

# THE LOGIC OF MASS DESTRUCTION: MODERN KNOWLEDGE, KAFKA, AND THOMAS MERTON'S POETRY

by **Ted Henken**

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Before the postwar trials in Germany it had been generally believed that the mass killings were exclusively the work of a relatively few fanatical S.S. leaders. But the records of the courts leave no doubt of the complicity of a number of German businessmen . . . who outwardly must have seemed to be the most prosaic and decent of men, pillars — like good businessmen everywhere — of their communities.

— William Shirer<sup>1</sup>

In the wake of World War II, with its unprecedented mass destruction in the form of Germany's concentration camps and the United States' use of the atomic bomb, many people were scrambling around trying to make sense of such deliberate barbarities. Both the atrocities that occurred at Auschwitz, the largest of the German camps, and at Hiroshima and Nagasaki stand out as the two most important examples of the dilemma that modern society has not only found itself in (internalized), but also created for itself (externalized). Though most people could accept the fact that millions of soldiers died in combat as one of the necessities of war, few could begin to understand why and how millions of innocent non-combatants could be exterminated so deliberately and seemingly without remorse. In his own attempt to make sense of the barbarities of Auschwitz and Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Thomas Merton realized that the most terrifying thing about the Holocaust is not such supposed monsters as Adolf Eichmann, who conceived of the "Final Solution" and led its implementation, but the fact that Eichmann and those who took part in mass murder were perfectly normal, "sane" individuals.

In the opening essay in his book *The Nonviolent Alternative*, Merton recognizes the truly modern nature of this problem: "The tragedy of our time is . . . not so much the malice of the wicked as the helpless futility of 'the good.' We, in our very best efforts for peace, find ourselves maneuvered unconsciously into positions where we too can act as criminals."<sup>2</sup> Merton sees that the society we "find ourselves in" acts upon us as individuals defining what we believe to be and what, for all intents and purposes, is reality. He understands that we do not simply "find ourselves in" society: we also put ourselves into (create) that society. "History does not [only] make us, we make it — or end it" (*NA*, p. 16).

In many of his writings Merton stresses the point that thus phenomenon is not restricted to any one ideology or political agenda. It is a universal modern phenomenon. It is true that Nazi Germany is the best known example of a whole society of "good" people taking part in or being complicitous with evil, but Merton recognizes that just as the Nazis called



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the murder of millions of people in their camps “good, necessary, and just,” other groups also employ this “logic” in order to justify their goals. Specifically, he points to the United States’ justification of the annihilation of hundreds of thousands of civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Merton recognizes that we, as members of a distinctly modern mass culture, give far too much credence to the “logic of circumstances” (*NA*, p. 18). The language of pure logic has become institutionalized in our culture and therefore is internalized to a great extent by each member of that culture. The idea of mass destruction has become internalized and each modern individual regardless of nationality has been socialized to accept its logic as reality. Merton argues that without further externalization (new language) by individuals, this totally sane language of pure logic will force us “deliberately to choose the course that leads to destruction” (*NA*, p. 18).

In his essay, “A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann,” Merton further explains the destructiveness of a language of pure logic by discussing the use and abuse of the word “sanity.” He understands the importance of language as a mechanism of confirming (thus recreating) the shared reality of a society. But, as in Shirer’s epigraph and in his own observations above, he sees that in the modern world “it is precisely the sane ones who are the most dangerous.” Using Eichmann as a point of departure, Merton invokes the seemingly universal understanding of the word sanity to mean “a sense of justice, humaneness, prudence, the capacity to love and understand other people.” But this definition of sanity becomes disturbing when applied to Eichmann who, incidentally, was found to be perfectly sane by a host of psychiatrists before the Nuremberg trials. Eichmann, in his own mind and in the minds of those around him, was an exemplary man, “a pillar of his community” who “conscientiously [went] about his desk work, his administrative job which happened to be the supervision of mass murder.”

