Out of the Shadows: Merton's Rhetoric of Revelation

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Thomas Merton's history as a thinker and writer follows a progression from the absolutism of conservative Catholic theology, in his case intensified by the asceticism of his Trappist formation and practice, to an autonomy grown from ongoing conflicts with his community and his study of world religions. His journey culminates in the radical social and political writing of his late career. The various roles he played map his development. As a convert, he transforms from the cynical dandy of his university days to the pious convert and postulant of the 1948 *The Seven Storey Mountain.* In 1951, he begins serving as master of scholastics, introducing innovations to help form the monastic conscience of the young men who came to Gethsemani, often following Merton's own example. By 1957, he is beginning to evolve into the autonomous self of the late controversies over mysticism, radical social action, and the hermitage (Mott, 304–6). This progression is evident in the substance of Merton's writing, as well as in his composing practices.

These claims are based on comparisons of Merton's published texts with the various drafts and personal journal sources through which he arrived at them. The key to this argument is the degree to which Merton begins writing under a shadow of influence, either theological or monastic, but then, through revision, writes his way back to his own authentic experience.

Merton first learned revision under the direction of Robert Giroux, his editor for *The Seven Storey Mountain.* Giroux helped Merton clarify his rhetorical purpose and construct an effective ethos. Later Merton became his own best editor. This can be illustrated by tracing

the development of the essay "Rain and the Rhinoceros" through several surviving draft versions, its original publication in *Holiday,* and a subsequent revision for the anthology *Raids on the Unspeakable.* In these revisions, Merton works through veiled allusions and personal allegory to clarify and then begin to act upon his abhorrence of American militarism and the war in Vietnam.

Giroux and Revising *The Seven Storey Mountain*

Before turning to "Rain and the Rhinoceros," let us examine draft materials and the published version of *The Seven Storey Mountain.* Here we see the positive influence of Robert Giroux, the editor charged with helping Merton turn *The Seven Storey Mountain* from an inaccessible theological tract into an autobiography that is still read as a touchstone of the spiritual malaise and moral struggle of post-World War II America.

Giroux was largely responsible for moving Merton back from the pietistic, nearly medieval rhetorical stance of the manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain* toward a more direct and accessible account of his personal experience. Specifically, Giroux helped Merton out from under the self-imposed domination of his superiors, Merton's original audience. With this audience the original version of *The Seven Storey Mountain* read more like a theological treatise than an autobiography. Giroux helped Merton conceive a new audience and rhetorical purpose, thereby allowing him to project a sympathetic and accessible ethos, or rhetorical self. Theological treatise becomes historical and personal narrative, and Merton transforms his ethos to that of a representative soul abandoning the spiritually wasted post-war secular world in order to seek both temporal and eternal peace at Gethsemani. Many believe Giroux's influence was responsible for the popularity of the book. Close examination of the manuscript validates this belief.

The book that we read as *The Seven Storey Mountain* is significantly different from Merton's original draft. The draft referenced Catholic themes such as grace and contained elaborate theological arguments to such a degree that Naomi Burton Stone, Merton's agent and long-time friend, wondered whether the book would be accessible to a general audience (Mott, 231). Once the book was accepted for publication, Robert Giroux was assigned editorial responsibility. His task was to help Merton transform a theology-dominated apologia written under the influence of his Trappist formation into a widely accessible autobiography. Giroux directed Merton away from theological argument written for an audience of insiders, his superiors, toward personal narrative that presents Merton as a representative man, struggling against and ultimately rejecting his contemporary secular world for Gethsemani's stable sacred tradition.

From a rhetorical perspective, Giroux's task was two-fold. First, he needed to demonstrate to Merton that his original rhetorical purpose—writing an apologia in the great tradition of Augustine—so limited the audience that only those who already knew what he knew and believed as he believed could read and understand the book. As a corollary, Giroux had to convince Merton to shift from argument to narrative. This shift would allow more readers to identify with him as a representative modern man working through contemporary spiritual alienation. Once readers could identify with Merton, then they could be moved by the account of his transformation and conversion.

Giroux's second but related task involved tempering Merton's ethos. Ethos is the self-image a writer creates through language, tone, and style. When not engaged in the pietism of high theological argument with its technical and elevated language and style, Merton used wit and bitter sarcasm, generally directed at himself, thereby creating the ethos of a clever, if jejune, "wise guy." This wise-guy stance, reminiscent of Merton's satires at Columbia, was off-putting, working against both the original argumentative purpose and the new narrative purpose.

