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DAY OF A STRANGER

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By May of 1965, Thomas Merton was spending a good portion of his day and all of his nights at the hermitage on the grounds of Gethsemani. Although he still had some responsibilities at the monastery, Merton's life was increasingly moving according to the daily rhythms and rituals of the hermitage. A composite picture of a day in the life of a hermit was the basis for one of Merton's best-loved essays, "Day of a Stranger." The early draft of this work was written in May, 1965 for publication in Latin America. In July, 1966 "Dia de un Extrano" appeared in *Papeles*, a Caracas journal. It was part of an ongoing effort by Merton to engage in dialogue with Latin American poets, artists, and intellectuals. Hence, the first draft of the essay was more political in tone and less of descriptive of his "day" than the third and more familiar English version.

A good discussion on the development of this document may be found in Robert Daggy's "Introduction" to the Peregrine Smith edition of *Day of a Stranger*. Daggy notes that the Spanish, "extrano," is much richer and more suitable for Merton's philosophy than the English, "stranger." The former carries various connotations, as being extraneous or useless, as being a marginal person or an alien. Thus "extrano" allows Merton to identify himself with the Third World which was perceived as marginal to the great economic and political powers of the First World. The term also allows him to identify with the artists, poets, and intellectuals in Latin America who were marginal persons and were criticizing both their own corrupt regimes and the imperialism of the North.

In both versions, Merton is the stranger, the person living physically and spiritually on the margins of the great technological behemoth. He lived in the woods as one of the marginal Kentucky farmers and dwellers in its hollows. Merton felt that he was becoming an increasingly marginal figure in the Catholic Church as well as the Cistercian Order; to conservatives as well as liberals. Among other "marginalized" folk: poets, Zen Buddhists, African Americans, hippies, and anti-war protesters, however, he was becoming increasingly well-known.

Near the beginning of the essay Merton states succinctly one of the themes of his piece: "...I live in the woods as a reminder that I am free not to be a number. There is, in fact, a choice." (D.S. p. 31) Merton additionally claims that he is not a type or an example of anything else, and that he has no intentions of living in the woods "like anybody" or "unlike anybody," including Thoreau, the Desert Fathers, and the Biblical prophets. Nor is he there to exercise the right of "being himself," since, as the hermit suggests, "there is very little chance of my being anybody else." When people try too hard to be themselves they are in danger "of impersonating a shadow." (D.S. p. 31) As for his freedom, Merton admits that it is a paradoxical thing. "It is a compelling necessity for me to be free to embrace the necessity of my own nature." (D.S. p. 33) It is necessary that he walk under the trees.

The hermit, therefore, is "both a prisoner and an escaped prisoner." This is one of a series of paradoxes, contradictions and tensions related to one's status as a resident alien and a marginal person. A marginal person is neither wholly

outside of nor wholly within society's circle. Such a position affords the opportunity, however, to mediate new possibilities closed off from or unrecognized by those locked into the circle.

Merton is also aware that his understanding of place has been deepened by this experience of living in the woods as a solitary. To those who ask if he spends his "day" in a "place," Merton suggests that the idea of place must be more nuanced.

I know there are trees here, I know there are birds here. I know the birds in fact very well, for there are precise pairs of birds (two each of fifteen or twenty species) living in the immediate area of my cabin. I share this particular place with them: we form an ecological balance. This harmony gives the idea of "place" a new configuration (D.S. p. 33)

"Place" now includes the community of plants and animals that form a whole with their human member. The stranger does in fact belong to a community, here at the margins; a community that has itself become increasingly marginal in the eyes of industrial society. Nor can the hermit assume to be the chaplain of this community, as Merton discovers:

Sermon to the birds: "Esteemed friends, birds of noble lineage, I have no message to you except this: be what you are: be birds. Thus you will be your own sermon to yourselves!"

Reply: "Even this is one sermon too many!" (D.S. p. 51)

Even the seemingly well-intentioned advice that the birds just be themselves is rejected by the birds, probably as presumptuous and anthropocentric. Merton is taught a lesson in humility. The crows are the only members of the community that Merton finds difficult to accept as part of this harmonious configuration. They remind him too much of humans: violent, loud, "self-justifying," and always at war with other species and among themselves. (D.S. p. 33)

In addition to "harmony," Merton uses the Latin word *consonantia*, to characterize the diversity yet unity that is nature and its voices. The term arises in a discussion of Gregorian chant. Merton notes how the *alleluia*, sung in the second mode, which is "built on the Re as though on a sacrament, a presence...keeps returning to the re as to an inevitable center." Despite the singing of many notes in between one re and another, "suddenly one hears only the one note." Yet this one note blends all of the other notes without their losing their "perfect distinctness." (D.S. p. 59). This is *consonantia*.

