

Merton and Camus on Silence as the Language of Resistance

By David Joseph Belcastro

With all my silence I shall protest to the very end. There is no reason to say, “It had to be.” It is my revolt which is right, and it must follow this joy which is like a pilgrim on earth, follow it step by step.¹

While we might be inclined to identify this quotation with Thomas Merton, it was in fact written by Albert Camus. A notebook entry dated September 9, 1937, it represents a youthful Camus and his initial reflections on a position that he would later develop in several collections of essays entitled *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Rebel* and *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, as well as in plays, short stories and novels. Merton quotes this passage in his essay “Terror and the Absurd: Violence and Nonviolence in Albert Camus,”² the earliest in a series of seven essays by Merton on Camus. Merton was looking seriously at Camus’ position of revolt as possibly valid for himself as a monk living in the twentieth century. Referring to this notebook entry, Merton indicates that he had found in Camus the pure rebel who refuses to accept with passive and unreasoning resignation a falsification of authentic life, a rebel who protests the destruction or mutilation of life in the name of something else, whether it be patriotism, economics or religion; a rebel who resists the numerous forces of alienation that separate humans from one another and from life itself (*LE* 239).

It is interesting to note that Merton appears to have overlooked the opening words of the notebook entry. Even though Merton belonged to a monastic tradition that valued silence, he took no notice of Camus’ “*With all my silence* I shall protest to the very end.” This, as is obvious from the context, is not the despairing silence of resignation but the affirming silence on behalf of life. Camus’ rebel is grounded in this silence, speaks out of this silence, and embodies this silence. While Merton does not make anything of this in “Terror and the Absurd,” it is clearly articulated in “Message to Poets,”³ in which Merton calls upon a new generation of Latin American writers to be rooted in “fidelity to life rather than to artificial systems” (*RU* 156). He points out that they are a generation who are “not in tutelage to established political systems or cultural structures” and, as a consequence, may “dare to hope in their own vision of reality and of the future” (*RU* 155). Because they remain outside all categories, outside where life unfolds “in all its unpredictability and all its freedom” (*RU* 159), he declares that they, like himself, are “monks” (*RU* 158), “ministers of silence” and “children of the Unknown” (*RU* 160), whose words “point beyond all objects into the silence where nothing can be said” (*RU* 160). It is out of this silence, Merton tells them, that they will be able to resist with innocence, love, and solidarity the alienation, violence and deceptions that are inherent in the social structures of

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this age. Whether it was the notebook entry or something else, it is clear from “Message to Poets” that Merton and Camus were on the same page with regard to silence as the language of resistance.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of what this might possibly mean, we could look at Merton’s essay “Rain and the Rhinoceros” (*RU* 9-23; *SE* 216-24) and Camus’ short story “The Growing Stone.”²⁴ Both works explore in similar ways silence as the language of resistance. Nature is presented as a witness that invokes an awareness of the ineffable that extends beyond the articulation of intellectual, religious and social constructs. This awareness silences all ideological declarations of *what is* and *what ought to be*. In Camus’ short story, the great pervasive sound of a river running wild silences the social customs and ecclesiastical traditions imposed by Europeans on the indigenous peoples. In Merton’s essay, the silence of the incomprehensible rhythms of rain baptizing his hermitage in the hills of Kentucky questions technological advancements and industrial enterprises that advertize *progress* but support war, oppression and environmental destruction. Both works, Camus’ short story and Merton’s essay, awaken within the reader an awareness of an interior silence that echoes the silence of nature and the universe. The awareness of this interior silence to which nature and these two works witness, long forgotten in the West, was understood by Camus and Merton as the essential protest necessary for the protection of life.

