Chanting on the Rim of Chaos, Sane Language in an Insane World

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Merton's *Prayer for Peace*, read in 1962 to the House of Representatives, forewarned:

> In this fatal moment of choice in which we might begin the
> patient architecture of peace
> We may also take the last step across the rim of chaos.

These words of caution are followed by a resounding petition:

> Save us then from our obsessions! Open our eyes, dissipate our
> confusions, teach us to understand ourselves and our adversary!
> Let us never forget that sins against the law of love are punished by
> loss of faith,
> And those without faith stop at no crime to achieve their ends!

This prayer describes the world as a place where obsessions blind nations to their crimes against humanity; crimes that are readily rationalized to justify the pursuit of dominance over the 'other' whom they have come to fear as the enemy. The pursuit of dominance, as the prayer also reminds us, is true for both sides of the conflict, with each side equally convinced that it is right and each side equally unable to understand the concerns of the other. This all too familiar stand-off inevitably brings humankind from time to time to what Merton here describes as 'the rim of chaos.' Provoked by fear, nations become enslaved to the very 'processes and policies of power' that they have deemed necessary for the making of wars. This enslavement to fear forces nations into wars 'we do not desire, that can do us no good, and which our very hatred of war forces us to prepare.' So, as the prayer unfolds, we inevitably become aware of this contradiction that has destroyed and continues to destroy human life; a contradiction earlier articulated by Merton in the opening lines of *Seven Storey Mountain*:

> On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God and yet hating Him; born to love Him, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers.

As here, so also in the prayer, the violent entanglement of humankind in wars is rooted in its estrangement from God. Fear of neighbor, obsession with war, and the confusion that arises in conflict are the consequence of humankind having lost faith and the loss of faith is the consequence of not obeying the commandment of love; a commandment we no longer strive to keep because, for all practical purposes, God has been forgotten. Within the few lines of this prayer written for the House of Representatives, Merton labors to awaken government leaders to the reality that the war they have entered is rooted not only in social, economic, or political conflicts but, at a deeper level, in the contradictions of the human heart that can only be resolved by God's love that frees us from fear and the obsessions that fear feeds so that we may be able to see with the clear vision of faith.

Prior to writing this prayer, Merton wrote a poem entitled *Chant to Be Used in Procession Around a Site with Furnaces.* The poem focuses on the 'processes and policies of power' mentioned in the prayer; processes and policies of power that blind us to the crimes that we commit against humanity. More specifically, the poem illustrates the way in which the language of those processes and policies is used to perpetuate the illusion of innocence that permits humankind to 'burn up friends and enemies with long-range missiles fired from great distances without ever having to see what we have done.' The poem is intended to break though this illusion of innocence by setting before the reader the insane language of the commander whose voice drones on throughout the poem in such a way that the reader is eventually struck by the absurdity and nihilism of the rational orders that manage the daily routine at Auschwitz. Skillfully, Merton unmasks the fearful face of humankind void of faith and love, alone in a world absent of God.

Together, prayer and poem create an image of Merton as a monk chanting on the rim of chaos against the folly of human reason that proceeds without faith and love to construct political and military strategies for war in the small country of Vietnam. Merton was not chanting alone in those days. He was one of a small choir of American tricksters who were intent on opening up new ways for understanding the world in which we live; ways that would allow life to flourish once again. Most notably there was Alan Ginsberg who chanted on more than one occasion in the streets of America during the Vietnam war. Other West Coast beats made sure that *Chant to Be Used in Procession Around a Site with Furnaces* was heard beyond the knobs of Kentucky. Lawrence Ferlinghetti published the poem in the *Journal for the Protection of All Beings;* a journal that included poetry and essays by Albert Camus, Bertrand Russell, Normal Mailer, Allen Ginsberg, and others who were invited to 'speak uncensored upon any subject they feel most hotly and cooly about in a world which politics has made.' Lenny Bruce, an American comedian frequently arrested for obscene language, adapted the poem, along with Merton's *A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann,* for his nightclub performance with the original intention to shock the audience into see the obscenity of war.

Merton provided the Beat generation with a philosophy that focused their energy and efforts during the Cold War that eventually ignited the fire bombing of Vietnam. The following statement by Merton summarizes that philosophy:

> We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people. We rely 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.[1]

This statement contains two 'beliefs' that form a creed to which these monks held and from which their chants took shape. First, sanity is defined not according to psychological categories but in accordance with the spiritual grace and discipline of love; a love that seeks to understand others in such a way that prudent, humane, and just behavior follows. Second, sanity, defined otherwise, i.e. without love, creates a world in which those upon whom the world community relies to be sane and, who in all public appearances appear sane, are, nonetheless, insane and, because of the pretense of sanity are most dangerous.