Close examination of the layers of composition and revision in the drafts shows how Merton, under the direction of Giroux, wrote his way out from under the domination of authorities. They further illustrate how Merton creates an accessible and sympathetic ethos. The first subchapter of *The Seven Storey Mountain,* "1. Prisoner's Base," provides an example. I will be comparing Merton's original typed draft (hereafter cited as typed draft), which includes very few corrections in his own handwriting; an intermediate version (hereafter cited as edited draft), which includes editorial and typesetting marks including cross outs, bracketing, and corrections in Giroux's handwriting; and the final published version. Both draft manuscripts are held in the Merton Collection of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of the Columbia University Library.

In Merton's typed draft, the first subsection runs for eight pages and includes thirty paragraphs. In the edited draft, this same section is reduced to two pages including only ten paragraphs. The published

version covers less than one and one-half pages and includes eight paragraphs. Obviously, Giroux and Merton did a great deal of condensing.

My analysis, however, concentrates on what was eliminated in order to condense. Most of the work occurred between the original typed draft and the edited draft, and the differences are suggestive. The typed draft began with a discourse on the soul, an argument shaped in theological terms and depending on specialized vocabulary. The discourse constitutes twenty of the thirty paragraphs of the subsection. It establishes a strong sense of self-contempt rooted in Merton's belief in his own and humankind's debased nature. The theme invokes the doctrine of original sin and includes an apostrophe to God:

> You Who, in Eden, has offered me the heaven of Your infinite liberty and peace, I despised, preferring instability and slavery, loving changing and uncertain goods. I forsook Your immense and unutterable reality, which is Pure Act, without any imperfection or unfulfillment, and gave away participation in XXXX the unending playing of the Three Persons in the Essence of One Infinite Love, in exchange for a thousand petty and complicated XXXXXXXX appetites and cravings, hatred and XX envies, uncertainties and doubts, trying to draw contingent things into the empty center of my own godless being as if to convince myself that I was the XXXXXX kernel of the universe, I was the end of all creation, and not you (typed draft, 2; here and throughout "X" indicates crossouts and emendations that are unreadable: the number of X's approximates the number of characters crossed out).

The literary apostrophe invokes conventional theological themes and language. The specific use of instability suggests an audience of superiors who recognize such use as a direct reference to the vow of stability, one of the several vows Merton professed as a monk of Gethsemani. Only after three paragraphs of such theological discourse does Merton allow a concrete reference to geography, events, or people. He notes his birth, offers impressionistic descriptions of his mother and father, and invokes scenes of World War I. Subsequently, both the edited draft and published version begin with these concrete references.

These concrete references run from paragraph seven through sixteen of the original thirty paragraphs of the subsection. Then, barely one-half way through the first subsection, the discourse on the soul recommences, running from paragraph seventeen through twenty-nine. Merton offers a long sermonic exposition on the three potential destinies of the soul. He mentions limbo, where the pagans Confucius and Aristotle reside, and the hell reserved for those who reject the Christian God. He provides an extensive catalog of sins, including traditional moral aberrations, such as simony, as well as contemporary atrocities, including Nazism (typed draft, 6). He describes the third and final "true destiny . . . to become One Spirit with God, and participators in Divine Nature" (typed draft, 7). In this argument Merton also reveals his theological source by quoting Duns Scotus (typed draft, 8).

Merton ends the subsection with thinly veiled personal references to one,

> born with too much wit, and too much understanding . . . [who] knows everything, he will not bother to look for the answer to anything: all his questions will be merely rhetorical, and their purpose will be merely to advertise his own wisdom and acuteness (typed draft, 8).

> There is hope, however, that these egoists will "find out XXXXXX XXXX, by experience, the fact of their own ignorance and stupidity and nothingness.
>
> "Because then their questions XXXXXXXXXXXX may, perhaps, turn into XXXX prayers, and there will be some chance of their XXXXXXXXXXXXXX receiving an answer" (typed draft, 8).

In addition to the theological argument that would be of interest only to an audience of superiors and other informed Catholics, the typed draft also includes examples of the sarcastic wise-guy stance of the Merton of "too much wit" noted above. Merton portrays existence in limbo in the following terms: "Yet at best, I suppose people like Confucius and Aristotle enjoy an eternity that is about equivalent to a Sunday afternoon at the beach, indefinitely extended, and with grit in all the sandwiches" (typed draft, [5]; page is not numbered but comes between 4 and 6). The humor here turns to sarcasm demonstrating a less-than-charitable attitude in Merton.

