

Thomas Merton on the Unspeakable

By **Ross Labrie**

In his Prologue to *Raids on the Unspeakable* (1966), Thomas Merton, while acknowledging an author's affection for all of his writings, said of *Raids* that he loved this book "more than the rest."¹ *Raids* is a collection of mostly revised articles that Merton nevertheless regarded as unified and distinct among his writings in both subject matter and point of view. The contents of *Raids*, while ranging from parables to prose poems, were all, like the calligraphic drawings that accompanied them, creative pieces in which the writing was largely given over to metaphor, symbolism and other acts of the imagination. Perhaps Merton's intention for the collection is most revealed in his prefatory insistence that his drawings were not illustrations but instead were semi-abstract pieces that stood in their own right and with their own inner points of reference. Both the forms and contents of the collection may be seen as a homage to creativity itself and as an aid to wisdom, which Merton took to mean the understanding of reality. *Raids on the Unspeakable* attempts to deal with the repetitive, Spenglerian quagmire of history by viewing Christianity in its dynamic encounter with history rather than as a set of abstract formulations of religious belief. Merton's existentialist approach in *Raids* is vividly apparent in his "Letter to an Innocent Bystander" (*RU* 53-62), where he noted that the "true solutions" to life's problems would be those that were provided not by theorization but by "life itself, and nature, and if you will permit me, God above all" (*RU* 61).

As Merton scholar Patrick O'Connell has noted,² the title of the collection is a variant of T. S. Eliot's description of poetry in *Four Quartets* as a "raid on the inarticulate."³ Writing to his publisher, James Laughlin, in October, 1965, Merton indicated that "Raids on the Inarticulate" was to be the title of the book.⁴ In fact, though, he had already in September of 1965 suggested a title change to *Raids on the Unspeakable* without explaining why (*SL* 266). Explained or not, the new title was more passionate and disturbing, even somewhat apocalyptic in contrast to Eliot's phrasing. In fact, Merton balked at the suggestion by fellow poet Cid Corman that *Raids* was too violent, indicating that in this respect Corman had been "too sensitive."⁵ For Merton, the images of violence in *Raids* were not a matter of stylistic animation but rather an acknowledgment of the violence embedded in what he called the social and political climate of the time, a time, as he put it in "The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room" (*RU* 65-75), "of finality and of fulfillment" (*RU* 65). The difference in tone between Merton and Eliot can be seen in an essay on Rafael Alberti in 1966 where Merton characterized the Eliot of the *Four Quartets* as "sober" and "objective,"⁶ generating a cooler atmosphere, clearly, than he had in mind for *Raids on the Unspeakable*. Nonetheless, Eliot's poem is relevant to *Raids on the Unspeakable*. Both Eliot and Merton were concerned about the debasement and unreliability of language – its unspeakableness – especially in the public sphere.

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The focus of the unspeakable in *Raids* is the materialism that Merton, as in “The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room,” associated with modern culture: “We are numbered in billions, and massed together, marshalled, numbered, marched here and there, taxed, drilled, armed, worked to the point of insensibility, dazed by information, drugged by entertainment, surfeited with everything” (RU 70). To Merton the materialism that had overtaken modern culture removed from view the latent possibilities of human existence. In particular it overlooked the crucial solitude that was needed for the self to emerge in the face of intense, collective socialization (RU 71). What compounded this attenuation of human beings was the exclusion of nature as anything but a tool to produce the goods that purported to assuage people’s emotional needs. Nature, as one can see in “Rain and the Rhinoceros” (RU 9-23), provided human beings not only with aesthetic pleasure but pointed to its Creator as the matrix of all life. Without this awareness one was overwhelmed by what Merton called the “*hubris* of affluence” (RU 3). While aware that much of the world was anything but affluent, Merton was also presciently conscious that the affluence of the West was what the rest of the world struggled to acquire. With his attention on what he thought of as the mesmerizing effect of consumer culture, Merton indicated that this particular dehumanization occurred not at the hands of tyrants, but rather inside the appetites and emotional urgings of the majority, a mass culture that Merton wryly described in the preface to *Raids* as one that made “tsars out of mice” (RU 3).

