

Simulacra, Deconstruction and Merton's Post-WWII Aesthetic

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I. Introduction: brief survey of the field

The Second World War provides a convenient demarcation line between two epistemologies. It marks the demise of the modernist 'metanarrative' of technological progress and optimistic belief in the unlimited capacity of human reason. Events like the Final Solution revealed in a devastating fashion the abysmal space of the irrational and the barbaric in the supposedly 'civilized' and 'enlightened' lives of modern humans. Concepts which once seemed to carry absolute and unanimous meanings—like history, (human) nature, truth, law, even God Him?/Herself?—were now regarded as largely culture-specific and socially constructed (or, as deconstruction would have it, as endlessly translatable names whose necessary transliteration releases the unconditional event that stirs in them)—and started to be used in inverted commas to imply epistemological scepticism. A split was detected between words and reality and the 'signified' no longer coincided with the 'signifier': linguistic signs, it was argued, refer to other signs rather than the world around us; the world *per se* is unknowable; all we have are merely human-made (man-made?) *constructs* of reality. French philosopher Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation is a culmination of this trend: there is no longer any meaningful reality, he declared, only

hyperreality, simulated reality: the sign *precedes* and replaces the thing; it masks a fundamental absence.

Those developments could not have left the artists and the techniques they used unaffected. Since my concern here is specifically Merton's poetry, I am going to limit my brief introduction to the dilemma facing the art of literature, which used to thrive on re-presenting reality (making reality *present* itself within the space of a literary work). 'How to write after Auschwitz' was a serious challenge for artists struggling with the legacy of the 'unrepresentable.' This question refers to a technique, a method of presentation that would be capable of doing justice to the irrational, absurd, nightmarish, almost surreal nature of such events as the Holocaust, which resisted the convention of a well-made, realistic story. In classical realism, episodes are connected by means of cause-effect relationship (the reality presented is, therefore, understandable and explicable) and the story is premised on the existence of a recognizable, logically-ordered reality in which action, developing from beginning through middle to end, is pushed forward by consistently drawn, more or less unified characters.

This convention went bankrupt in the cauldron of the Second World War. Life turned out to be discontinuous,

inexplicable and chaotic and no longer yielded itself to linear, realistic depiction. Those who kept on using this convention anyway, succeeded in producing sincere, sentimental *simulations* of reality—melodramas which manipulated emotions without touching the deeper core of the problem depicted. 'The most secure simulations are unreal sensations,' writes postmodern author Vizenor, drawing on Baudrillard's theory.¹

2. Merton's post-WWII aesthetic and poetic imagination

It is not without significance that Merton's break with the dense, metaphysical idiom of his earlier poems manifests itself fully for the first time in two pieces revolving around the unrepresentable: *Chant to Be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces* and *Original Child Bomb*.

Both poems were conceived roughly around the same time (ca. 1960/1961) and both attempt to deal with such events as the Holocaust and the bombing of Hiroshima respectively by using flat, laconic language, ironical detachment, parody, and heavy citation. Both poems depart from any explicit references to metaphysics or theology: if they have any metaphysical frame of reference, it is by no means evident. If God is evoked at all, He is much more likely to be evoked ironically and by the 'wrong' guys—like the blasphemous abuse of religious terminology by the scientists and the military who served the nuclear sublime, or the Auschwitz commander Rudolf Hoess's devilish ambition to serve his people with a priestly dedication, (Merton's Hoess says: 'I was born into a Catholic family but as these people were

not going to need a priest I did not become a priest. I installed a perfectly good machine it gave satisfaction to many'²).

Both poems present—or perform—the point of view of the 'guilty' party: a convicted war criminal in one and those responsible for the evaporation of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians and the untold sufferings of many more in the other. Preserving his moral distance from their actions and opinions without announcing this explicitly, however, Merton constructs the two pieces almost entirely of quotations and near quotations culled from the protagonists' actual utterances. Thus *Chant* is entirely told in Hoess's own voice and in *Original Child Bomb* only an occasional comment here and there reveals indirectly, in an ironical understatement, the author's moral outrage at the official pronouncements that make up the major part of the piece. For example, seemingly praising the professional cool of the military, Merton is actually devastated by their indifference to human suffering. About the pilot who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, Merton says: 'Col. Tibbets was a well balanced man, and not sentimental. He did not have a nervous breakdown after the bombing, like some of the other members of the crew' (CP, p.299)—and the readers are struck by the drama of the unspoken.

Merton shows, dramatizes, *and performs* his characters, leaving to readers the work of filling in the narrative gaps, coping with inconsistencies, detecting irony, interpreting a situation for themselves. The virtue of those poems lies in the fact that the poet shows, but never

describes—as descriptive realism is just another convention, a *construction* of reality that merely has the appearances of coherence, while life itself is chaotic and its (il)logic remains incomprehensible. Merton rarely comments on events, and thus refrains from telling the reader what to think about the drama unfolding in the text, which is highly significant in itself—in the absence of credible cognitive categories and the collapse of *grands recits*, how can one actually *know* what is happening? Impersonating the characters and allowing them to speak for themselves is closer to the felt pulse of life, which, as Joseph Conrad famously said, does not narrate but makes impressions. In real life each individual has to cope with those impressions alone, without the intervention of a god-like, manipulative mediator who would provide a ‘correct’ reading of events.