He speculates on his destiny if he had not converted:

> I might have ended up in an eternity little worse than a bad dream, separated from God, but enjoying the tedious conversations of a lot of pious philosophers and protestant XXXXX ministers and all the ladies who, under Queen Victoria and since, have XXXXX expired in the suburbs of London without ever having seriously offended God and without ever having loved Him or any one else either (typed draft, [5]).

Here Merton makes his point at the expense of others, ministers and ladies, whom he had come to loathe during his public school and Cambridge days. Such excess may have raised a smile in critics who snidely remark the vacuousness of proper British culture, as Merton frequently did in his satires. But the style also alienates readers who do not hold similar views, especially Americans for whom the criticism of Queen Victoria would make little sense. When Merton does grant himself permission to adventure away from conventional theology in the original typed draft, he engages in stylistic excess and uncharitable commentary that compromises, even defeats, his rhetorical purpose and calls into question the ethical worthiness of the man about to narrate his conversion.

The edited draft produced by revision under the direction of Giroux demonstrates changes in substance and style. These changes document a shift of rhetorical purpose from theological argument with satiric commentary to historical and personal narrative. As noted earlier, Merton condenses eight pages to two. Gone are Dun Scotus and most of the theological argument. Gone is the apostrophe to God and the sermonizing stance it represents. References to Merton's and humankind's debased nature and consequent self-loathing are greatly tempered. The ten paragraphs that remain are all built around concrete historical and personal events. The discourse on the soul's destinies and the catalog of sins is condensed into a one-paragraph portrayal of a world "that was the picture of hell" (edited draft, 1). In the revision, Merton does not indulge himself in generalized theological assertion. Concrete references to historical events in a troubled world at war abound: "Not many hundreds of miles away from the house where I was born, they were picking up the dead men that rotted in the rainy ditches among the dead horses and the ruined XXXXXXXX seventy-fives, in a forest of trees without branches along the river Marne" (edited draft, 1).

Merton carries one significant image from the original typed draft to the edited draft, a reference to "crooked mirrors at Coney Island." He retains this image from the original draft seemingly as an accommodation to an American audience that is, given Merton's revised rhetorical purpose, now his primary audience. In the typed draft, the image comes after Merton's references to the nearby war in Marne and Champagnes: "Too many of us had souls that showed God's image, yes, but XXXX distorted and without likeness, after the manner of the crooked mirrors they have on Coney Island" (typed draft, 2). In the edited draft, the image is used to end the now one-paragraph-long discourse on the soul. Merton starts with general references to his contemporary world, and then builds a generalization about the relation between God and humankind: "It was a XXXXXX world of idolaters, trying to draw all things into their emptiness the way God draws them back into His own fullness: little starved souls, made in the image of God and then twisted out of shape XXXXXXXXXXXXX like the things you see in those crooked mirrors at Long Island" (edited draft, 1).

Two specific changes deserve note. First, this sentence includes one of the only two uses of "soul" to survive from this section of the original typed draft. The other comes in a paragraph about his mother. Both uses of soul, however, are excised in the published version. Originally serving as a central theme in the argument of the original, soul appears but does not serve as a central theme in the edited draft, and disappears entirely in the published version of the first subsection, "1. Prisoner's Base." The revisions done under the direction of Giroux show Merton abandoning the formal theological concerns and obsessions instilled in him through his conversion and monastic training.

The second change involves Merton's transforming the image from a nonpersonal one—"in the manner" (typed draft, 2)—to a direct personal address to the reader—"like the ones *you see*" (edited draft, 1; emphasis added). The change is an invitation to American readers to participate directly in the text. Further, this direct reference to American culture is treated without sarcasm or humor, allowing American readers to identify with Merton, rather than alienating them as his earlier wise-guy ethos had. These references to Coney Island mirrors do not survive in the published version, perhaps because they are not anchored to a specific historical event or to Merton's personal experience. Giroux convinced Merton that only material with specific and concrete reference could continue in the book.

Nevertheless, the change between original and edited draft demonstrates a key element of Giroux's positive influence on Merton. They show how Merton has established a new rhetorical purpose for *The Seven Storey Mountain*. His purpose now is to present his life and conversion as a concrete and accessible model for those interested in spiritual renewal. And they show how Merton carefully crafts a new ethos to earn the sympathy of his readers. The new "representative man" ethos encourages positive identification between writer and reader, thereby allowing Merton to accomplish his new rhetorical purpose.