Merton’s sense of the “unspeakable” elements in twentieth-century culture was magnified by his view that secularist consumerism was easily transformed into a kind of idolatry whereby human beings took credit themselves for the immense richness of nature. This is dramatized in “Atlas and the Fatman” (RU 91-107), in which the protagonist’s opponent hubristically assumes that nature is essentially within his control. Merton emphasized that there is a grim truth of sorts embedded in this hubris, i.e., that human beings are capable of destroying that which they had not and could not have created. Such is the eerie power of the Strategic Air Command bomber which Merton describes flying over his monastic hermitage in the depths of the night (RU 14). This chilling image of massive destructiveness is linked to what Merton in *Raids* calls “the void” (RU 4). By the void Merton meant a negation of ultimate values. At first he might seem to be simply appalled at the superficiality of modern, consumerist culture. But then he introduces Adolf Eichmann as an example of the void and suddenly the word becomes terrifying and apocalyptic. While Eichmann is not portrayed as an exponent of consumerist culture, he does represent an analogous attachment to the things of this world – in his case to the value of logistical order.

The depth of Merton’s analysis arises from his perception that the void created by a lack of belief in anything other than the goods of this world is not, as it otherwise might appear, something merely passive and nominal in its effect. Those who are “haunted” by “emptiness,” as Merton puts it in “The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room,” are driven by a kind of *acedia* to escape the void through violence (RU 72). Similarly, Merton observed about the fictional world of Flannery O’Connor that the void is seen to be the source of an explosive violence (RU 4). Thus, paradoxically, the effect of the void, the matrix of the unspeakable, is not spiritual torpor but rather a colossal destructiveness brought about by a “spiritual vacuum” into which violence, like lightning, can and will enter. It does so, Merton added, because of a desire for release from the despair and impotence many feel in response to the void in which they exist.

Employing the sort of unexpected juxtaposition that characterizes Merton's narrative strategy in *Raids*, he introduces the fourteenth-century Sufi mystic, Ibn Abbad, who had observed with a surprisingly relevant consciousness that if those who did not work for a living were involved in every kind of frivolity, those who worked were so absorbed by work that they had no time for anything else (*RU* 147). As for the manipulators of the void, Merton again cited Ibn Abbad to the effect that there are three kinds of "Master": those who esteem "only themselves," those who esteem only "innovations," and those who esteem only "what is established." These latter, the potential bureaucrats, are said to have minds that are "little cells of ice" (*RU* 148), and they are the subject of Merton's essay on Adolf Eichmann (*RU* 45-49). Eichmann had conformed to the rules laid down by others, an obeisance that was historically memorable because it enabled him not to see the horrors he was perpetrating. What makes Merton's portrait of Eichmann so novel and compelling is his focus on Eichmann's ostensible sanity. Such a sanity, which failed to reach the depths of Eichmann's humanity, Merton saw as more dangerous than the actions of the insane because it was more likely to mask the void. It did this by using reason instrumentally instead of as a guide to reality. True sanity, Merton maintained, was able to respond to the needs and sufferings of others. To do otherwise would be to risk the self-deception that went with the role of innocent bystander, a specious innocence in which, in the name of good citizenship, one avoided confrontation with the unspeakable.

People like Eichmann, in Merton's view, lived in a metaphysical myopia, which was itself a cause of the unspeakable. Thus, a major theme in *Raids* is the need to widen one's vision so as not to miss the spiritual reality of oneself and of the world in which one lives, including the natural world. Nature is a major protagonist in *Raids*, a foil to the destructive history of human beings. The escape from myopia depended upon one's ability to reach beyond entrenched ideologies and to see the gift of the world as something that is "neither yours / Nor from yourself, / Something you have on loan; / To see your being in His Being" (*RU* 146). In the evocative prose poem in *Raids*, "The Early Legend" (*RU* 125-38), Merton explores the ontological significance of nature both in terms of its present significance and for its recollection of the value of a pre-historical setting for human beings.

While in the preface to *Raids* Merton was careful to distinguish his approach from that of pantheism, he did depict the primitive worldview as in some ways a wider vision than the modern – the outline "of a new world that has not been discovered and of an old world that has never been known" (*RU* 138). At the same time he did not sentimentalize primitive culture, as can be seen in the way in which in "The Early Legend" primitive peoples, goaded by their religious leaders, are portrayed as killing the strangers who come into their midst so as to consume the novel resources introduced by these strangers. The role of nature in primitive society is thus seen as morally ambiguous. Nonetheless, while aware of this moral ambiguity, Merton attributed to primitive peoples a consciousness of their Creator, a consciousness whose loss in the modern world constricted one's perception of being and led to the void.

