGB” parenthetically in the text.
18. “*Rhinoceros and Other Plays* by Eugene Ionesco,” BookRags Literature Study Guide (www.bookrags.com/studyguide-rhinoceros-and-other-plays).
19. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003) 3; subsequent references will be cited as “IE” parenthetically in the text.
20. William H. Shannon, “Freedom,” *Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* 164-67.
21. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 38; subsequent references will be cited as “NSC” parenthetically in the text.
22. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 161.