Between the edited draft revision and the final published version there are few changes. In addition to excising the references to soul noted earlier, one change deserves note. Merton eliminates a paragraph-long description of his mother's religious attitudes. The excision represents a softening, clearly in the spirit of charity.

The preceding paragraphs present his father in a very sympathetic light: "His vision was religious and clean, and therefore his paintings were without decoration or XXXXXX superfluous comment, since a religious man respects the power of God's creation to XXXX XXXXX bear witness for itself.

"My father was a very good artist. His name was Owen Merton" (edited draft, 2).

Then comes the paragraph on his mother. "My mother was not quite like that." The rest of the paragraph portrays her as "mathematical," and "abstract and idealistic," trying "to get everything else to take the stamp of that idea" (edited draft, 2). She imposed a "Doric neatness that haunted the depths of her soul" (edited draft, 2). Even these brief references provide considerable fuel for exploring the relationship between Merton and his mother. But these are not the point of the book. Excising these references moves the narrative forward, avoiding a distraction. They also make Merton's ethos more sympathetic and accessible.

In sum, the revisions of the first subsection of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "1. Prisoner's Base," show the strong and positive influence of an editor helping Merton to move beyond his immediate influences and to abandon the sarcasm that, though central to his secular writing, disrupted his spiritual autobiography. These revisions, however, do not tell the whole story of the writing of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, nor do they show the development of Merton as an autonomous thinker and writer. Comparing another set of drafts, journals, and published texts will detail the mature Merton's evolution toward an autonomous, actualized self.

"Rain and the Rhinoceros"

In "Rain and the Rhinoceros" we see Merton acting as an autonomous self. Thinking more and more independently, he focuses his analysis upon his own monastic experience, judges his current practice unsatisfactory, and acts to change it. In both figurative and literal terms, the revisions of "Rain and the Rhinoceros" show

Merton rejecting the comfort and protection of the community, and, along with that comfort, the conformity communal life demands. He seeks a vital but more risky alternative: "vulnerability and death" in the process of discovering his "inner self." Rather than a denial, however, the changes represent "an act and affirmation of solitude" (15; unless noted otherwise, page references are to *Raids on the Unspeakable*). As a consequence, Merton becomes the entirely responsible author of his actions. The revisions also show an ironic consequence of Merton's autonomy: the solitude that ostensibly should complete Merton's withdrawal from the world causes him to reengage the world by working against injustice, militarism, and war through the radical social and political writing of the last part of his career.

"Rain and the Rhinoceros" originally appeared in *Holiday* in May 1965. Merton's journals indicate he was drafting the essay through the late fall of 1964; he notes completing the manuscript on December 20 of that year. He later submitted a revision, the publication draft, to *Holiday* on January 31, 1965. My analysis is based on comparisons of the original typed draft, including Merton's extensive handwritten changes, the publication typed draft sent to *Holiday* with only a few changes, and the published version. The manuscripts are held in the collection of the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College in Louisville, Kentucky.

The original typed draft represents the transition from early to finished draft. The changes are significant; nine pages grow to thirteen. The title changes from "The Long Night's Festival" to "Rain: Or Ionesco Is Nearer than You Think," and finally to "Rain and the Rhinoceros." These changes reflect a shift in emphasis from poetic reflection to personal and social critique. A similar shift is also evident in Merton's substantive revisions. Yet another version appears in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, an anthology of Merton essays published by New Directions in August 1966. At that time, Merton adds a new ending, a revision that is central in my argument. In sum, almost two years pass between original drafting, the appearance in *Holiday*, and publication in the anthology. That time marks a major period of growth for Merton in spiritual, psychological, and literary matters.

In "Rain and the Rhinoceros," Merton reflects on the anguish of existence in a material culture disconnected entirely from nature and spirit. The reflection begins in the din created by a hard rain falling on the flat roof of his hermitage. Merton is absorbed in the noise. The rain

suspends time and activity, creating a festival, opening up space to examine the everyday.

Through the essay, Merton argues that solitude allows the individual to penetrate material and social illusions, to discover the self-alienation of constantly escalating but insatiable needs created by collective material culture, and to transcend these illusions by reconnecting with God through the Spirit. This progression follows the model of Christ's temptation and triumph in the desert. Merton explores a sequence of antitheses. The natural and spiritual oppose the technical and material. Woods and desert stand against the city. The solitary contrasts the social collective. These culminate in a defense of the useless and meaningless, antipathies of the collective that undermine secular materialism through passive resistance. Not to contribute is to subvert. To withdraw is to confront. This is Merton's cultural critique.