In the meditations about nature in *Raids* Merton focused on a contrasting, symbolic pair of protagonists, both from classical Greece – Atlas and Prometheus.⁷ Atlas, located in the Atlas mountains in North Africa, is presented as a personification of nature and a prototype in some ways of how human beings might learn to survive the unspeakable. Atlas, the Titan, overthrown by Zeus and Olympic gods, is given the penalty of holding up the world and does so in a way that Merton

considers instructive. There is, for example, the paradox that Atlas “watches” providentially over the world “in his sleep” (*RU* 120). As the sleep image suggests, Atlas’s sustaining of life is as instinctual as it is rational, just as his effect on the world is as immense as it is hidden from view. So, Merton suggests, is the immense order and richness of nature taken for granted by those who see it merely as an opportunity for exploitation. Merton’s sympathetic portrait of Atlas spans two narrative essays (“Atlas and the Fatman” and “Martin’s Predicament, or Atlas Watches Every Evening” [*RU* 111-21]) and shares part of the imagery of a third, “The Early Legend.” In that essay the African mountain and sea imagery associated with Atlas merges with that of fertility gods in general, whose repeated, seasonal dying contrasts implicitly in Merton’s view of things with the singular but everlasting death of Christ (*RU* 127). Merton’s Atlas is also continuous in meaning, though, with the Edenic myth of the Judeo-Christian texts. Merton does not mean to conflate nature and Christianity but rather to enlarge the reader’s vision by raising the cycle of death and renewal from the plane of the natural to the supernatural.

Polarized with Atlas is the figure of Prometheus, or rather two figures of Prometheus, one of which is consonant with that of Atlas, the other opposed. Merton was struck by the fact that in the West it is Hesiod’s Prometheus who is best known and with whom the humanists of the Renaissance, the progenitors of modern thought and culture, identified. This Prometheus was chosen as the symbol of resistance to the gods and to nature, in short to the enemy from without that needed to be resisted and if possible conquered. As Merton frequently identified himself as a Christian humanist, it can be said that it was not the affirmation of humanity at which he balked but rather the quite unnecessary antagonism against both nature and the Creator of nature that he felt had historically shaped modern culture. Thus, he points to the Prometheus of Hesiod as like Cain while the Prometheus of Aeschylus resembles Christ on the cross (*RU* 83).⁸ Earth, or Atlas, hears the sufferings of Aeschylus’ Prometheus and Zeus relents. Prometheus and Zeus will be reconciled, and the victory will be both for Prometheus and for “Earth” or nature, i.e., that nature which had been created to accommodate human beings (*RU* 82). In one of the most striking utterances in *Raids*, Merton observes in connection with both Prometheus protagonists that there is nothing human beings can steal from God because before they can think of stealing it, it “has already been given” (*RU* 88).

The linking of the Atlas and Prometheus myths with modern culture is typical of the brave, imaginative touches that characterize *Raids*. In “The Early Legend,” for example, with its evocation of early human culture, Merton observes that the “painted quail” on the palace wall is “sacred” whereas the “live quail is neither sacred nor secular” (*RU* 131). The live quail is neither sacred nor secular because such language imposes upon reality and nature in particular a false dichotomy in which the sacred trumps the secular. The God of life, including nature, Merton presents as transcending such divisions and as the source of a fathomless and unified mystery of being. This God is identified by Merton as the “Nameless” one who “sleeps in the sacred meadow” (*RU* 131) but who is found to be neither sacred nor secular. The nameless one resembles the figure of the stranger whose identity awaits the attention of human beings in the present age as it had in the past. Throughout *Raids* some of the weightiest meanings arise not from authorial comment but rather from the bed of narrative action. In asserting himself against nature and the Creator, for example, the Fatman, moved by intuition, places his feet in the water and suddenly begins to grow. Subsequently, the reader is advised that in an arid period when no rain fell the Fatman had shrunk to the size of an infant. All of this occurs

without a moment of recognition on the part of the Fatman, who symbolizes the self-sufficient stance of modern culture in the face of a sustaining creation that keeps it and humanity itself in existence.

