Rain, Contemplation and Social Responsibility: Merton's Challenge to Us

By **Monica Weis, SSJ**

Despite the torrential rains that devastated Bermuda and deluged the coasts of Florida and the Carolinas last September, and despite the ongoing flooding in the south and mid-west, and the controversy over climate change as contributing to these natural disasters, water, in the form of rain, can be seen as a festival to be celebrated. In his widely-anthologized essay, "Rain and the Rhinoceros,"[1] Thomas Merton offers us a meditation on rain as a metaphor for understanding the importance of solitude and contemplation of the rhythms of nature. His essay touches on three interrelated topics: rain as nature's speech heard in the prayer of quiet; the witness of Philoxenos, a sixth-century Syrian monk dedicated to silence and the discovery of the inner self; and Eugene Ionesco's absurdist play, *Rhinoceros*, which illustrates the "problem of the human person stranded and alone in what threatens to become a society of monsters" (*RU* 19). The present article will focus primarily on Merton's celebration of water in the form of rain and on our responsibility to protect it, with passing references to Philoxenos and to Ionesco's play.

Merton's opening sentence is both cautionary and prophetic: "Let me say this before rain becomes a utility that they can plan and distribute for money" (*RU* 9). He might just as easily have written "water" instead of rain. But Merton is in the woods, in his hermitage, listening to the sound of water coming down from the heavens. He is free, and *it* – water from the heavens – is also free. With this understanding Merton can confidently proclaim: "I celebrate its gratuity and its meaninglessness" (*RU* 9). Meaninglessness? Yes, in contrast to our contemporary insistence on the value of everything based on economics, Merton understands the classical rhetorical distinction between *bonum* and *utilitas*. He recognizes the inherent value of rain – its *bonum*, as distinguished from its *utilitas*. Rain – or water – does not have, but *is* its own goodness; its essential character is its own value that does not have a price. However, when seen only as *utilitas*, that is, only as a commodity worth some cost, rain (or water) takes on the dimension of the "other" to be exploited or sold for profit.

Alone in the woods with time for contemplation, Merton experiences rain as *bonum* that offers him "a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of silence, of rumor." He ponders:

> Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody, drenching the thick mulch of dead leaves, soaking the trees, filling the gullies and crannies of the wood 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

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> wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech, the most comforting speech in the world . . . . As long as it talks I am going to listen. (*RU* 10)

The sound of the rain on the hermitage roof and porch with its "insistent and controlled rhythms" reminds Merton that the "whole world runs by rhythms . . . that are not those of the engineer" (*RU* 9).

This distinction – natural versus engineered rhythms – is a major point of Merton's essay. Natural rhythms are to be recognized and respected; constructed, manufactured, fabricated rhythms are suspect and can dull our senses to the reality we *should* be experiencing – what Merton calls "the voice of the present moment" (*RU* 23). Over the next several pages Merton praises rain as a "festival" whose rhythms lull him to sleep. This Trappist monk is existentially one with nature. "Here I am not alien," he writes (*RU* 10). Not so in the city – and this is where you and I come in for some heavy criticism.

Merton realizes that our constructed world, our "world of mechanical fictions," all too often prevents us from seeing and experiencing the beauty of nature and from allowing nature to renew itself and us (*RU* 11). The city is not necessarily a distraction, but a form of busyness we have to guard against. In the city, Merton writes, the "woman from the delicatessen scampers along the sidewalk with a newspaper over her head" to escape the rain, unaware that "the streets, suddenly washed" have become "transparent and alive" (*RU* 11). Rain is not seen as renewal and baptism, but only as today's inconvenience and tomorrow's weather. We city dwellers skirt around the reflecting puddles, too numb to realize, Merton laments, that "the streets shine beautifully" and that we "are walking on stars" and "running in skies to catch a bus or a taxi." Rain to the unaware city dweller "is an impertinence, a wen on the visage of progress" (*RU* 12). To be fair, Merton is not death and judgment on city life. He – and we – know that in the midst of city bustle, we can carve out some inner quiet for contemplation and reflection. He is, however, a firm critic of allowing modern society with its obsession for technology to entrap us. Merton is adamant that he has "no confidence in places where the air is first fouled and then cleansed, where the water is first made deadly and then made safe with other poisons" (*RU* 10-11).