Merton invokes sources as various as Philoxenos, a sixth-century Syrian hermit, Thoreau in *Walden*, and Ionesco and the theatre of the absurd. Coleman white gas appliances play a major symbolic role representing a technological means of finding meaning in having "fun." The box of the Coleman lamp advertises its purpose: *"Stretches days to give more hours of fun"* (13).

The festival stops only once during this all-night-through-late-the-next-afternoon deluge when Merton's concentration is broken: "At three-thirty A.M. the SAC plane goes over, red lights winking low under the clouds, skimming the wooded summits of the south side of the valley, loaded with strong medicine. Very strong. Strong enough to burn up all these woods and stretch our hours of fun into eternities" (14). The interruption creates an urgent sense of the world beyond the hermitage, establishing a suggestive relation between the solitary and the worldly that Merton takes a long time working out, both in the essay and his life.

Close analysis of the text in progress shows how Merton changes his ethos, his manner of presenting himself through writing, from a hermit to a social critic attacking mainstream American material culture. Merton's authority, however, does not reside in his superior moral stature as monk. Rather, it originates in his own experience of alienation from the collective. This alienation is signaled in his desire to move to the hermitage. "Rain and the Rhinoceros" and its revisions contain a personal allegory, the internal drama of Merton's self-realization. The drama is not complete until Merton himself recognizes that the ultimate end of solitude will be action—radical protest.

"Rain and the Rhinoceros," according to *Holiday*'s headnote to the essay, "reveals the value of solitude" (8). In the process, Merton offers a radical critique of contemporary American culture. The essay begins with a sense of urgency. "Let me say this before rain becomes a utility that they can plan and distribute for money" (9). The culture of commerce and the city has sufficient power and will to declare anything useful so it can be traded. Merton feels compelled to take this fleeting opportunity to celebrate the rain's "gratuity and meaninglessness" (9). He begins his critique here: culture creates individuals in its own image and for its own ends; the individual works obsessively to be useful and productive in order to satisfy an unending series of needs that exist merely to perpetuate the culture.

Here Merton begins to introduce elements of conflict between him and his community, subtly initiating the private allegory. By the third paragraph he has established his separation from the community: "I came up from the monastery last night, sloshing through the cornfield, said Vespers, and put some oatmeal on the Coleman stove for supper" (9).

The Coleman stove plays a key role in Merton's internal drama. It represents a vehicle of separation from the community and, further, defiance of his superiors. As noted in Mott's biography (359–60), the Coleman appliances were major sources of concern among Merton's censors. Merton had only recently received permission to spend time in the hermitage. Permission was predicated on Merton accepting the hermitage as temporary and experimental. Merton's explicit references to the stove indicate defiance, as if he no longer accepted the original plan and had moved to the hermitage permanently.

He intimates the personal significance of the Coleman appliances: "Coleman's philosophy is printed on the cardboard box which I have (guiltily) not shellacked as I was supposed to, and which I have tossed in the woodshed behind the hickory chunks" (13). This comment seems casual, almost humorous, but it represents defiance significant in inverse relation to its tone. The lantern box was to be shellacked in order to preserve it. Preserving the box reinforces the experimental nature of the hermitage project. In theory, if either Merton or his superiors wanted, the experiment could be called to an end and the appliances packed back in their boxes and stored for some other use. Merton, however, does not shellack and preserve the box; rather, he registers a protest by throwing the box into the woodshed among hickory blocks and other kindling.

While the censors are concerned about the message that might be sent by the references to the Coleman appliances, specifically that Merton has moved to the hermitage and is taking his meals alone, Merton himself is equally concerned that that message be sent. He is withdrawing from his community. He is finding his own way. Merton makes the Coleman appliances symbolic of the collective and its potential negative influences, either the cultural or monastic collective. And cleverly he makes these references so crucial to the essay that they could not be easily excised even if the censors so demanded.