The creativity of *Raids* can also be seen in its bristling paradoxes. In “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” for example, there is Merton’s seemingly fanciful claim that alone in the woods at night and in the rain he is among an earthly minority who have kept the world from ending. This paradox, apparently laced with hyperbole, is based on the quite serious belief that only those who care for nature and whose concern induces caution in others will prevent the planet from being unspeakably destroyed by rapaciousness. What will stem such an outcome is a consciousness of a wider world. Such an enlarged vision is the beginning of what Merton in “The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room” calls a “new creation,” a step beyond the confines of what would generally be called the actual. This development would not involve a movement towards the future but rather a transformation in the way in which one perceived the present (*RU* 75). Such a transformation toward the fullness of reality depended not primarily on cautionary advice but, paradoxically, on a greater use of the imagination and of one’s creative powers. Merton’s point is not that aesthetics is more important than morality but that imagination and creativity will bring about an enlarged view of the human situation in its creational context and thus further human survival.

Examples of such serendipitous creativity are to be found virtually everywhere in *Raids*. Indeed, the theme of the cosmic dimension of creativity echoes throughout the book. Creativity is seen to be the *métier* of the gods and of the Judeo-Christian God in particular. In “The Early Legend” God is described as one who “plays” among his children (*RU* 133). The creativity of God is especially visible in the crucifixion of Christ, which is described as an imaginative and responsive action by the divine. Similarly, Merton notes in a review of the fiction of Julien Green in *Raids* that the crucifixion, particularly in its extraordinary generosity, surpassed what reason and justice might have expected (*RU* 31-33). In addition to the originality and expanded perception of reality that accompanied creativity, Merton believed, the creative mind avoided the stiffening inherent in the combative need of reason to take positions and to defend itself.

In the epigraph to “The Early Legend” (*RU* 125), which is taken from Plato’s *Laws*, Plato credits the mind at play with expanding the horizons of thought and feeling so that war, the sign of an arrested state of mind, is avoided. Merton takes the history of human culture with its unceasing conflicts as another example of the void, but points out that the void itself, when submitted to God, becomes an “abyss of creativity” (*RU* 71). In *Raids* God is invoked as the creative fount of life and not simply the orderer of life. In “The Early Legend,” for example, the reader is advised to remember that life is a forgotten game and that human beings are the issue of an “unutterable fable” (*RU* 125). Echoing the thought of the Russian religious writer, Nicholas Berdyaev, who is referred to repeatedly in the preface to *Raids* (*RU* 2, 3, 5-6), Merton concluded, paradoxically, that the imagination fed the flow of innate, intuitive understanding and in this way helped to lead to an understanding of ultimate reality. Lest this be regarded as ingenuous, it can be noted that recent anthropological work has suggested that play may well have drawn human beings in the past into novel forms of behavior that enhanced survival and that gave rise to significant developments in culture.⁹ Thus, Wordsworth’s famous declaration that the child was father of the man¹⁰ might well have an empirical basis.

Based upon his own experience as a creative writer, Merton observed that fresh glimpses of reality produced by creative acts would generally not be realized until the creator looked back at

his or her creation. The reason, Merton declared, is that creativity characteristically includes the full resources of the maker, including the subconscious. Moreover, Merton came to emphasize the importance of immediacy and intuitiveness in connection with creativity, a feature of his thinking that is noticeably Romantic. In his "Message to Poets" (*RU* 155-61), for example, he described the poet's creativity in Heraclitean terms as born out of the "truth" present in a particular moment. This truth would be available to "naked minds only," by which Merton meant those minds that had been freed from the harness of collective ideas and sentiments (*RU* 161).

Although in the "Message to Poets," "Answers on Art and Freedom" (*RU* 165-75), and "Signatures: Notes on the Author's Drawings" (*RU* 179-82), Merton addressed himself specifically to poets and artists, he regarded creativity as within the reach of all, and described poetry, for example, as the "flowering of ordinary possibilities" and the register of "ordinary and natural choice" (*RU* 159). Typically in *Raids* Merton does not associate creativity with an elite sensibility but rather with a way of seeing that is available to all, a conscious step in which through contemplation especially one begins to elude the thinking of an all-too-familiar public discourse. As he indicated in his "Message to Poets," Merton regarded such hackneyed public discourse as a version of the unspeakable because of its manipulative purposes, whether of the "businessman, the propagandist" or "the politician" (*RU* 159). In this context Merton called attention to such use of language as a deliberate seeking of unintelligibility so as to cloud the mind and appeal clandestinely to the will and to desire.