With *Chant to Be Used in Procession Around a Site with Furnances,* sometimes referred to as the 'Auschwitz poem,' Merton gives poetic expression to the two fundamental beliefs noted above; the second

directly, the first in a slanted way. Doing so, however, was not without its difficulties. For language itself had been co-opted by the 'insane' in order to sound sane. In a letter to James Laughlin, Merton wrote:

> Personally I am more and more concerned about the question of peace and war. I am appalled by the way everyone simply sits around and acts as though everything were normal. It seems to me that I have an enormous responsibility myself, since I am read by a lot of people, and yet I don't know what to begin to say and then I am as though bound and gagged by the censors, who though not maliciously reactionary are just obtuse and slow. This feeling of frustration is terrible. Yet what can one say? If I go around shouting 'abolish war' it will be meaningless. Yet at least some one has to say that. I am in no position to plan a book about it. There is no purpose to a silly book of editorial-like platitudes. Some more poems like Auschwitz, maybe. But the thing is to be *heard.* And everything is perfectly soundproof and thought proof. We are all doped right up to the eyes. And words have become useless, no matter how true they may be.[2]

Language had been sufficiently distorted for profit and power to be ineffective any longer for telling the truth. And, if truth be told, everyone had become sufficiently sound and thought proof so as to be unable to comprehend it. The Auschwitz poem was intended to shatter the language barrier of meaningless platitudes constructed by both pro and anti-war factions and thereby expose the modern world's insane choice of violence as the nihilistic pursuit of utopian fantasies that inevitably become living nightmares for countless innocent men, women, and children.

Construction of a Chant

In order to say something that needed to be said and, at the same time, could be heard, he had to find a literary form that could effectively address the problem of war in the modern world. While working through this impasse, it became apparent to Merton that writers in the West were confronted by two insurmountable obstacles that would require subversive action.

First, he believed that the general population had for the most part lost touch with the collective wisdom and literature of Western culture. Consequently, literary allusions that require familiarity on the part of the reader would not work with the general public. He would have to choose words more familiar to the reader. That is to say, he would have to make use of words 'found' in common places like advertisements in newspapers or directions on the side of boxes. For example, notice the words carefully articulated by the commander. These words were known to have been printed on the side of cartons shipped to concentration camps.

> How I commanded and made soap 12 lbs fat 10
> quarts water 8 oz to a lb of caustic soda but it was
> hard to find any fat ...
>
> 'For transporting the customers we suggest using
> light carts on wheels a drawing is submitted'
>
> 'We acknowledge four steady furnaces and an emergency
> guarantee'
>
> 'I am a big new commander operating on a cylinder
> I elevate the purified materials boil for 2 to 3 hrs
> and then cool'

Chant to Be Used in Procession Around a Site with Furnaces has also been described as an example of 'assemblage art' which is essentially the same thing as a 'found poem' but with more emphasis on the assemblage of found images into a composition that provides for the reader an opportunity to see something in a new and perhaps more profound way. For example, this poem presents concentration camps not simply as places surrounded by barbed wire fences but where children play, hiding in piles of clothes while their mothers are doing laundry, and, at the end of day, sent for their baths in gas chambers:

> Children of tender age were always invited by reason
> of their youth they were unable to work they were
> marked out for play
>
> They were washed like the others and more than the others
>
> Very frequently women would hide their children in
> the piles of clothing but of course when we came to
> find them we would send the children into the chamber
> to be bathed

The second problem further compounded the situation for Merton. The world of commerce and politics had so contaminated language that any serious writer would have to resort to anti-language or, in the case of the poet, anti-poetry. Anti-poetry presents words emotively incongruous with the subject matter. As a result, irony emerges that is so pervasive and apparent that it is impossible for the reader not to hear what is being said. With regard to the Auschwitz poem, the officer's rational orders collide with the insanity of life for his innocent victims. Merton sought to make his readers aware of the absurdity of such commands by assembling found statements from Nazi records with lines that could be found in a travel magazine advertising a health spa. For example the poem begins:

> 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
>
> I made cleaning appointments and then I made the travelers
> sleep and after that I made soap