The Coleman stove plays a concrete role in Merton's evolving epiphany concerning the nature of solitude. "It [the oatmeal] boiled over while I was listening to the rain and toasting a piece of bread at the log fire. The night became very dark" (9). With this conventional mystical allusion to the dark night comes a paradoxical realization about the rain and the nature of silence and solitude:

> The rain surrounded the whole cabin with its enormous virginal myth, a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of silence, of rumor. Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody, drenching the thick mulch of the dead leaves, soaking the trees, filling the gullies and crannies of the woods with water, washing out the places where men have stripped the hillside! What a thing it is to sit absolutely alone, in the forest at night, cherished by this wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech (9–10).

In fact, the dark night's epiphany depends on the interruption provided by the Coleman stove boiling over. Merton moves back and forth from the technological to the natural (stove to rain), from distraction to concentration (stove boiling over to the rain's silence), ultimately to the meditation-stopping sound of the SAC bomber overhead. He establishes a pattern of disruption, yet solitude and its insights come through the silence created by the rain's "perfectly innocent speech" (10). Merton leaves the monastery to achieve solitude, but this solitude contains speech, the antithesis of silence, except that it is purposeless, "selling nothing, judging nobody."

Within the context of Merton's experiment with solitude, the rain's speech accomplishes a great deal. He notes the rain drenches the "mulch of dead leaves" and washes out "places where men have stripped the hillside." In this rain of immanence and transformation, a cleansing sacramental rain, Merton symbolically washes himself of the guilt of separation from community. In a sense he is arguing his case against the community and his superiors. He goes to the hermitage to perfect his solitude. He finds the transforming speech of the rain, discovered in the dark night, made real to him only after being distracted by the crackling noise of the oatmeal boiling over on the Coleman stove. Through this paradoxical process, Merton has finally found his place. And he will take advantage of the opportunity it provides: "It will talk as long as it wants, this rain. As long as it talks I am going to listen" (10).

All this occurs in the essay's first four paragraphs. My analysis points to the embedded personal drama of "Rain and the Rhinoceros" and its paradoxical conclusion. Understanding the significance of the Coleman appliance references within the hermitage experiment, we understand that Merton's ethical and moral authority do not originate in his public role of monk and spiritual writer, but from his own personal experience of ongoing conflict with his community and superiors. This struggle maps the same move toward autonomy that he recommends for the victims of the collective. In addition, the paradoxical relations between solitude, distraction, and insight anticipate Merton's ultimate realization of the moral and ethical imperative to reengage the world through radical protest.

Two revisions in the drafts of "Rain and the Rhinoceros" best exemplify Merton's move toward autonomy. Taken together they underscore the paradox through which solitude brings epiphany and reengagement, the real lessons of the Coleman appliances, Philoxenos, and Ionesco worked out by Merton at the hermitage.

The first revision involves excising a paragraph from the original marked typed draft. This paragraph defended Ionesco's stance as a Platonic gadfly whose purpose is not "giving the audience 'something positive' to take away with them" (21) but only to raise questions and thus call attention to the absurdity of society. Ionesco's plays raise questions, but, because these questions concern the collectivity, which is itself illusory and absurd, they are meaningless. Answering the questions makes one a participant: "To constitute oneself as the single-handed opponent to the rest of the collectivity is to accept the collective fiction at its own face, to set it up as a windmill and exhaust oneself fighting it" (original typed draft, 8). Through the rest of the paragraph Merton offers more support for Ionesco's choice to withdraw and not answer the questions. Any answer is futile.

But Merton ends the paragraph with an ambiguous image affirming the adolescent and irresponsible posture of acting like a child "throwing your ice cream on the floor and screaming until you get spanked" (original typed draft, 8). In the original version Merton defends Ionesco, who assumes the egocentric and morally compromised posture of identifying problems but refusing to become implicated by considering solutions. In this early draft, Merton is defending his own as yet unresolved role as monk and solitary. He too identifies problems in the struggle against the collectivity to personhood, but he will not implicate himself. His solution resembles the adolescent response of the absurdist, but in a different context. He does not throw his ice cream on the floor, but, as narrated in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he rejects the world and withdraws to the cloister.

That Merton has grown beyond this adolescent response is clear in the revision of this section. In the final version, Merton allows Ionesco to present his own defense. Ionesco denies that he is raising questions but refusing to be implicated or to assume responsibility by suggesting solutions. Merton references another Ionesco work—not a new work that Merton recently discovered but material he had already been using while writing "Rain and the Rhinoceros"—that "portrays the absurdity of a logically consistent individualism which, in fact, is a self-isolation by pseudo-logic of proliferating needs and possessions" (10). Merton argues that since Ionesco has previously theorized existential anxiety and absurdity, the *Rhinoceros* is an application of this theory. He notes that "Ionesco protested that the New York production of *Rhinoceros* as a farce was a complete misunderstanding of his intention. It is a play not merely against *conformism* but about *totalitarianism*" (20). Ionesco, then, is opposing communism, which is, for Merton, one of the demons of contemporary politics.