It is here that Merton sees the language of pure logic, institutionalized and internalized by and for the members of the modern world, break down. He believes that this unchallenged notion of sanity is a universal modern problem. He wonders why we are so worried about some fanatic or psychotic getting into a position of power when “the sane ones will have perfectly good reasons, logical, well-adjusted reasons” for mass destruction. Finally, showing how the same logic justified mass destruction is live in the United States as much as anywhere else, he says: “When the missiles take off, then, it will be no mistake.”<sup>3</sup>

Merton’s explanation of our shared definition of sanity and of the modern world in general has many connections with Franz Kafka’s own classic commentary on the modern world, *The Metamorphosis*. It is evident at the opening of the book that Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis is not primarily a private problem, but one that has direct implications on his social identity as a son, brother, money earner, and, especially, a sane human being. Gregor’s social identity is transformed in the first sentence of Kafka’s work where he is described as “a monstrous vermin.”<sup>4</sup> his transformation continues throughout the rest of the story when his manager refers to him as “an animal;” his sister as “it;” the housekeeper as “the stuff;” and his father who leaves no doubt by saying “you just have to try to get rid of the idea that it’s Gregor” (Kafka, pp. 13, 51, 52, 57). His identity (the social definition and thus the social construction of his reality) as a sane, upstanding money-making member of the modern world is destroyed when he is labeled as an inhuman and insane monster.

The real metamorphosis that takes place in the book is not Gregor’s physical one, but the one that occurs in the minds of Gregor’s parents and sister, the others in the house, and Gregor himself. Kafka, like Merton, turns the social construction of reality in the modern world upon itself by challenging a society that defines sanity as “humaneness, the capacity to understand other people” (*NA*, p. 160). Gregor, defined as inhuman and insane by his society, is actually the most humane and understanding of all of Kafka’s characters. The sane ones, on the other hand, forfeit their claim to humaneness and understanding as they are deliberately unfeeling and callous. Once they are forced by the “logic of circumstances” to define Gregor as inhuman and insane (thus making themselves the paragons of humanity and sanity), they have “perfectly good reasons” to fear him and take logical steps against his obviously violent nature (*NA*, pp. 18, 161). Ironically, though, the

only violence in the book was perpetrated by the sane members of the sane society on Gregor, the inhuman and insane “monstrous vermin.” Stewart Ewen observes this same dilemma in his book about the birth of advertising in the United States, *Captains of Consciousness*, saying that “Kafka’s depiction of the modern world [is] one in which the irrational [has] become rational.”<sup>5</sup>

Merton, for his part, sympathizes with those who are seemingly trapped by the society’s institutionalization of the logical language of mass destruction. While he tries to create (externalize) a new language specifically through his poetry, he realizes that an objectified and internalized definition of reality has great staying power as it exists, more than anywhere else, in people’s minds (as illustrated by Gregor’s family). He realizes that it is nearly impossible to expose oneself to the barbarity of Auschwitz and Hiroshima and Nagasaki without becoming numbed by their enormity. As a writer and especially as a poet, Merton needs a way to approach these subjects that will allow his readers to get past their numbness. As Michael Mott observes: “Any commentary, any moralizing, would intrude upon the only decent human response — meditation in stillness.”<sup>6</sup> He further observes that, in writing about such horrific subjects, Merton realizes the impossibility of using the conventional tools of satire. Merton knows that these enormities will speak for themselves if he can simply provide the right setting. Mott feels Merton accomplishes this by distancing himself from his art. It is this distance that makes his poem about Auschwitz, “Chant to be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces,” “far more truly modern” than his previous poems (Mott, p. 304).

In writing about “Chant,” Merton stresses that the extent to which language has been perverted makes conventional satire impossible. Instead, he creates what he calls the Found Poem or the Anti-poem, writing:

The double-talk of totalism and propaganda is probably not intentionally ironic. But it is so systematically dedicated to an ambiguous concept of reality that no parody could equal the macabre horror of its humor. There is nothing left but to quote the actual words of these men.<sup>7</sup>

It is amazing to read Merton’s poem and then read Shirer’s description of the extermination camps in his history of Nazi Germany, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. Nearly every line of Merton’s poem is infected with the “double-talk of totalism.” Shirer gives many examples of this in his book. After comparing these two, it is evident that Merton meant his audience to read this poem as a monologue by Rudolf Hoess, a one time commandant of Auschwitz. Read in this way, the poem sounds like a confession as it is filled with cryptic descriptions of the horrors that took place at Auschwitz. But, as it drones on in the same diligent tone, the poem begins to sound more like a sober justification of the “faultless” and “obedient” work of German “patriots.”