While silence as resistance is explored in these two works, neither Camus nor Merton presents systematic studies but they simply express, as acknowledged by Merton, intuitions which cannot be easily defined because they are “obscure and ironic” (*RU* 2). Consequently, “The Growing Stone” and “Rain and the Rhinoceros” leave the reader with difficult questions to consider. How does the silent gesture of a French engineer carrying a stone overcome imperialism and create community with the poor and oppressed? Why should we consider the silent presence of a hermit in the woods a valid and effective protest against alienation? Of what do a river in Brazil and rain in Kentucky speak? Who are we who are silenced by a simple gesture, a hermit in the woods, a murmuring river, or the rhythms of falling rain? These are questions that cannot be easily answered. Yet they are questions that offer an opportunity to discover new horizons that promise life rather than destruction.

Luce Irigaray, a prominent feminist philosopher in France, provides a perspective from which we could consider “The Growing Stone” and “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” the questions these works raise and silence as the language of resistance. In *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community*, Irigaray presents her theory on gender as a paradigm for an appreciation of cultural diversity, a respect for human differences and a commitment to a solidarity that is grounded not in conformity but in the shared experience of diversity.⁵ She understands human identities to be grounded in the fecundity of nature and therefore irreducible to stereotypes, class distinctions and social customs. The witness of nature appears and reappears everywhere in the random murmurings of rivers, unrecognizable rhythms of rain and sundry other ways. Nature, according to Irigaray, challenges us to welcome the diversity it represents and to do so in the spirit of democracy (Irigaray 140). Conversely, nature silences all forms of authoritarianism and totalitarianism that have dominated life in modern times. Nature witnesses to the possibility of a community woven from the differences of age, gender and race, as well as the diverse religious symbols that vary from one culture to another (Irigaray 140). For this to happen, she suggests an “education of the body” (Irigaray 70), by which learning comes through the sensual experiences of the whole person immersed in nature. Here, she believes, is the possible refoundation of the human community “at the level of the least constructed, at the most intimate level of being human itself and of its living relations with the pre-given world that surrounds

it: nature, other living beings” (Irigaray 11, 55). While sharing much in common with Merton and Camus on nature, silence and resistance, Irigaray has moved beyond their work by presenting a systematic study. Her perspective on silence and human relations can be summarized in three parts.

First, silence is an essential aspect of human relations. Language only deals meaningfully with a restricted segment of reality. What lies beyond language, silence, is the larger and all encompassing dimension.⁶ Irigaray situates this silence within human relations. She sees the recognition, establishment and practice of this silence as necessary for all authentic ways of relating. In “The Growing Stone,” Camus essentially says the same thing. Here he describes a situation in which a traditional Christian ceremony processes unexpectedly outside the church and town to a primitive hut by a river where an engineer from France and indigenous people simply sit together in silence. In “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” Merton, while reflecting on the immediate experience of the rain falling in the woods around the hermitage, remembers Eugene Ionesco’s play *Rhinoceros* and writes his essay that weaves together the experiences of theatre and rain as if to suggest that a silent hermit, impervious to the gigantic snorting of progress, lives in fidelity with the rhythms of life. In both Camus’ story and Merton’s essay, silence creates and nurtures relations between humans, humans and nature, and humans and the Unknown.

The second aspect of Irigaray’s perspective relevant to this inquiry is an extension of the first and may be summarized as follows: in silence distinctive differences become apparent with each standing separate before the other. That is to say in silence, one cannot be reduced to the other or the other to oneself. Rising from the silence is the awareness that the other represents an unfolding mystery of seemingly endless possibilities. Human identity, like life itself, becomes undefinable and therefore free to be explored and discovered in new ways. In “The Growing Stone,” the native peoples are no longer seen as marginalized extensions of a European empire but are presented as distinct and unique and, consequently, as an unknown to be discovered in their own right rather than predefined according to the prejudices of another culture. Likewise, Merton in “Rain and the Rhinoceros” makes a point of distinguishing himself from the culture that would define him and what he does, believing that they know what he does in a hermitage hidden away in the woods.

