

Thomas Merton on Adolf Eichmann

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"Your world is full of me, I am all over the place, I am legion."

Born in Solingen, Germany, on March 19th, 1906, Adolf Eichmann, the son of an accountant and someone who grew up in a pious Protestant family, was married with four sons. Known by fellow-Nazis as "the Jewish specialist," he was a German nationalist, an ambitious party member, and "the face of Nazi murder".² In the English historian David Cesarani's recent comprehensive biography, Eichmann is the consummate manager who organizes genocide "in the way that the director of a multi-national corporation manages production and distribution of product; calibrating the supply of raw material to the capacity of plant, monitoring output and quality controls and assuring prompt delivery".³ He ensures that the trains destined for the death camps run on time.

Adolf Eichmann was that individual German mandated by Nazi authorities to arrange the logistics for the extermination of large numbers of Jews as if they were threatening germs or disease-carrying rats. Analogies to germs and rats, or more broadly vermin, were commonplace in Nazi parlance. For Thomas Merton, Eichmann is also a universal figure of the modern age, a man behind a desk who signs papers and issues directives without moral consideration of what he is signing

or issuing. For Merton, Eichmann lives anywhere in any time. He is as common in Washington and Tel Aviv as he is in Beijing and Berlin.

He thrives where institution and bureaucracy, nation and nationality, power and obedience supersede individual freedom and human need. He gains ascendancy whenever charts and numbers trump human feelings, and abstract theories are considered more important than individual lives. As Merton himself says,



Eichmann on trial in Jerusalem in 1961

speaking in the voice of Eichmann in *Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander*, "Your world is full of me, I am all over the place, I am legion".⁴ The social philosopher Hannah Arendt in her studies of Eichmann stresses his banality. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton in his studies of Eichmann stresses his universality.

Merton simultaneously sees Eichmann as a mass-murderer, an individual responsible for the planning of the destruction of millions of people, and as a representative figure of his time, and ours. He is the efficient problem-solver and the sycophantic servant of the state known for his "blind obedience," even "corpse-like obedience".⁵ The strength of Thomas Merton's response to Eichmann lies in his seeing him as more than a well-groomed, well-tailored Nazi who reads Hebrew and speaks a little Yiddish. For Merton, Eichmann embodies the technological mind-set whereby life's complexities are problems to be solved and mechanical efficiency is the highest form of morality.

When given the task of solving "the Jewish problem," Eichmann supports Zionism and encourages large-scale Jewish emigration to Palestine. He soon realizes that too few members of European Jewry are interested in going. Likewise, he fails in his plans of evacuating Jews to Madagascar and in his proposal for the establishment of a Jewish territory in the Nisko region of Poland.⁶ He then turns to a more efficient method of ridding Europe of Jews: mass murder by gas. Eichmann is a rational man without feeling or compassion and without guilt or anxiety.

Thomas Merton directly addresses the question of Adolf Eichmann on four occasions. He writes an essay on Adolf

Eichmann in 1964 called "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann," which is published in *Raids on the Unspeakable*. The essay subsequently appears in William H. Shannon's gathering of Merton's social essays called *Passion for Peace*. Merton makes notes on Eichmann in his journal *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* in 1965. In two other works centred on Eichmann, Merton doesn't so much write about Eichmann as he inhabits him for ironic and satiric purposes. Merton's "Chant to be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces" and his "Epitaph for a Public Servant" chillingly replicate Eichmann's voice and world view. Both works are Swiftian performance pieces, as is made clear in Michael W. Higgins's *Heretic Blood*.⁷ "Epitaph" is originally written for *Ramparts* in 1967 and posthumously included in *The Collected Poems*. "Chant" is first published for Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *Journal for the Protection of All Beings* in 1961 along with contributions by Albert Camus, Norman Mailer and Bertrand Russell. It is subsequently reprinted in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* and *The Collected Poems*.

In the construction of his chant in 1961, which he sometimes refers to as "the Auschwitz poem," Merton applies his reading of William L. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* to an artistic purpose. As Michael Mott documents in his biography of Merton, included in Shirer's book are letters "from German manufacturers of lethal gas and crematorium equipment to the camp authorities".⁸ Merton takes information from the letters to construct an extended "found-poem".