Merton is also interested in showing to the reader that their lives have been influenced and their opinions prejudiced in subtle and not so subtle ways by such abuses of language. When readers arrive at the end of the poem, horrified by the sane sounding language of a sadistic officer, they are surprised by the commander who now turns and speaks to them; accusing them of similar war crimes against humanity:

> So I was hanged in a commanding position with a
> full view of the site plant and grounds
>
> You smile at my career but you would do as I did if
> you knew yourself and dared
>
> In my day we worked hard we saw what we did our
> Self sacrifice was conscientious and complete our work
> was faultless and detailed
>
> Do you think yourself better because you burn up
> Friends and enemies with long-range missiles without
> ever seeing what you have done

Merton's own description of the poem is along the same lines described above. In a letter to Nicanor Parra, dated the 20 March 1965, he comments on the found or assemblage construction of the poem and the intention of this anti-poem:

> ... this poem is composed almost in its entirety from the very words of the commanders of Auschwitz. It would be impossible to invent something more terrifying than the truth itself.[3]

In a letter to Sister M Emmanuel, date the 9th of August 1961, he may have added something more to what we have so far noted about the construction of this poem:

> I will send you under separate cover a very lugubrious poem about Auschwitz that I wrote, but it is simply a florilegium of statements from official documents and other declarations, for the most part. That makes it even more terrible.[4]

Merton's description of the chant as 'a florilegium of statements' is interesting. While it may just be another way of saying 'found' or 'assemblage' poem, it seems to be saying something more. Florilegum literally refers to a floral arrangement of words. Is *Chant* a floral arrangement of death camp statements? If so, it adds one more irony to a poem that has assembled found statements with conflicting images linked together by the intermittent lines spoken by the commander, punctuating the irony that pervades this poem. As James Laughlin points out in a letter:

> It is done with a wonderful kind of ingenuous irony, such as he later uses in 'Original Child Bomb,' his dead-pan account of the Hiroshima bomb. In 'Chant to Be Used in Processions,' Merton uses Pound's 'persona' mask technique, where he speaks through the mouth of one of the Nazi executioners. The irony is devastating when the SS officer urges the prisoners in the camp to write home to their friends to invite them to come to their 'joke.' This kind of black humor crops up continually in his later work.[5]

After the Chant

Chant to Be Used in Procession Around a Site with Furnaces predates and initiates Merton's work on language and violence. The poem, as the title may suggest, invokes a procession of questions and insights that later found expression in his journal entries, correspondence, and essays written during the sixties. In this paper, we will limit our attention to three ideas that are relevant for our understanding of the Auschwitz poem. As we will see, these ideas represent Merton's effort to lift the veils of an illusion that allowed nations to believe that they could engage in war and remain innocent of crimes against humanity.

Merton, early on, begins to redefine 'war criminal' in such a way that it eventually includes everyone, without exception, including himself. In a journal entry dated 16th August 1961, he has come to the opinion that 'war criminal' applies to anyone who invokes fear in others with the mere threat of violence.

> Fr. Basil's brother – driving out of Louisville seeing a sign 'Evacuation Route.' 'To where?' Nobody thought of that. Everyone is anxious because last week the Russians *really* got a man in space – he went around the earth 17 times. And then Khrushchev started shouting and threatening to rain down H-bombs on America. First of all, no matter how much we may be at fault ourselves, this alone is a criminal act. All the people who are exploiting atomic weapons in any way for political ends are, to my mind, already war criminals. As if it made any difference what you called them. (The very *act* of calling someone a 'war criminal' tends to involve one in the great web of lies and hatreds and illusions.)[6]

The words within the parenthesizes extend the indictment even to himself or others who are inclined to point fingers and declare another guilty of crimes against humanity while claiming innocence for themselves. Maintaining such a position of innocence, according to Merton, is to involve oneself in a great web of illusions. The reality is that we all participate in the problem of violence and none, not even the monk behind cloistered walls, is innocent. How so? In a letter dated late June or early July 1962, he writes:

> We have just witnessed the execution of Adolf Eichmann. In Nazi Germany, you may or may not remember, honest people, including perhaps many Catholics, more or less seriously accepted the view that the purity of the German race, the power of the German nation, was gravely menaced by 'international Jewry.' The policy of genocide ... was accepted, or at least put through without significant protest, even from Catholics (there were of course exceptions). It seems that Catholics just looked the other way, if they did not actively approve and cooperate (the commandant of Auschwitz was a baptized Catholic, but I don't know if he continued to practice his religion).
>
> The Eichmann trial has shown that these people were 'sane' and 'normal.' That they did their job like any other job. It was mostly a matter of paperwork, at the top level of course. But they knew very well what they were doing. They simply went by the fact that everyone in their society accepted this as 'normal' and 'right' and they shrugged

off responsibility by saying it was their 'duty' and that the needs of the state demanded this unusual procedure.[7]

If one fails to protest or resist genocide wherever it may occur, one participates in the crime. For this reason, Merton eventually extends the indictment of 'war criminal' to include the entire western world. In a journal entry dated the 27th March 1963, he writes:

> The [Eichmann] trial is not just an indictment of one man or one system, but is in fact a sordid examination of conscience *of the entire west* and one which has proved singularly inconclusive because no one seems to grasp anything definite about it (if they have even *tried* to grasp anything). All that remains is a general sense of loss, of horror and of disorientation. And even the horror is diffuse and superficial. Where does one begin to respond to the multiple indictment of our world? The stereotypical answers all collapse, and there are no new ones, and there is not faith! Yet the total irrationality of the Eichmann affair must not make us distrust reason or humanity themselves. The temptation is to think that reason and conscience themselves have been exploded by the inane cruelties of our age![8]

With time, Merton turned his attention to a different yet related idea. And, as before, he wants to redefine a word that has been used by nations to maintain their innocence while burning up 'friends and enemies with long-range missiles without ever seeing what [they] have done.' Wanting people and governments of the West to see that their justifications for war are the work not of rational but irrational minds, he redefines sanity not, however, in psychological terms, but in light of human compassion. In his essay entitled *A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann* published 1966 he writes:

> We can no longer assume that because a man is 'sane' he is therefore in his 'right mind.' The whole concept of sanity in a society where spiritual values have lost their meaning is itself meaningless. A man can be 'sane' in the limited sense that he is not impeded by his disordered emotions from acting in a cool, orderly manner, according to the needs and dictates of the social situation in which he finds himself. He can be perfectly 'adjusted.' God knows, perhaps such people can be perfectly adjusted even in hell itself.
>
> And so I ask myself: what is the meaning of a concept of sanity that excludes love, considers it irrelevant, and destroys our capacity to love other human beings, to respond to their needs and their sufferings, to recognize them also as persons, to apprehend their pain as one's own.[9]

Furthermore, Merton wants to redefine sanity and madness in order to avoid an artificial and one dimensional view of life that separates humankind into the sane and insane, good and evil, civilized and uncivilized; a division that allows the sane to do evil to those whom they deem uncivilized. As Merton points out in his essay entitled *'Faulkner and His Critics'* published 1967, each of us and every nation embodies both sanity and madness:

> This curious, artificially lucid, one-dimensional view of life, in which there is no place for madness or tragedy, will obviously fail to comprehend a Faulkner. It will accuse Faulkner of renouncing history and embracing tragedy instead. But there is also such a thing as the refusal to see any tragic possibilities in history, the exclusion of madness and cataclysm from life in favor of a pure rationale of historic development. Do not such suppressions make tragedy all the more terrible and unavoidable? Faulkner's point was that they do. The tiny ripples on the reasonable surface of history are perhaps indications of sea monsters below. As Michel Foucault has pointed out, the refusal of madness, the clear delimitation of reason and madness, creates a *demand* for madness. Far from getting on as if the Enlightenment had never been, Yoknapatawpha was made necessary by the Enlightenment – and was necessary to it. Faulkner saw that the reason, justice, and humanity of the Enlightenment and the lunacy, injustice, and inhumanity of the South were in reality two aspects of the same thing.[10]

Merton was aware, as we have seen, that for the illusion of innocence and sanity to be maintained, language had to be manipulated. Consequently, towards the end of his life, he turns his attention to the problem of language and violence as noted inn his essay entitled *Auschwitz: A Family Camp* published 1967:

> Language itself has fallen victim to total war, genocide and systematic tyranny in our time. In destroying human beings, and human values, on a mass scale, the Gestapo also subjected the German language to violence and crude perversion.
>
> Any open reference to the realities of life and death in the camp was regarded as treason.[11]

This inquiry eventually produced the essay entitled *War and the Crisis of Language* published in 1969. *War and the Crisis of Language* is not a systematic study of language and violence but, as explained by Merton, 'random and spontaneous insights.' A paragraph from the concluding section of this essay perhaps best summarizes its contents.