Merton deals symbolically with this phenomenon in "Atlas and the Fatman." There, the Fatman is said to promulgate another word for love and another word for death. Thus, those who use language manipulatively attempt to transform human experience in its most powerful states by having language cleverly crowd out one's real experiences of love and death through fantasy and escapism. This is yet another example of what Merton meant by the void. In *Four Quartets*, which had provided part of the title in *Raids*, Eliot lamented the imprecision and the steady decay of language as well as the general decline in intellectual standards. Merton, however, was more concerned with the shallow and misleading use of language by corrupt political and social institutions.

By way of contrast, in "Rain and the Rhinoceros" Merton was struck by the ostensibly unintelligible language of rain as a mysterious rhetoric that poured down meaning without attempting to persuade. In this sense, while Merton does not call attention to the fact, nature is presented as a positively seen version of the unspeakable and of the void – a vast reservoir of latent, hidden meaning. While the language of collective discourse plays on the emotional vulnerability of those who hear it, the rain moves the listener towards the present, thereby freeing him or her from recurring anxieties about the future and from guilty and unsatisfied feelings about the past. Moreover, in the rain there emerges a parallel world in which the whistling of quail directs one's attention outward towards the fuller reality that surrounds the listener. In an analogous way, through the artist, Merton suggested, readers or viewers are led to become "children of the Unknown" and "ministers of silence" (*RU* 160). Such states of mind, evading the social persuaders, lead ultimately to a silence where nothing can or need be said. In this matter Merton scholar Lynn Szabo has insightfully drawn attention to the complexity of Merton's view of language, which she perceives as having the power to "delimit" and to "transcend" both "time" and "meaning."¹¹ As language optimally hangs poised between utterance and silence, human beings are led to recall that they are the children of an "unspeakable father" (*RU* 126).

In this regard, throughout *Raids* one confronts the paradox of a speech that communicates without language. In “Atlas and the Fatman,” for example, Atlas is said to keep the continents from drifting apart without the use of words. In “The Early Legend” the complexity of nature is captured in the swirl of fire and water and in the voiceless lightning symbolizing the massive, creative intelligence that governs the natural processes both in the present and in the evolutionary past. Embedded in narrative, Merton’s atavistic symbols draw the reader to feel a necessary alienation from one’s cultural assumptions. In the journey towards a new, because forgotten, perspective, language, especially that dominating public discourse, will prove to be as much a hindrance as a help. Therefore, in some ways it must be resisted in order to be refashioned. To accomplish this, Merton makes clear, the first step is a return to silence and to a void stripped of preordained associations.

The distinguishing mark of the artist, in Merton’s view, is innocence, which he felt joined the monk’s and the artist’s vocations. Innocence was particularly crucial, Merton maintained, in enabling the artist and the intellectual to elude the web of collective thought. Paradoxically, the innocence of the artist for Merton was not solely a moral quality but rather a cognitive one as well, by which the artist was called to avoid the usual pitfalls of conventional thought, especially those associated with what he called calculation. By calculation Merton meant a technique for forming one’s attitudes and policies based on established opinion and knowledge. He illustrated this in “Signatures: Notes on the Author’s Drawings” at the end of *Raids*, in which he distinguished his free-form, calligraphic drawings from more conventional images that depicted a clearly set-out content. Merton claimed that the drawings allowed the mind to be attentive to the figures and thereby to escape, however temporarily, the hypnotic echo of repeated words and attitudes.

In this way the mind could approach being and experience freshly, freed from the baggage of collective and artificial assumptions. Although Merton’s approach to the subject of *being* derived from an ancient, monastic spirituality, it can be said that his approach, philosophically, bore some resemblance to the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and Paul Tillich. Merton was aware of the writing of both Tillich and Heidegger in the 1960s and shared their distaste for the either/or impasse erected by both idealism and empiricism.¹² For Merton an innocent or un-programmed response to the world was a remarkable, childlike gift that could easily be lost. He differentiated the artist’s innocence from a programmed view of the world by calling attention to the diminution in one’s view of human beings that occurred when they are seen, for example, primarily as ciphers in an economic system. In this case, he suggested, one acquired the view that human beings are primarily to be regarded and treated as “objects for sale” (*RU* 157). While Merton drew attention to the cognitive aspects of the artist’s innocence, he noted the moral benefits to society brought by the artist. Thus, in his “Letter to an Innocent Bystander” he compared the artist to the child in the fairy tale who cried out the truth that the emperor was wearing no clothes. The child, Merton added, revealed society’s blindness and vanity and thereby might well have saved society from an even graver fate than embarrassment.