In the hot afternoon, having returned from his daily trip to the monastery where

he experienced this Gregorian consonantia, Merton sits in the back room of the hermitage where it is cool. In the silence words end and

...all meanings are absorbed in the *consonantia* of heat, fragrant pine, quiet wind, bird song and one central tonic note that is unheard and unuttered... In the silence of the afternoon all is present and all is inscrutable in one central tonic note to which every other sound ascends or descends, to which every other meaning aspires, in order to find its true fulfillment. To ask when the note will sound is to lose the afternoon: it has already sounded, and all things now hum with resonance of its sounding. (D.S. p. 61)

Merton's attentive sensing of the enveloping natural world on this hot afternoon makes him aware of the diversity of phenomena present to him but also of a center or presence toward which they all tend, as the notes of the chant seek the tonic *Re*. All of these diverse sounds, all of these many meanings are all blended and harmonized in that One, yet retain their distinctness. Again, it is like a deep-sounding tonic which makes all beings "hum," each in accord with its own uniqueness, but in tune and harmony with the rest. Using an aural rather than a visual metaphor is thus more ecologically appropriate.

In addition to the many "natural" voices that make up the natural ecology of this marginal place, there are human voices which form its "mental ecology." Voices of Rilke, Zukofsky, Nicanor Parra; the "tzu's" and "fu's:" Kung fu Tzu, Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu; also, Camus, Sartre, John of Salisbury, and others. Women's voices blend in, too, "from Angela of Foligno to Flannery O'Connor, Theresa of Avila, Juliana of Norwich, and, more personally and warmly still, Raissa Maritain." (D.S. p. 35) Merton's community, then, is rich in voices, both natural and cultural, present and past. Place has a new configuration, it seems, in more than one sense.

The theme of his discovery of a new rhythm and pattern to the flow of his daily life dominates Merton's essay. Initially he found the unstructured nature of hermitage life unnerving. Over time and as the duration of the periods he spent in his cabin increased, Merton set up his own schedule. The monk began to cook for himself and take responsibility for his home and his environs.

The hermit would retire early and rise around 2:30 a.m. He would say the Hours appointed for that time, day and liturgical season, and then spend an hour or more in meditation. Merton's prayer was not verbal nor was his meditation filled with images. Rather, he sought an ever-deeper awareness of the divine presence, beyond words, at the center of his being. Over the years his prayer had become simplified and integrated with his deepening act of being. As he says, "What I do is live. How I pray is breathe. Who said Zen? Wash out your mouth if you said Zen. If you see a meditation going by, shoot it." (p.41) Zen had helped Merton simplify. "Up here in the woods is seen the New Testament,"

he continues, "that is to say: the wind comes through the trees and you breathe it". (D.S. p. 41)

Following his meditation he would have a light breakfast and read until sunrise. The hours surrounding dawn had always been special for Merton. And just as Merton would find it *necessary* to walk under the trees, so he would admit:

It is necessary for me to see the first point of light which begins to be dawn. It is necessary to be present at the resurrection of Day, in the blank silence when the sun appears. (D.S. p. 51)

Following hours of meditation and reflection, Merton's mind was undoubtedly alert and receptive to the epiphany of dawn. "In this completely neutral instant I receive from the Eastern woods, the tall oaks, the one word 'DAY,' which is never the same. It is never spoken in any known language." (D.S. p. 51)

Either after breakfast or dawn, another "ritual," not quite so sublime would take place. Merton would wash out his coffee pot in the rain bucket and proceed to the outhouse. The basic sequence of ceremonial events follows:

...Approaching the outhouse with circumspection on account of the king snake who likes to curl up on one of the beams inside. Addressing the possible king snake in the outhouse and informing him that he should not be there. Asking the formal ritual question that is asked at this time every morning: "Are you in there, you bastard?" (D.S. p. 53)

After more Psalms, Merton would begin his manual chores. These too were ritualized. He would spray the bedroom for mosquitoes and cockroaches. Then the ritual opening of north and east side windows, closing of southern windows. The west side windows are left open until the hot months. He would then do some letter-writing and prepare to go to the monastery. "Pull down shades. Get water bottle. Rosary. Watch. Library book to be returned. It is time to join the human race." (D.S. p. 53) Merton would take his water bottle along to be filled since it wasn't until later that he had a well dug.

Merton would eat the main meal at the monastery and then return in the early afternoon, "with the water bottle freshly filled, through the cornfield, past the barn under the oaks, up the hill, under the pines, to the hot cabin." (D.S. p. 61) In the "cool" back room he would do some light reading, say another canonical hour and then meditate for an hour or two. Following that he would do some of his writing for two hours or so. Then he would pray another canonical hour, prepare a light meal, and clean up after it. In the early evening he would "sit in the back room as the sun sets, as the birds sing outside the window, as night descends on the valley." (D.S. p. 63) As the day draws to a close,

I become surrounded once again by all the silent Tzu's and Fu's (men without office and without obligation). The birds draw closer to their nests. I sit on the cool mat on the floor, considering the bed in which I will presently sleep alone under the icon of the Nativity. Meanwhile the metal cherub of the apocalypse passes over me in the clouds, treasuring its egg and its message. (D.S. p. 63)

## Rain and the Rhinoceros

One of Merton's early and finest hermitage pieces, "Rain and the Rhinoceros," was occasioned by a December, 1964, evening spent listening to the rain. With great literary sensitivity and spiritual insight, Merton develops an essay that is at once a profoundly personal response to nature and a contemplative evaluation of contemporary humanity's alienation from the natural world. Drawing the reader into his world of rain and solitude, Merton then leads one to reflect further on the implications of what one "learns" from the rain.