Later, Merton quotes Ionesco himself in response to the charge that he offers no answers:

> "They (the spectators) leave in a void—and that was my intention. It is the business of the *free man* to pull himself out of the void by his own power and not by the power of other people!" In this Ionesco comes very close to Zen and Christian eremitism (21, emphasis added).

Merton defends Ionesco for not moralizing or providing answers; the individual must create and assume responsibility for answering these questions. This is the lesson Merton is learning through his own experience moving to the hermitage.

In defending Ionesco, however, Merton fails to turn the critique directly against himself. He remains complacent, satisfied to find his own answer by withdrawing to the desert after the model of Philoxenos. He invokes Philoxenos' exhortation to go to the desert to discover Christ: "I will make you true rich men who have need of nothing" (23). Merton accommodates this Christ-like ideal to his *Holiday* audience: "Obviously we will always have *some* needs. But only he who has the simplest and most natural needs can be considered without needs, since the only needs he has are the real ones, and the real ones are not hard to fulfill, if one is a *free man*!" (23, emphasis added).

Merton, by nature of his withdrawal to solitude, has constituted himself a free man, so his reflection is complete. The rain stops. He praises the transforming power of the rain with a resurrection image: "A dandelion, long out of season, has pushed itself into bloom between the smashed leaves of last summer's day lilies" (23). He again invokes the useless noise of the rain, "There is nothing I would rather hear, not because it is better than other noises, but because it is the voice of the present moment, the present festival" (23).

So ends the version of "Rain and the Rhinoceros" that appeared in *Holiday*. In that context it is a satisfying and appropriate ending. Merton's goal was to convince an audience steeped in collective material culture of the value and efficacy of solitude in the festival of the present. Given the struggle documented in *A Vow of Conversation*, Merton's edited and published journals from the period, however, he has committed the same ethical error he earlier first accepted and then challenged in Ionesco, the error of irresponsible withdrawal, of refusing to implicate himself in the problem.

The distance and disinterestedness that critics perceived in Ionesco parallel the complacency and equivocation of Merton listening to the rain in the hermitage, withdrawn, inner directed, Buddha-like, lost in contemplating his own existence. This is the ending Merton sent to *Holiday*, but it is not the ultimate ending of "Rain and the Rhinoceros." Something happens to him between the publication in *Holiday* and the version anthologized in *Raids on the Unspeakable*. Merton adds a coda with a reference to ongoing disturbances in the monastery and at Fort Knox, the military reservation. It signals his realization that he himself is implicated in the world's anguish.

"Rain and the Rhinoceros" appears as the first essay in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, an anthology Merton published with New Directions, a press renowned for its radical aesthetics and politics. In "Prologue: The Author's Advice to His Book," Merton comments that this volume signals a change in him, a change that has been met by resistance by his community and superiors. As a consequence this book needs "special advice" because it too may be met with resistance and hostility. Merton explains that the book is

> unusual. It's your poetic temperament. I would hardly call you devout, though I have found you meditating in your own way (not often in Church). But you must remember that most of your brothers went to the seminary, and you will be expected to be like a seminarian yourself. This, I fear, is where you will get into trouble (1).

In reality, the book had been to seminary, just as the others had, but this book and Merton had gone beyond, all the way to the hermitage, where it learned to "be not so much concerned with ethical principles and traditional answers to traditional questions, for many men have decided no longer to ask themselves these questions" (2). The interest now is in "difficult insights at a moment of human crisis. Such insights can hardly be either comforting or well-defined: they are obscure and ironic" (2). The book addresses "the critical challenge of the hour, that of dehumanization . . . [dealing] with it as you could, with poetry and irony rather than tragic declamation and confessional formulas" (3).

Few could miss the reference to his earlier writing, especially *The Seven Storey Mountain* with its declamations and confessions. Now, however, Merton risks going beyond the safety of formulas to assert an autonomous world view. He must because both he and the world are experiencing a moral and ethical standoff, "a theological point of no return, a climax of finality in refusal, in equivocation, in disorder, in absurdity, which can be broken open again to truth only by miracle, the coming of God" (4).