Like the artist, the intellectual had a distinct role to play in resisting the unspeakable. For Merton the intellectual’s role was to stand between the power brokers with their manipulative vocabulary and the ordinary people who are herded about by them. The intellectual must therefore as well have a kind of innocence but also a need for a more active engagement than the artist with those controlling society. They are to recognize the schemes of the powerful ones, Merton pointed out, even

without, as yet, becoming aware of the police who backed them up. The great peril for intellectuals, Merton suggested, was the despairing feeling that they were not strong enough to challenge the oppression that surrounded them and the void from which this oppression sprang. Here, Merton's outlook is close to that of Czeslaw Milosz with whom he corresponded in the 1960s.¹³ In particular, one is reminded of Milosz's theme in *The Captive Mind* (1953) that intellectuals, immobilized by a feeling of powerlessness, like to belong to one powerful side or the other in political contexts. This gives rise to an inertia, Merton warned, that should not be confused with patience. As with the artist, the intellectual was summoned, Merton suggested, to reflect not only on the different groups that constituted society but on the wholeness of the human beings who made up society, a wholeness that would inevitably be overlooked by those in power.

In "Answers on Art and Freedom" Merton set about linking a few of the major themes that he had pursued in *Raids*. He made it clear that the innocence of the artist and of the intellectual would inevitably threaten their freedom, a freedom that, as in the case of persecuted African Americans, for example, had naturally expressed itself through a distinctive creativity. In connection with the artist Merton focused especially on the artist's freedom of conscience as a foundation for independent work. Such freedom was, Merton insisted, ultimately religious. By this he referred not to organized religion as such but rather to an ingrained spiritual perception that directed the mind toward its creational history, context, and possibilities. Merton balked at the threat posed to artists and intellectuals by theory and ideology and insisted that the artist must not be doctrinaire, particularly about the role of art itself. For this reason he was wary of formalism and external theories that divided the artist from his or her work, arguing that the artist could not be expected to be free in art if he or she was a slave in daily life. This was a remarkable view in the 1960s while the New Criticism was still in the ascendant.

In addition to Merton's apprehension about the pressures on the artist to conform to the prevailing values and attitudes of one's culture there is the further limitation on freedom posed by language itself. This was because language subliminally conveyed to all who used it centuries of ingrained, semantic attitudes. In this connection Malgorzata Poks has helpfully called attention to Merton's reading of Barthes and Heidegger in the 1960s.¹⁴ While one hesitates to picture Merton throwing up his hands at the gulf between language and meaning, he understood the difficulty faced by the artist caught in the web of institutional language. Such was the theme of Merton's poetry collection *Cables to the Ace* (1968).¹⁵ Similarly, Merton affirmed the logic of the artist, Andy Warhol, for example, who, inundated with a distractingly artificial public discourse about the relationship between art and society, produced a "meticulously accurate" picture of a beer can (*RU 170*).

The problem, in Merton's opinion, was not the unreality of meaning but rather the obstacles to acquiring meaning. Language was unspeakable from having been warped by those who dominated the public and especially the institutional sphere and who impregnated language with self-serving and dehumanizing social and political attitudes. Merton saw his goal as the reconstructing of language but only in balance with silence. This silence would encompass the many worlds that conventional speech had overlooked. In addition to silence and the contemplative realities it could reveal, Merton invoked the imagination, the source of human creativity, to revitalize language by playing with it. Merton was fond of such playfulness with language as can be seen in his correspondence with his friend, the poet Robert Lax.¹⁶ Merton's creativity can be seen not only in his shaking up of conven-

tional language but in the hybridized structuring of many of the pieces in *Raids*, as can readily be seen in the opening narrative-essay, “Rain and the Rhinoceros.”

“Rain and the Rhinoceros” begins with a moment of experience as Merton, the narrator, sits in his hermitage in the woods. There he becomes aware of the rain falling around him, a familiar and easily overlooked experience. He then gathers himself into the natural, creational context underlying the rain’s and his own existence. Awed by the immense gift of being, he notices the advertising material on his Coleman lamp, and then considers the culture from which it was taken, noting his own monastic separateness from that culture. Reflecting on his simple life, he recalls the great contemplative, Philoxenos, and then, unpredictably, the great dramatist of the absurd in the twentieth century, Eugene Ionesco. Suspended within the rain and in his forested setting, Merton begins “Rain and the Rhinoceros” from the bottom up as it were, proceeding from his engaged senses and reversing the tendency of many essayists and of highly organized societies, especially those governed by powerful ideologies, to proceed from the top down.