The theme of "the usefulness of the useless," reflects the influence of Chuang Tzu and Ionesco, both of whom he was studying at the time.

Let me say this before rain becomes a utility that they can plan and distribute for money. By "they" I mean the people who cannot understand that rain is a festival, who do not appreciate its gratuity, who think that what has no price has no value, that what cannot be sold is not real, so that the only way to make something actual is to place it on the market. The time will come when they will sell you even the rain. At the moment it is still free, and I am in it. I celebrate its gratuity and its meaninglessness. (R.U. p. 9)

There are two ways of experiencing and valorizing the rain and by extension nature itself. First, the utilitarian and extrinsic, which judges everything's value in terms of its usefulness to humans as determined by the economic system. Second, the spiritual and intrinsic which respects and celebrates the rain as a reality with a value of its own, an intrinsic value. Similarly, the latter mode of consciousness is rooted in the internal freedom and solitude of the person rather than the former which expresses the collectivist or herd mentality of the individual. Only the free person can appreciate the "freeness" of the rain; only a person in touch with his or her own truth can understand the truth that is proclaimed by the rain.

Merton's contrasting of the solitude and reality of nature with the noise and artificiality of the city is paralleled by his comparison of the spiritually mature person with the shallow member of the herd. The "uselessness" of nature is a

reminder of the ultimate uselessness of the free person. A person's uselessness points to an inner freedom which transcends the restrictive self-definitions created by society. "There is a time for warmth in the collective myth" and the "social womb," says Merton. "But there is also a time to be born."

The rain also reminds us that nature's rhythms are foreign to those of the mechanistic society. Socialization too often means anaesthetization. We become servants to "the greed of machinery that does not sleep, the hum of power that eats up the night." (R.U. p. 10) We learn to live in "a world of mechanical fictions which condemn nature and seek only to use it up, thus preventing it from renewing itself and man." (R.U. p. 11) Merton points here to the mysterious power present in the natural world that can renew the human spirit. Such a power is not present in a machine that devours humans and nature to feed itself and then discards them as waste.

The rain renews and the night renews. When one is a part of the natural world, then its own renewal can be one's own. As Merton notes:

Here I am not alien. The trees I know, the night I know, the rain I know. I close my eyes and instantly sink into the whole rainy world of which I am a part, and the world goes on with me in it, for I am not alien to it.

...One would think that urban man in a rainstorm would have to take account of nature in its wetness and freshness, its baptism and its renewal. But the rain brings no renewal to the city, only to tomorrow's weather, and the glint of windows in tall buildings will then have nothing to do with the new sky. (R.U. pp. 10, 11-12)

The rain also speaks if one is ready to hear. The speech of rain does not try to sell anything or convince us of anything; again, it is free of charge. Rain speaks its own truth which is identical with its own being. There is no duplicity in such language. Rain speaks the language of innocence, and hence of paradise. To really listen to and understand this "virginal myth," a person must break through the collective myth which masks both their and nature's truth:

Now if we take our vulnerable shell to be our true identity, if we think our mask is our true face, we will protect it with fabrications even at the cost of violating our own truth. This seems to be the collective endeavor of society: the more busily men dedicate themselves to it, the more certainly it becomes a collective illusion, until in the end we have the enormous, obsessive, uncontrollable dynamic of fabrications designed to protect mere fictitious identities - "selves," that is to say, regarded as objects. (R.U. p. 15)

To hear our own and the rain's truth, however, requires that we die to the false

self and awaken to our true self. Such an act requires solitude, which too often is confused with "aleness." The collective individual, paradoxically, often feels alone and frequently experiences loneliness even in a crowd. Thus the compulsive need to affirm one's reality by consuming goods or "fun." Solitude, however, brings one into solidarity with one's own self, with nature and with other persons. Only when one has experienced one's own vulnerability and faced the emptiness and "nothingness" that the loss of the collective self involves, is one able to move through and beyond them to a deeper, freer, fuller identification with the common anguish of all human beings. No longer needing to protect and shore-up the isolated self, the contemplative is able to discover the self of all beings, and take on the pain of all beings. (R.U. pp. 17-18)

Merton is saying, then, that the truth preached by nature is the truth of paradise, and that the one who would hear it or speak it, must recover the truth of her or his own being. The very transformation needed to "hear" this truth of nature brings one into closer contact with one's own truth. The wisdom of the woods and the rain stand over against the mechanistic fictions of collective society. Solitude can help to free one from the self programmed by contemporary society to carry on its myth.

## Notes:

1. Merton, Thomas. *Day of a Stranger*. Intro. by Robert E. Daggy. Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc. 1981.
2. Merton, Thomas. *Raids on the Unspeakable*. New York: New Directions, 1966.

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