Performance has recently become a term of fashion. It has received much critical attention and been theorized from a variety of critical perspectives—including drag and queer theory—almost always in the context of a liberating practice which ‘troubles’ (Judith Butler’s term) or destabilizes categories and fixed boundaries. It is interesting that Merton’s Hoess and Hiroshima poems already employ this technique for the same purpose. Instead of telling a tragic story of victimhood and condemning the mass murderers outright (which, in Vizenor’s terms, would result in a story promoting victimry and manifest manners), Merton quotes the culprits’ own words, the words they use in good faith as justification of their deeds—which are criminal in themselves, but which the speakers perceive in terms of hard, conscientious

duty and service to civilized humankind. ‘One no longer needs to parody,’ was Merton’s discovery in the 1960s; ‘it is enough to quote—and feed back quotations into the mass consumption of pseudo-culture. The static created by the feedback of arguments...is enough to show the inner contradictions of the system.’³

Another important characteristic of both poems is that, being collages of quotations, they present even on the visual level the fragmentation and discontinuity of reality from which cause-effect relationships have evaporated. The following fragment from *Original Child Bomb*, for instance—a poem subtitled ‘Points for meditation to be scratched on the walls of a cave’—in addition to being a discreet unit, one ‘point for meditation’ set off from the other forty by means of spatial arrangement, is also discontinuous and self-contradictory in itself and so can serve as a good illustration of the fragmented character of postmodern reality. Merton writes: ‘On July 7th the Emperor of Japan pleaded with the Soviet Government to act as mediator for peace between Japan and the Allies. Molotov said the question would be “studied.” In order to facilitate this “study” Soviet troops in Siberia prepared to attack the Japanese’ (CP, p.296). Soviet preparations to invade Japan are an obvious *non-sequitur* to the promise to consider (‘study’) helping to negotiate a peace agreement between Japan and the Allies. It can be concluded that it is reality that is radically discontinuous and art, like a good mirror, merely reflects this!

Additionally, both poems depict a world of blurred boundaries in which

good and evil seem indistinguishable or at least thoroughly mixed. As a result, unanimous moral judgments cannot be passed. Even the obvious ‘monster’ (Hoess) who ordered multitudes of men, women, and children into death chambers can soberly say to us: ‘You smile at my career but you would do as I did if you knew yourself and dared’ (CP, p. 349). A most unsettling, alas, deeply realistic notion! Perhaps only one who has crossed all the lines realizes how deep is the root of evil and how true it is that there is a Cain even in the best of us. Perhaps, as Merton also suggests elsewhere, good and evil are merely arbitrary, man-made⁴ concepts which satisfy our minds’ need for clear-cut divisions.

The last lines of *Chant* provide a link between two varieties of war crimes and so may serve as a transition to *Original Child*: ‘Do not think yourselves better,’ Merton’s Hoess warns the Allies and other ‘good’ guys, ‘because you burn up friends and enemies with long-range missiles without ever seeing what you have done’ (CP, p. 349). Killing people with Zyklon B in a concentration camp passes for organized crime against humanity and the perpetrator is subject to trial by an International War Crimes Tribunal, while the purposeful use of highly lethal, state-of-the-art weaponry against a defenceless city qualifies as technological progress, and its perpetrators, for whom suffering remains distant and purely abstract, are praised as war heroes and decorated with medals. Human imagination has a hard time coping with such radically ‘postmodern’ developments! Once again, it is life itself that dismantles binary oppositions long

before this process registers in the work of artists and philosophers. (As an aside, it must be noted that it is not deconstruction or other varieties of poststructuralist theory that are to blame for, supposedly, ushering in unbridled relativism, ‘killing God’ or postulating void and absence where a fullness of presence used to reside. On the contrary: philosophers and cultural theorists, poets and visual artists have been struggling against heavy odds to catch up with the preposterous real.)

On top of what has already been said, *Chant* and *Original Child* provide early illustrations of *simulacra*, or simulations of reality. As an example let us consider the following utterance by Merton’s Hoess. Boasting about the advanced method of genocide he worked out, Hoess says: ‘When trains arrived the soiled passengers received appointments for fun in the bathroom they did not guess.’ Or later in the poem: ‘Another improvement I made was I built the chambers for two thousand invitations at a time the naked votaries were disinfected with Zyklon B’ (CP, p. 346). If one were to take Hoess’s words at their face value, his care for the new arrivals would seem close to the sacred Christian virtue of hospitality, his ‘improvements’ would pass for genuine progress, and his overall conscientious service and obedience to the law would need to be extolled. Also, the Auschwitz commander’s preoccupation with hygiene is highly laudable—until one realizes that ‘purification,’ ‘cleaning’ or ‘disinfecting’ refer not to the elimination of literal vermin but the killing of humans who, like the Jews, were treated like vermin by the Nazis and therefore destined for extermination with

such 'disinfectants' as the notorious Zyklon B, a cyanide-based pesticide.