This brings Merton to the Syrian hermit Philoxenos and to Ionesco's Theatre of the Absurd. In fewer than six pages, Merton telescopes Philoxenos' ninth *memra* on poverty into the absolute necessity of being alone in order to discover one's identity. Those who are trapped in the "illusions of collective existence" (*RU* 14) are like the unborn child who "has life, but no identity. To have an identity," writes Philoxenos, "he has to be awake, and aware. But to be awake, he has to accept vulnerability and death." He must awaken not only to the "unreality of [his] vulnerable shell" but also to his "invulnerable inner reality . . . . The discovery of this inner self is an act and affirmation of solitude" (*RU* 15) that challenges each of us. Sadly, our identity will not be discovered in the human collectivity that demonstrates its power over us by increasing our needs as it "tightens its demand for conformity." Once the individual has broken through the "illusion of omnipotence" that is fed by the collectivity who "informs and shapes [his] will to happiness" (*RU* 16), he "learns to think for himself, guided no longer by the dictates of need and by the systems and processes designed to create artificial needs and then 'satisfy' them" (*RU* 17). Liberated now as a "mature identity," this emancipation can take two forms: the active life, "serving the needs

of others, without thought of personal interest or return," or the contemplative life, which is "an advance into solitude and the desert" where we confront our poverty and nothingness (*RU* 17). The danger of not discovering our True Self and settling for the collectivity is the perfect segue into Merton's discussion of Ionesco's play.

Rhinoceros offers us the dramatic example of Beranger, the individual, becoming overwhelmed by the distractions of the collectivity. Despite Beranger's initial resistance to the pressure of the herd, the collectivity snuffs out any possibility of "solitude and dissent" so that existence becomes absurd. Beranger finally realizes that "To be the last man in the rhinoceros herd is, in fact, to be a monster" (*RU* 20). As Ionesco demonstrates in his play, the collectivity, to strengthen its own self-awareness, must "reject certain classes, or races, or groups . . . by hating them instead of absorbing them" (*RU* 22). Merton quotes Ionesco's contention that rhinoceritis "is the sickness that lies in wait '*for those who have lost the sense and the taste for solitude*'" (*RU* 21 [quoting Ionesco's *Notes and Contre Notes* 129]). "There will always be a place, says Ionesco, '*for those isolated consciences who have stood up for the universal conscience*' as against the mass mind. But their place is solitude" (*RU* 22). Here from Ionesco's pen is apt testimony to the importance of inner solitude and integrity of the Self. In reflecting on *Rhinoceros*, Merton comments that it is "the solitary person (whether in the city or in the desert) who does mankind the inestimable favor of reminding it of its true capacity for maturity, liberty and peace" (*RU* 22). A few years earlier, in an essay entitled *The Camaldolese Way*,[2] Merton strongly asserts this principle. He writes: "Not all men are called to be hermits, but all . . . need enough silence and solitude in their lives to enable the deep inner voice of their own true self to be heard at least occasionally" (*CW* 24; *SL* 167). For Merton, the rhythm of the rain in the woods creates that space and affirms this need to listen to his own deep inner voice.

Yet Merton's essay on rain is more than poetic rhapsodizing. Yes, he uses words like "festival" and "gratuity," and includes the exuberant passage: "What a thing it is to sit absolutely alone, in the forest, at night, cherished by this wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech, the most comforting speech in the world" (*RU* 10). But this essay outlines a more basic principle of living. Merton implies the importance of mindfulness, of becoming more awake, of seeing and observing. Perhaps I would not be too far astray in mentioning another life-moment of Merton's attraction to water: namely, his fascination with water as a toddler in Prades, France. As his mother Ruth Jenkins Merton records in Tom's baby book, whenever she wheeled his pram on the bridge over the River Têt, little Tom stood up, straining to see the burbling water running swiftly below.[3] Having seen this bridge and this river, and hearing, two blocks before the bridge, the noise of the water rushing down from Mount Canigou, I can only imagine little Tom's excitement at this experience of nature: all that speech pouring down.