In *Chant*, Merton's narrator speaks in

Eichmann's manner of thought and language. In content, the prose poem links to Merton's *Devout Meditation*. In style, it bears closer resemblance to "Original Child Bomb" about the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, another of Merton's Swiftian performance pieces. *Chant*, written as a largely unpunctuated rant and verbal projectile, clips along at a furious pace. In a September 5, 1965 letter to Cid Corman, Merton characterizes his satire as "a sort of mosaic of Eichmann's own double-talk about himself".⁹

How we made them sleep and purified them

How we perfectly cleaned up the people and worked a big heater

I was the commander I made improvements and installed a guaranteed

system taking account of human weakness I purified and I remained decent

*How I commanded*¹⁰

The title of the prose poem "Chant to be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces" combines monastic words ("chant," "procession") with more clinical terms such as the passive voice "to be used," the abstract noun "Site" and the comparatively modern term "furnaces". Throughout the Swiftian satire, filled with the unconscious irony of a speaker who has no idea that the very words he boasts of ("I commanded," "I improved") condemn him, Merton has Eichmann hang himself by his own diction.

The "I" of the monologue mixes old

words with new words and simple words with technical words. The relatively formal words "installed," "guaranteed," and "system" sit near the ludicrously moronic diction, "a big heater". Eichmann reveals himself to be at once ethically vacuous and technically sophisticated. He sounds like an American astronaut with his mixture of baby talk and technical jargon. He has no images in his prose, no metaphors, no emotion; his is the prose of statement and euphemism; the prose of clinical and detached discourse.

Whatever the problem, the speaker surmounts it. Whatever the demands of cost, he finds cheaper ways to effect mass destruction. He makes soap from gassed bodies.

How I commanded and made soap 12lbs fat 10 quarts water 8 oz to a lb of caustic soda but it was hard to find any fat

He transports corpses, which he euphemistically refers to as "customers," cheaply.

For transporting the customers we suggest using light carts on wheels a drawing is submitted

He knows precise numbers.

I am a big commander operating on a cylinder I elevate the purified materials boil for 2 to 3 hours and then cool

He conducts the right tests.

*For putting them into a test fragrance I suggested an express elevator operated by the latest cylinder it was guaranteed*¹¹

Eichmann dramatizes the Nazi penchant for euphemism. As Hannah Arendt recalls, words such as “killing” or “extermination” are never used in Nazi correspondence or directives.¹² The word for murder is replaced by the phrase “to grant a mercy death”; gas rooms are disguised as showers and bathrooms; the gassing centres at Auschwitz and other death camps are called “Charitable Foundations for Institutional Care.”¹³ In his essay “Auschwitz: A Family Camp,” Merton notes that “Officialese has a talent for discussing reality while denying it...”.¹⁴ Central to the officialese of Auschwitz is “a pathological joy in death”. Merton asserts that “All of it is the celebration of boredom, of routine, of deadness, of organized futility”.¹⁵

Officialese predates and postdates Eichmann. In one of his last essays, written in 1968, “War and the Crisis of Language,” Merton points to the “pompous and sinister jargon of the war mandarins in government offices and military think-tanks” where “a whole community of intellectuals, scholars...spend their time playing out ‘scenarios’ and considering ‘acceptable levels’ in megadeaths.” According to Merton their “language and their thought are as esoteric, as self-enclosed, as tautologous as the advertisement...they are scientifically antiseptic, business-like, uncontaminated with sentimental concern for life—other than their own. It is the same basic narcissism, but in a masculine, that is managerial, mode”.¹⁶ Eichmann for Merton enfleshes masculine narcissism in the managerial mode.

In language as powerful as Orwell’s in “Politics and the English Language,” Merton in “War and the Crisis of Lan-

guage” speaks of “the illness of political language.” Political language is “characterized everywhere by the same sort of double-talk, tautology, ambiguous cliché, self-righteous and doctrinaire pomposity, and pseudoscientific jargon that mask a total callousness and moral insensitivity, indeed a basic contempt for man”.¹⁷ Eichmann’s language is the managerial norm in imperial political systems. Such language is, for example, the voice of officialdom in the United States from Erlichman and Haldeman in the Nixon White House to Cheney and Rumsfeld in the Bush White House.