Understanding the symbolic nature of language and its power as an instrument of legitimizing the social order is helpful in analyzing “Chant.” The most obvious example of the power of language and its maintenance of a constricted reality is in the well known lie told to the holocaust victims that the gas chambers were only delousing facilities. For most people their knowledge of the double-talk alive in this atrocity ends there. The structure of this utterly logical and totally sane language goes far beyond a simple lie in the camps. Calling gas chambers “baths” is only one example of the entire vocabulary of extermination that existed at Auschwitz. Throughout Merton’s poem there are many examples of this legitimization of mass destruction.

In the same way that “sanity” was shown to be equated with obedient destruction and murder, words like “satisfaction,” “accommodate,” “purify,” and “clean, all take on new meaning in the moral vocabulary of Nazi Germany at Auschwitz. This new language allows Hoess’s statement that “I installed a perfectly good machine it gave satisfaction to many” to take on a respectable meaning and gloss over the fact that the purpose of this “perfectly good machine” was mass murder.<sup>8</sup> Merton’s poem continues to show the reader the stark “sanity” of Nazi vocabulary with the words “efficient” and “satisfaction”: “it was not hot water that came through vents though efficient winds gave full satisfaction.” Merton goes on to observe that, though “accommodate” implies to “make comfortable,” that in Nazi vocabulary they brag “we built our gas chambers to accommodate 2000 people at a time” (CGB, p. 241). Merton further emphasizes this double-talk by inserting the words “clean” and “purify” in many of the places where “gas” and “burn” might be used. The poem opens with the lines:

How he made them sleep and purified them  
 How we perfectly cleaned up the people.

The full institutionalization and objectification of this legitimization of murder occurs when it is seen as a matter of course, a part of a given set of social rules. “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.”

More examples of this logical legitimization of mass destruction is seen in Eichmann’s general plan for the extermination of the Jews, called in ultimate and horrific play on words, “The Final Solution” (Shirer, p, 963). For the Nazis the word “solution” became synonymous with murder. This explicit legitimization of mass murder is put into perspective when we realize that it was only one part of an entire symbolic universe created by the Nazis. This is the universe posited by Adolf Hitler’s “lie” in *Mein Kampf* that the “Aryan race” is superior.

Finally, one can see that this “logical” language is a vehicle of reality maintenance and that “Chant” is an exercise in what Merton calls “the double-talk of totalism.” This language, though, was not alive only between a “few fanatical S. S. leaders,; but was internalized by Germans both inside and outside of the camps. The letters sent to Hoess from the German businesses competing to build the gas chambers at Aushwitz claimed that “with faultless workmanship [they would] deliver very fast goods” (*NA*, p. 262). But, lest we think that this language used by Hoess and German businesses is the extent of the problem of mass destruction, or that such “perfect obedience” is simply an isolated incident in German history, Merton ends his poem with a sharp indictment of the modern world that forces the reader to accept the frightening universal character of a language and logic that legitimizes mass murder.

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 not think yourself better because you burn up  
 friends and enemies with long-range missiles  
 without ever seeing what you have done

### NOTES

1. William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), pp. 972-973. Hereafter referred to as Shirer.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*; edited by Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), p. 15. Hereafter referred to as *NA*.
3. All the quotations in the preceding paragraphs are taken from “A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann,” *NA*, pp. 160-162.
4. Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*; edited & translated by Stanley Corngold (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), p. 3. Hereafter referred to as Kafka.
5. Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976), p. 192.
6. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), p. 305. Hereafter referred to as Mott.
7. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday Image, 1968), p. 241.
8. All quotations from Merton’s “Chant to be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces” are taken from *NA* pp. 261-262.