But to bring Merton's reflection on rain/water to the twenty-first century – what might Merton say today to our world facing a human-made climate crisis? We know that Merton's commitment to prayer and contemplation flowed naturally into what scholars refer to as his "turning toward the world."[4] Prayer is never solely a relationship between the individual and God. It must overflow into compassion and action for all of God's children. Thus, the 1960s was a time of intense and passionate writing for Merton on the social ills of that era. From October 1961 to October 1962, he penned multiple Cold War letters to friends about the abomination of war and

injustice;[5] he went on to publish a series of essays and poems on the injustice of racial oppression, the insanity of nuclear proliferation, the dangers of technology, the rights of indigenous people and the need for a commitment to non-violence.[6] It is not unseemly to imagine that Merton would have something to say about how we treat our natural world. There are references to his belief in our interdependence in his 1963 letter to Rachel Carson, and hints of his commitment to eco-justice and planetary vision in letters to Barbara Hubbard,[7] and in "The Wild Places," one of his last essays before his untimely death in December 1968.[8] Thus I feel safe in saying that Merton would no doubt have challenged us about our feeble response to our current environmental crisis. Indeed, I suspect that Merton would have criticized the way we treat all of God's creatures, and in particular, water.

David Wallace-Wells, in his seminal 2019 work, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life after Warming*,[9] reminds us that although 71% of the planet is covered in water, barely 2% of that water is fresh, with only 1% being accessible. According to *National Geographic* calculations, only 0.007 percent of the planet's water is available to fuel and feed its seven billion people. This *should* be enough to support as many as nine billion people, but we have put ourselves in a serious water crisis "through governmental neglect and indifference, bad infrastructure and contamination, careless urbanization and development" (Wallace-Wells 86-87). The city of Phoenix, for example, because of its explosive development, is "already in emergency planning mode"; India and Pakistan face "high to extreme water stress"; major lakes like the Aral Sea in central Asia, Lake Mead in Nevada, Lake Poopó in Bolivia, Lake Urmia in Iran and Lake Chad in Africa have shrunk significantly in recent decades, and major aquifers like the Colorado River Basin, which supplies water to seven states, and the Ogallala Aquifer in the Texas Panhandle have, in recent years, lost many cubic miles (Wallace-Wells 88). Cape Town, South Africa, experiencing a severe drought in 2018, witnessed the disturbing paradox of black South Africans leaving water pipes running unattended and suburban whites "making hay over 'orgies of flushing in the toilet stalls of upscale shopping malls'" (Wallace-Wells 88-90). And we have been told that the slum dwellers in Manila pay more for water than people living in London or New York who have access to public supplies of clean water.[10] Can we be any more insane?

The opening sentence of Merton's essay is worth repeating: "Let me say this before rain [or water] becomes a utility that they can plan and distribute for money" (*RU* 9). In so many situations, Merton's concern has already become a reality. The tide of our water problems touches and threatens to submerge our daily activities. While many examples across our country could be cited, let me focus on just two.

An August 26, 2019 article in *The Guardian* reveals that Nestlé Waters intends to extract an astounding 1.1 million gallons of water per day from Ginnie Springs and the Santa Fe River in Florida and sell it back to the public.[11] A bit of history here: the Florida Water Resources Act says that all water in the springs, rivers and lakes in Florida is state property, yet it has never established a price for the water. So while taxpayers pay into resources that restore the springs from over-pumping, companies like Nestlé propose to take state water without paying for it. Of course, on their web site Nestlé sings a different tune: "At Nestlé Waters North America, we are committed to helping the communities in which we operate thrive and become more resilient. We believe that if we work in partnership with people in each community we operate,

we will create and maintain the environmental, social and economic value of each community."[12] Compassionate-sounding words notwithstanding, Merrillee Malwitz-Jipson of the Our Sante Fe River conservation group told *The Guardian* she isn't buying it. "The Santa Fe River is already in decline. . . . There's not enough water coming out of the aquifer itself to recharge these lovely, amazing springs that are iconic and culturally valued and important for natural systems and habitats. It is impossible to withdraw millions of gallons of water and not have an impact . . . . Water that comes from your tap should be safe to drink and wash your dishes (and yourself!) with." There are serious ironies here beyond the primary ethical one of "can we own water?" As Malwitz-Jipson comments: "When people need to not only spend money on bottled water, but also go out and buy it, clean water access becomes not only an affordability issue but an accessibility one" (*Guardian*).