The essays anthologized in *Raids on the Unspeakable* deal with controversies that had not been traditional concerns of cloistered Christian monks. They range from nuclear arms and militarism through racism and third-world revolutions to Sufi mysticism. "Rain and the Rhinoceros" functions as a perfect introduction to the volume.

And though already published, Merton makes a change in the essay, a significant gesture in light of the risk-taking promised in the prologue.

The *Holiday* version ended with a celebration of the present festival. Now comes a new ending: "Yet even here the earth shakes. Over at Fort Knox the Rhinoceros is having fun" (23). Merton recognizes that he cannot escape the world, even as he tries to perfect his solitude at the hermitage. The reference to the earth-shaking missiles and guns at Fort Knox is illuminated in *A Vow of Conversation*, Merton's edited journals from 1964–65.

Numerous entries document Merton's struggle toward the solitude of the hermitage and his responses, from ecstasy to severe self-criticism, during his initial time there. What he discovers is that solitude does not come from his presence in a particular place; rather, it comes through a painful process much like Christ's experience in the desert referenced in "Rain and the Rhinoceros." The journal reveals several stages of conflict and resolution. His commentaries against his community range from harsh critique to melancholic reflection.

On November 24, 1964, he remarks on another SAC bomber flyover that distracted him during the consecration at the conventual Mass. He continues by reflecting on a full day at the hermitage and the contrast between his vital hermitage life and the numbing life of the community:

> Only here do I feel that my life is fully human. And only what is authentically human is fit to be offered to God. There is no question in my mind that the artificiality of life in the community is in its own small way, something quite deadly (saved by the fact that the artificiality of life in the 'world' is totally monstrous and irrational) (103).

The latter point is the explicit argument of "Rain and the Rhinoceros." The critique of the monastic community, however, shows the more significant struggle through which he creates an ethos to legitimize his social commentary. A later entry compares "the power, the energy of truth" (111) released in solitude to the dulling conformity of life in community. The comment invokes a melancholy: "It seems to me though that these streams [of energy and truth] do not get to run for me in the community and that I simply go along in the heavy, secure, confused neutrality of the community, though perhaps for others the springs are running" (111). Throughout this period the journal records the conflict between individual and community, often in the

same language—community is referred to as "collectivity"—that constitutes his critique of mainstream American culture in "Rain and the Rhinoceros."

The journal includes numerous references to SAC bomber flyovers and to the distracting din of the guns and missiles firing at Fort Knox. The journal documents Merton's growing objections to the war in Southeast Asia specifically and to America's militarism in general. The noise of the guns at Fort Knox results from training exercises preparing conscripted young men to be sent to Asia to fight the war that Merton is coming more and more to abhor. Bombers fly over and exploding shells and missiles shake Gethsemani's earth, distracting Merton from the concentration he seeks in solitude. The noise, first noted as a nuisance, becomes an obsession. Just as in "Rain and the Rhinoceros," this distraction brings an epiphany:

> 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. I am *here* because they are *there;* indeed, I am *supposed* to hear them! They form a part of an ever renewed decision and commitment on my part, for peace. But what peace? (117).

The final question refers to a growing tension between the inner personal peace he seeks through solitude and peace in a world shattered by guns and encircled by bombers carrying nuclear weapons.

The entry becomes more and more complex as Merton is pulled between the silent and prayerful goal of solitude and the need to turn back to the world to seek justice, a tension Merton ultimately surrenders "to the mysterious and sovereign intention of the Lord, the Master whom I have come here to serve" (117). The entry stops short of committing Merton to radical anti-war and social protest, but his subsequent life and writings indicate the direction he chose.

The journal, however, documents Merton's own awareness of the growing tension in his life. His final commitment to God's sovereign intentions, however, is not mediated by the security and confident trust in convention represented by the community, nor by trust in and obedience to his superiors, as promised in his monastic vows, but only in his own growing awareness, self-knowledge, and inexhaustible questioning, questioning that creates a burden on and discord in Merton's heart. He cannot turn away from these questions any more than he can ignore worldly explosions: "Yet even here the earth shakes. Over at Fort Knox the Rhinoceros is having fun" (23).

Having moved out of the shadows of literary and theological influence, Merton no longer uses conventional rhetoric to affirm traditional theology; now, as an autonomous self, he allows revelation to act directly on him. As we trace this process through his revisions, we witness Merton's rhetoric of self-discovery and actualization.

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