> The illness of political language – which is almost universal and is a symptom of a Plague of Power that is common to China and America, Russia and Western Europe – 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.[12]

Whether Merton ever planned to write more on the subject is not clear. What is clear, however, is that for nearly a decade his thoughts return again and again to the subject as if he is trying to find his way through the problem and discover connections from which to construct a position to continue his chant to be recited in procession around furnaces.

Behind the Chant

To observe how Merton found his way beyond the problems stated in *War and the Crisis of Language*, we must listen to the voice behind the *Chant to Be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces*. While the commander's voice in the poem is the voice of insanity masked by a monotone account of duties performed, there is another voice, silent but nonetheless present. Behind the poem, the reader hears a sane voice, an alternative voice to that of the commanders. It is, of course, Merton's voice. It is a voice that sings of love and faith in contrast to hatred and fear. It is one that invokes freedom and clarity in contrast to obsessions and confusion.

This voice represents another dimension to Merton's work on the problem of language and violence. Merton clearly wanted to do more than just point out that the modern world had gone insane; he wanted to provide for that world an opportunity to rediscover a sane language that speaks with grace and truth. What he has to say was informed by two other voices, one modern and the other ancient. Albert Camus and Clement of Alexandria contributed significantly to Merton's understanding of what is truly sane and normal.

Merton's essay, *Terror and the Absurd: Violence and Nonviolence in Albert Camus*, written 1966, examines a position – contrary to the commander's in the poem – that refuses to resign itself to the nihilistic arrogance of total power and protests against abstractions on which that power bases its claim to an absolute right to kill.

> The key idea of *The Rebel* is that revolution nullifies itself when it resorts to massive killing. The need for the revolution to kill in order to maintain itself in power means that it no longer has the right to be in power. When the love of life that is at the root of revolution turns into a need for the death of hundreds and thousands of other men, then the 'love of life' becomes a contradiction and a denial of itself, and revolution turns into absurdity and nihilism.
>
> [Camus' 'Rebel'] is a man who protests, but protests not against abstract injustice, nor in the name of a theoretical program. He protests in the name of man, individual and concrete man of flesh and blood, against the war-making arrogance of total power, against the abstractions on which power bases its claim to an absolute right to kill. The Rebel moreover refuses to be silent and insists on an open dialogue which will help others like himself to arrive at a lucid and common decision to oppose absurdity and death and to affirm man against all abstractions.[13]

There is, however, more to Merton's alternative than what Camus had offered. While Merton found something in Camus of value, it was Clement of Alexandria that provided him with the touchstone for determining what is sane. In a journal entry dated 14th November 1961, Merton writes:

> The sanity of Eichmann! Such sanity is not sanity. Such health is not health. On the other hand the true sanity of Clement of Alexandria. His beautiful, clear, clean doctrines full of peace and light. That we are planted in Christ as in Paradise. His realization of hope in Christ, Life in the Spirit. There is no other true sanity.[14]

Clement of Alexandria; Selections from The Protreptikos, published 1962, presents the sane language of this early Christian writer in marked contrast to the insane language of today's world.

> We have come to believe that truth and justice so badly need to be defended by us that, without our recourse to violence, truth cannot survive in the world. Clement had a different view of things.
> In proportion as we rely on material arms, we tend to become separated from the purity of this truth. Not that our intellects do not continue to function correctly – but an inner, spiritual grasp of divine truth in its fullness will necessarily be lacking to the man who solves problems by force and not by love. Such a man no longer really believes in the power of truth as something smaller and weaker than himself.
>
> The man who fights with the Sword of the Spirit is not so much defending truth as defended by Truth. He himself is the sword which Truth uses to defend itself. He himself, expressing the Divine Truth

not in speech but in act and sacrifice, 'even unto death' is a witness and martyr of the Truth.[15]

While raising his voice in protest against humankind's crimes against humanity with Allen Ginsberg, Lenny Bruce and Albert Camus, Merton brought a distinctively Christian perspective on war. Standing with them in opposition to humankind's insane choice of violence, he chants with Clement of Alexandria, witnessing to the divine logos that binds all creation in peaceful harmony; a hymn of praise to the Divine Logos who 'transforms the earth into heaven.'[16]

Notes and References

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