A second example about bottled water itself sheds a different light on the problem facing us. A recent *Time* magazine article by Seth Siegel announced that "bottled water has gone from a convenience to an alternative drinking-water system, with about one third of Americans choosing it over tap water most or all of the time."[13] In 2017, bottled water was an $18.5 billion industry in the U.S. and yet 70% of the bottled water sold in the U.S. is not subject to Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulation. Water bottled and sold within a state is considered intrastate commerce, thereby falling under state regulations which may or may not be as strict as federal regulations. The major suppliers (Nestlé, Coca-Cola, Pepsi) and prestige brands such as Fiji and Perrier are generally safe because of the incentive to preserve their reputations. However, there is no guarantee that the lesser-known brands are providing safe drinking water. A 1999 National Resource Defense Council (NRDC) study, after testing samples of more than 100 bottled-water brands, found bacteria or chemical contaminants above industry standards in one third of their samples. Furthermore, if water bottled in plastic, not glass, containers is left standing long enough or in a hot place, phthalates ("endocrine disrupting agents" dangerous especially for pregnant women and young children), microplastics and various chemical agents in the plastic can leach into the water. True, our country has sustained contaminated tap water in such wide-spread places as Flint, MI, Newark, NJ and Puerto Rico, yet Siegel believes the answer to the potential risks of bottled water lies in "improving the nation's drinking-water infrastructure through advanced filtration systems – and publicizing that effort – so tap water becomes a more appealing option" (Siegel 18).

So where do we go from here? Merton would insist, I think, on beginning with a kind of reverent silence, a listening, that recognizes and appreciates the inherent value of water, one of God's creatures. In saying the divine office every day, Merton would have prayed Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech." And Merton would add his own psalm of praise: "All that speech pouring down . . . . As long as it talks, I am going to listen" (*RU* 10). But contemplation must not devolve into mere navel-gazing. To flourish as authentic prayer, it must expand into social consciousness, based on a Franciscan compassion for all our brothers and sisters, in this case, Sister Water. Just as Merton was a card-carrying member of The Wilderness Society, I suspect that he would applaud our becoming members of the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) or other far-sighted agencies dedicated to recognizing the value, the *bonum*, of our natural resources and

defending their wise use. He would nudge us to join activist movements intent on preventing water disasters due to human selfishness and myopic planning. Merton alludes to this posture at the end of his essay on rain when he celebrates the "sweet whistling" of the quails in the wet bushes: "There is nothing I would rather hear, not because it is a better noise than other noises, but because it is the voice of the present moment, the present festival" (*RU* 23). Friends, the present moment for reverence and for action is NOW.[14]

1. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 9-23 (subsequent references will be cited as "*RU*" parenthetically in the text). This essay is also readily available in Thomas Merton, *Selected Essays*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013) 216-24 (subsequent references will be cited as "*SE*" parenthetically in the text).
2. Thomas Merton, *The Camaldolese Way* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1957) (subsequent references will be cited as "*CW*" parenthetically in the text); rpt. *The Merton Seasonal* 40.4 (Winter 2015) 3-16. A somewhat different version of the material in this essay was also incorporated into *The Silent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957) 144-71 (subsequent references will be cited as "*SL*" parenthetically in the text). For the relationship of these various texts, see Patrick F. O'Connell, "Thomas Merton's *Silence in Heaven* and *The Silent Life*: The Evolution of a Contested Text," *American Benedictine Review* 67.3 (September 2016) 266-93.
3. Ruth Jenkins Merton, *Tom's Book: To Granny with Tom's Best Love – 1916*, ed. Sheila Milton (Monterey, KY: Larkspur Press, 2006) n. p.
4. See Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996).
5. See Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).
6. See Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995).
7. See Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 70-75.
8. See Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. Walter H. Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 95-107; this version of the essay was originally published in *Center Magazine* 1 (1968) 40-44. A somewhat longer version appeared in *The Catholic Worker* 34 (June 1968) 4, 6, now available in *SE* 442-51.
9. David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life after Warming* (New York: Tom Duggan Books, 2919) (subsequent references will be cited as "Wallace-Wells" parenthetically in the text).
10. See https://www.unesco.org/water/wwap (data accurate as of 2006).
11. See https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/aug/26/nestle-suwannee-river-ginnie-springs-plan-permit (subsequent references will be cited as "*Guardian*" parenthetically in the text).
12. See https://www.nestle-watersna.com/en.
13. Seth M. Siegel, "How Safe Is Bottled Water?" *Time* (October 7, 2019) 17-18 (subsequent references will be cited as "Siegel" parenthetically in the text).
14. This essay was originally composed as a presentation at the 2020 annual conference, subsequently cancelled, of the College English Association in Hilton Head, SC, which had "Tides" as its general theme.