In 1963, Merton reads Hannah Arendt’s *New Yorker* magazine coverage of the Eichmann trial. Arendt’s articles are subsequently published as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Arendt concludes that “The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal”.¹⁸ In a July 24, 1963 letter to the Jewish scholar, Gershom Scholem, Arendt moves away from an earlier position on Eichmann as an embodiment of “radical evil” and asserts her new position that Eichmann’s evil “possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension” and is best characterized by the adjective “banal.” Only the good, she argues, has depth and can be radical.¹⁹ Inspired by his close reading of Arendt in the *New Yorker*, Merton writes his “A Devout Meditation In Memory of Adolf Eichmann” in 1964. The title is of course meant ironically in the way that Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” is meant ironically. Merton’s meditation is no more devout than Swift’s proposal is modest. “One of

the most disturbing facts,” Merton notes, “that came out in the Eichmann trial was that a psychiatrist examined him and pronounced him *perfectly sane*”.²⁰ In fact, according to Hannah Arendt, “half a dozen psychiatrists had certified him as ‘normal’”.²¹ Far from being some inhuman monster, Eichmann appears all too human. Merton implies that had Eichmann been pronounced insane his organizational assistance in the destruction of six million Jews would have been easier to fathom.

Merton’s analysis of Eichmann in his “Devout Meditation” connects in sentiment, though not in form, to Leonard Cohen’s 1964 “All There Is To Know About Adolf Eichmann” in *Flowers to Hitler*.

EYES: Medium

HAIR: Medium

WEIGHT: Medium

HEIGHT: Medium

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES:

None

NUMBER OF FINGERS: Ten

NUMBER OF TOES: Ten

INTELLIGENCE: Medium²²

Like Cohen, Merton emphasizes Eichmann’s normality. He also investigates his troubling sanity:

We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people. We are relying on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism, madness, destruction. And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the

sane ones who are the most dangerous.²³

In his “devout” meditation, Merton moves from the particular to the general, from the individual Eichmann to the universal Eichmann:

It is the sane ones, the well-adapted ones, who can without qualms and without nausea aim the missiles and press the buttons that will initiate the great festival of destruction that they, *the sane ones*, have prepared...No one suspects the sane, and the sane ones will have *perfectly*

Merton implies that had Eichmann been pronounced insane his organizational assistance in the destruction of six million Jews would have been easier to fathom

good reasons, logical, well-adapted reasons, for firing the shot. They will be obeying sane orders that have come sanely down the chain of command...²⁴

Merton questions the value of sanity disconnected from love. He asks what sanity means when it “excludes love, considers it irrelevant, and destroys our capacity to love other human beings, to respond to their needs and their suffering, to recognize them also as persons, to apprehend their pain as one’s own.”²⁵

He concludes his meditation-essay by acknowledging Eichmann as not just one person in history but as a recurrent character-type in history:

No, Eichmann was sane. The generals and fighters on both sides, in World War II, the ones who carried out the total destruction of entire cities, these were the sane ones. The ones who have invented and developed atomic bombs, thermonuclear bombs, missiles, who have planned the strategy of the next war; who have evaluated the various possibilities of using bacterial and chemical agents: these are not the crazy people, they are the *sane* people...²⁶

Merton's very last sentence, in a paradox worthy of Swift or Orwell, reads: "... in a society like ours the worst insanity is to be totally without anxiety, totally 'sane'".²⁷

In 1967, Merton returns to Eichmann, this time using Swift and Arendt to maximum effect. He deploys the Swiftian technique of becoming the other, of taking on the voice and manner of the enemy for the purpose of mockery and subversion. As Edward Said says in his essay "Swift as Intellectual," Swift's technique "is to become the thing he attacks, which is normally not a message or a political doctrine but a style or a manner of discourse."²⁸ The speaker in Merton's "Epitaph for a Public Servant," *In memoriam--Adolf Eichmann*, parodies Eichmann's speech patterns. The dramatic monologue, or word-collage, has interesting points of convergence with Denise Levertov's "During the Eichmann Trial" published in *Jacob's Ladder* in 1961. Both Levertov and Merton extensively draw details from Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem in cobbling mosaics of self-

deception and blind obedience. Pointedly, Levertov's poem reaches a similar conclusion to Merton's on Eichmann's universality:

he, you, I, which shall I say?
He stands
isolate in a bulletproof
witness-stand of glass,
a cage, where we may view
ourselves, an apparition
telling us something he
does not know: we are members
one of another.²⁹