Obviously, what the poem's protagonist euphemistically calls 'bathrooms' were in fact death chambers with poison outlets instead of showers. Needless to say, what awaited them in the so-called bathrooms was nobody's idea of 'fun,' unless those at the portholes at the other side of the sealed door were somehow, in a macabre way, capable of having it. As this sample analysis has demonstrated, Hoess—who becomes the incarnation of an inhumane system—manipulates reality by the inventive use of language. Renaming atrocities and replacing the real by its simulated image, he produces *simulacra* that have no genuine reference to the actual deeds. (Parenthetically speaking, it is this simulated reality that became the official truth about Nazi concentration camps for years, even decades after the war.)

Likewise, in *Original Child Bomb* Merton has captured the process of turning the real into a massive simulation, starting with the unsettling parallel between the testing and the explosion of the deadly 'Little Boy'—a highly destructive bomb—on the one hand and the gestation-and-birth process which normally correlates with creation and happiness on the other, through to the incredible proclamation issued by the military governor of Japan when Hiroshima was still burning. In the following fragment Merton uses graphic language and drastic images to make naked facts contradict and deconstruct, by their very weight, the proclamation's rhetoric: 'To all the people without hands, without feet, with their faces falling off, with their intestines hanging

out, with their whole bodies full of radiation, he declared: "We must not rest a single day in our war effort... We must bear in mind that the annihilation of the stubborn enemy is our road to revenge." He was a professional soldier' (CP, p.301). Professional soldiers treat death as pure abstraction, a concept in their war *games*, never as a tangible, existential encounter. In their games death always refers to another, to an 'enemy' who, somehow tautologically, by the very fact of being named the enemy, 'deserves' to die. But their death is never real. The function of military or political rhetoric is to reinforce this ideological distance. So genocide becomes 'the Final Solution' and the evaporation of hundreds of thousands of civilians is 'a demonstration' of the atomic bomb 'on a civil target,' etc. Thus death is never really present in the simulated reality such jargons construct. The more we talk about it (and abstractify it), the less it concerns us—unless something or somebody pierces the cultural fabrications and forces us to confront naked reality and the scandal of death. This is what I believe Merton's *Original Child Bomb* does. With its minimal style which contains no figures of speech, in spare words which evoke unadorned facts, this poem emerges out of a stunned silence and tugs at the heart. 'The presence of human silence and death have no simulations,' wrote Vizenor (quoted, 1985).

3. Finale

Incorporated into the fabric of a recently made movie⁵ inspired by Merton's poem is the following laconic note: 'US Airman Matthew McGunigle photographed the Hiroshima blast. After the war he entered

a monastery and took a vow of silence.' It is telling that from within this silence another monk should emerge to tell the story that made McGunigle speechless. 'Death,' wrote French writer Georges Bataille, 'discloses the imposture of reality... [It] shows that the real society was lying. ...What the real society has lost is not a member but rather its truth' (quoted in Vizenor, 1985).

In the movie, a little girl named Amelia watches in horror the endless procession of nuclear images proliferating on her TV screen. Finally, fed up with the media's double talk, she switches off the TV and constructs her own alphabet of the nuclear age by simply quoting facts. 'A is for Amelia,' she begins, 'and this stuff is true.' Speaking in an even, though decisive voice, which is an equivalent of Merton's low-key poetic style, she brings the simulated TV stories of nuclear peace to a crisis by juxtaposing them with uncomfortable, disrupting facts. The society has lost its truth and it takes a child to say so. But nobody listens to her. She has just demonstrated that nuclear peace means nuclear proliferation and cries out in horror, but her cry is engulfed by the rhythmical noise of explosions and raucous music emanating from the screen. Amelia covers her ears unable to bear it. Suddenly there comes a moment of dead silence and the phrase 'Game Over!!!' starts pulsating in green letters across the blank screen. The worst *has* happened. Amelia's solitary whisper emerges from the ensuing darkness: 'What's a meditation?' she demands, 'What time is it? What is going to happen?' Her voice emanates from the nuclear cave on whose walls Merton once scratched his forty-one points for meditation.

Notes

1. Gerald Vizenor, from "Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2001, p.1076. Subsequently referred to as Vizenor.
2. Thomas Merton, 'Chant to Be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces,' *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions, 1977, p. 346. The collection will be subsequently referred to as CP.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 7*, ed. Patrick Hart, San Francisco: Harper, 1999, p.262.
4. In this context the term 'man-made' is justified as it points to the legacy of a patriarchal, dualistic culture Merton was just beginning to deconstruct.
5. *Original Child Bomb: Meditations on the Nuclear Age*, dir. Carey Schonegevel McKenzie, 2004.

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