The third aspect of Irigaray’s perspective is simply the reverse of the second: silence is where two resist becoming one, that is to say, the reduction of distinctive differences to a common denominator representing an artificial conformity. She believes that from within silence emerges a natural resistance of the two to be reduced to a socially constructed one. The resistance is essential for the unfolding of the uniqueness and mystery of the individual. This silence prevents a person or group of persons from defining others in ways that restrict, alienate and oppress. All such social constructs become meaningless when dwarfed as they are by the expansive unknown reality of the ineffable to which silence witnesses. This aspect of silence becomes the ground for a solidarity of resistance but one that does not require uniformity but the radical openness of wonder, exploration and acceptance. In “The Growing Stone” we find in the closing scene a community established between the French engineer and the indigenous people: each present to one other in silence, each distinct from the other, neither reduced to the other. In “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” Merton has come to understand himself as both distinctively different and yet nonetheless a member of a larger community with the task of serving that community with his life of silence. “Thoreau sat in *his* cabin and criticized the railways. I sit in mine and wonder about a world that has, well, progressed. I must read *Walden*

again, and see if Thoreau already guessed that he was part of what he thought he could escape. But it is not a matter of ‘escaping.’ It is not even a matter of protesting very audibly” (*RU* 12-13). Merton’s recognition that neither he nor Thoreau can escape the social constructs of their times is important. He understood the monk’s vocation to be *in* although *not of the world*. This situates Merton in the trickster tradition. Like the trickster celebrated in world mythologies, the monk lives on the boundary between organized societies and the vast Unknown. The monk becomes a portal between the two, keeping open the possibilities that life and death have to offer. So, in a sense, it is a friendly protest that speaks a silence for the liberation of persons bound by their own designs.

Viewing Merton and Camus on silence as resistance through the lens provided by Irigaray, we see that both writers recognized the problem with constructs and the need to awaken within experience an awareness of that which lies outside and beyond political ideologies, social organizations or philosophical and religious systems. Nature, as represented by the river and the rain, witnesses to a dimension that is beyond the boundaries of all our constructs. An engineer’s silent gesture and a hermit’s silent presence witness to life and protest against any threats to the flourishing of life in this world. Their silence speaks of the vast unknown, calling us to live and speak out of the freedom it offers. Here, as suggested by Irigaray, Merton and Camus, a horizon emerges that is always new and promising. Here we discover the importance of silent gestures, hermits hidden away, and the deepest dimension within ourselves that is awakened by the slightest murmuring of rivers and rain that call us to enter the dance of life.

While Merton and Camus appear to agree on silence as the language of resistance, Camus proceeds no further than the human heart as the ground of this protest. Merton, on the other hand, understands the heart and its deepest joy and capacity to love in a world of sorrow and hate to be grounded in the hidden work of God in Christ. Even so, the distance between the two men may not be as great as it may seem. Czeslaw Milosz in his obituary essay on Camus stated that all of Camus’ work, not just his academic thesis on Augustine, might very well have been “marked by a suppressed theological bent.”⁷ Whether the differences between the two men could ever have been resolved is the subject of another article. For this one, however, we are on fairly solid ground to suggest that Merton and Camus would have had no difficulty sitting *together* in a way that affirmed their oneness-in-silence.

1. Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935-1942* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963) 64.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 232-51; subsequent references will be cited as “*LE*” parenthetically in the text. This essay is now also available in Thomas Merton, *Selected Essays*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013) 361-81; subsequent references will be cited as “*SE*” parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 155-61; subsequent references will be cited as “*RU*” parenthetically in the text. This essay is now also available in *SE* 172-76.
4. Albert Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom* (New York: Vintage, 1958) 159-213; for Merton’s own commentary on this story, see the final section of Thomas Merton, “Three Saviors in Camus: Lucidity and the Absurd” (*LE* 284-91).
5. Luce Irigaray, *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 137; subsequent references will be cited as “Irigaray” parenthetically in the text.
6. See George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (London: Yale University Press, 1998) vii.
7. See Tony Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron, and the French Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 93-94.