Merton's "Epitaph," in particular, is one of the most brilliant and successful subversions of Eichmann's language and personality in literature. As in his earlier "Devout Meditation," Merton emphasizes Eichmann's sanity in his "Epitaph." The speaker, the voice of Eichmann, tells the reader that his relations with his fa-

Every day new Eichmanns sign papers that result in the murder of human beings

ther, mother, brother and sister are "most normal/Most desirable". His Christian education is "Without rancor/Without any reason/For hating". He follows orders; he subordinates himself to "The Leader". He, being a grown-up, thinks "Repentance is/For little children". He is, after all, "A man with positive/Ideas/with no ill will/Toward any Jew".³⁰

Merton in his "Epigraph" has Eichmann say, "Official orders/Were my

only language".³¹ The words echo Arendt's quotation from Eichmann that "Officialese is my only language".³² Arendt adds that "the longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that this inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else".³³ He was also "a non-reader except for newspapers".³⁴ His banality consisted of "empty talk" and "stock phrases"; he was "genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché"; he was, in short, not stupid but vacuous.³⁵

Hannah Arendt speaks of Eichmann in the past tense. Thomas Merton speaks of him in the present tense. For Merton, Eichmann lives. He is legion. He is found in every corner of the technological world. Every day new Eichmanns sign papers and issue directives that result in the murder of human beings. When an administration, as in the United States, increases its defense budget by billions and reduces its Medicare budget by millions, the direct consequence is that poor people who happen to be sick die. As Merton prophetically chants in the voice of Eichmann: "Do not think yourself better because you burn up friends and enemies with long-range missiles without ever seeing what you have done."³⁶ Similarly, do not think yourself better because you sign a paper in an air-conditioned room without ever witnessing the dying face of a sick person without money to pay for an expensive operation. By ovens, or missiles, or neglect, there are many ways to murder human beings, and there are many Eichmanns in all parts of the world who are willing to commit the murders.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 290. Subsequently referenced as CGB.
2. David Cesarani, *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes* (London: William Heinemann, 2004), p. 1. Subsequently referenced as *Life and Crimes*.
3. Cesarani, p. 157.
4. CGB, p. 290.
5. CGB, p. 287.
6. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. 33. Subsequently referenced as Jerusalem.
7. Michael W. Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998), p. 164 and p. 168.
8. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), p. 364.
9. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, edited and introduced by William H. Shannon (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), p. 199. Subsequently referenced as PP.
10. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1997), p. 345. Subsequently referenced as CP.
11. CP, 348.
12. *Jerusalem*, p. 85.
13. *Jerusalem*, p. 106.
14. PP, p. 282.
15. PP, p. 282.
16. PP, 307.
17. PP, 313.
18. *Jerusalem*, p. 276.
19. Hannah Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, edited with an introduction by Peter Baehr (New York: The Viking

Portable Library, 2000), p. 396. Subsequently referenced as *Portable Arendt*.

20. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Un-speakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 45. Subsequently referenced as Raids.

21. *Jerusalem*, p. 25.

22. Leonard Cohen, *Selected Poems 1956-1968* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1969), p. 122.

23. *Raids*, p. 46.

24. *Raids*, p. 46 and p. 47.

25. *Raids*, p. 47.

26. *Raids*, p. 48.

27. *Raids*, p. 49.

28. Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1983), p. 85.

29. *Holocaust Poetry*, compiled and introduced by Hilda Schiff (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995), p. 166.

30. *CP*, pages 703, 704, 705 and p. 710.

31. *CP*, p. 706.

32. *Jerusalem*, p. 48.

33. *Jerusalem*, p. 49.

34. *Jerusalem*, p. 41.

35. *Portable Arendt*, Introduction, xxvi.

36. *CP*, p. 349.

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