He fills in the developing picture not only with words but with images and sounds that by their very vividness convey a fundamental pleasure whose value would be judged conventionally, Merton believed, to be trivial if not negligible in the so-called larger scheme of things. This experience of value sets at bay the common assumption that human beings have to take ownership of nature by wresting it from its creational context. In doing this, Merton argued, they could be easily lured into the unspeakable by failing to see being as a supernal gift whose immensity and richness, which far exceeded its felt limitations, they could never hope to duplicate. Creativity, beginning with divine creativity, Merton viewed as a way of eluding the meretriciousness and institutional manipulation that were the banners of the unspeakable. Moreover, the creative, inter-generic shape of “Rain and the Rhinoceros” and of a number of the other pieces in *Raids* illustrated the narrative, mythic, symbolic and poetic contexts in which Merton wanted his ideas to emerge and to develop. Because of this approach the essays convey an attractive experiential authority and reinforce Merton’s view in the 1960s that art had surpassed the theology of the day in its ability to convey the spiritual dimensions of being.¹⁷

1. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 2; subsequent references will be cited as “RU” parenthetically in the text.
2. Patrick F. O’Connell, “*Raids on the Unspeakable*,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 379.
3. T. S. Eliot, “East Coker,” V.8, *The Complete Poems and Plays – 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962) 128.
4. Thomas Merton and James Laughlin, *Selected Letters*, ed. David D. Cooper (New York: Norton, 1997) 269; subsequent references will be cited as “SL” parenthetically in the text.
5. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 134.
6. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 314; subsequent references will be cited as “LE” parenthetically in the text.
7. The essays “Atlas and the Fatman” and “Prometheus: A Meditation” (RU 79-88), as well as “Letter to an Innocent Bystander,” had appeared previously in Thomas Merton, *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961).
8. Merton’s discussion of Aeschylus’ Prometheus does not appear in the initial hand-press limited edition published by Victor Hammer: Thomas Merton, *Prometheus: A Meditation* (Lexington, KY: King Library Press, 1958); it was added as part of the new prefatory note included in *The Behavior of Titans* and in *Raids*.

9. See Michele Pridmore-Brown, "Surges," *Times Literary Supplement* (1 Oct. 2010) 3, and Melvin Konner, *The Evolution of Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) *passim*.
10. William Wordsworth, "My heart leaps up," l. 7, in *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, ed. Paul D. Sheats (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982) 277.
11. Lynn Szabo, *Thomas Merton: A Man for Our Times* (Vancouver, BC: Thomas Merton Society of Canada, 2010) 2.
12. See Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 54, 115. Tillich's influence can be seen in Merton's essay, "Theology of Creativity" (LE 355-70; originally published in *The American Benedictine Review* 11 [September 1960] 197-213).
13. Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz, *Striving towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, ed. Robert Faggen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997).
14. Malgorzata Poks, "The Geography of Lograire as Merton's *Gestus* – Prolegomena," *The Merton Annual* 22 (2009) 156.
15. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968).
16. Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax*, ed. Arthur W. Biddle (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001).
17. See Thomas Merton, "Faulkner Meditations: *The Wild Palms*" (LE 520-21).

Raids on the Unspeakable, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander. GOOD: *A Man in the Divided Sea, No Man Is An Island, *The Strange Islands, The New Man, Disputed Questions, Mystics and Zen Masters.Â Thomas Merton is not always an easy writer to get into. His most famous book, The Seven Storey Mountain, which many people pick up first, is an uneven work. Thomas Merton (1915-1968) entered the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, following his conversion to Catholicism and was ordained in 1949. During the 1960s, he was increasingly drawn into a dialogue between Eastern and Western religions and was actively engaged with domestic issues of war and racism.Â I prefer the Merton of The Inner Experience, but for any Merton fan Raids on the Unspeakable shouldn't be overlooked. Read more. Helpful. Thomas Merton, Sermon on The Feast of the Immaculate Conception, 12/8/62, audio recording. There is an unfading relevance to the words written nearly 60 year ago by the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton. Many of us are rereading his books and essays with bewilderment, assuming they must have been written in and for this very time. Alas, we know that this beloved monk, said to be one of the most influential spiritual writers of the twentieth century, rests in that place of mystery beyond death while his body lies underground at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky.