

THOMAS MERTON
AND HANNAH ARENDT:
Contemplation after Eichmann

by **Karl A. Plank**

*As for the liar, fear him less
Than one who thinks himself sincere,
Who, having deceived himself,
Can deceive you with a good conscience.*

Thomas Merton

*When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does
and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their
refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action.*

Hannah Arendt

*He who believes can experience no miracle. During the day one does not
see any stars.*

Franz Kafka

VOICES HEARD IN SILENCE

Human life bears the freight of dialogue. Whether we live alone or in the near company of each other, our lives are shaped by a speaking and hearing that involve us in realities greater than ourselves. Uttered dialogue, in its living immediacy, bridges the separateness of selves with words of relation and calls us to respond to a voice not of our own making. Solitude, as well, may welcome a voice heard in memory or held by the imagination and thereby host the presence of an other in its silent domain.

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As he reflected on the promise of his Mount Olivet hermitage, Thomas Merton acknowledges the company of voices heard in silence. He writes:

There is a mental ecology, too, a living balance of spirits in this corner of the woods. There is room here for many other songs besides those of birds Here is heard the clanging prose of Tertullian, with the dry catarrh of Sartre. Here the voluble dissonances of Auden, with the golden sounds of John of Salisbury. Here is the deep vegetation of that more ancient forest in which the angry birds, Isaias and Jeremias, sing. Here should be, and are, feminine voices from Angela of Foligno to Flannery O'Connor, Theresa of Avila, Juliana of Norwich, and, more personally and warmly still, Raissa Maritain. It is good to choose the voices that will be heard in these woods, but they also choose themselves, and send themselves here to be present in this silence.¹

Merton's paean to "the voices that will be heard in these woods" — in essence, a list of authors with whose works he was seeking intimacy — provides no meager metaphor for the solitary's dialogue. Reading may remove us from the context of living speech but, no less than conversation, holds the potential to call us into response. In reading we encounter something external to ourselves, a text whose meaning may lead us into self-examination, stirring feelings of kinship or inciting profound change. Once chosen, such texts intrude into our lives. They "choose themselves, and send themselves here to be present." We cannot easily ignore them, for once we admit them into our consciousness, they become part of the fabric of our identity. From that point on, these texts assume a voice that haunts and consoles, but rarely lets us alone.²

Readers become writers. In solitude they respond to the presence of other voices with texts of their own. Merton recognized the responsive character of writing and understood even his personal notebooks to have the character of "implicit dialogue." In the preface to *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* he writes:

. . . these notes add up to a personal version of the world in the 1960s. In elaborating such a version one unavoidably tells something of himself, for

1. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger*; ed. by Robert E. Daggy (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), pp. 35-37.

2. The distinction between oral media and written communication has become a commonplace in hermeneutic theory. See, e.g., Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), pp. 25-44 and Walter J. Ong, S.J., *The Presence of the Word* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970). This distinction, however, should not lead us to diminish the significance of reading as a dialogic act, albeit one with its own dynamic. The point parallels the monastic tradition's seriousness about *lectio* as an activity that involves the reader's whole person with the power of a text (i.e., Scripture), an involvement that leads to self-knowledge, conviction, change, and profoundly, to *oratio*. See Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*; trans. by Catherine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), pp. 71-73 and "Western Prayer and Contemplation," in *Christian Spirituality. Origins to the Twelfth Century*; ed. by B. McGinn & J. Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1985), pp. 417-419.

what a man truly is can be discovered only through his self-awareness in a living and actual world. But these pages are not a venture in self-revelation or self-discovery. Nor are they a pure soliloquy. *They are an implicit dialogue with other minds, a dialogue in which questions are raised.*³

Though Merton's writing characteristically constructs "a personal version of the world," that version itself admits and responds to the presence of other voices. Neither their puppet nor their profligate, Merton writes with a sense of engagement, a coincidence of hearing and speaking. The questions which would ensoul his writing emerge in no vacuum, but from his encounter with other voices in a shared world.

Although Merton does not mention her among the feminine voices in his corner of the woods, one of his earlier partners in the "implicit dialogues" of *Conjectures* is the Jewish political philosopher, Hannah Arendt.⁴ Indeed, Arendt's voice, familiar from previous readings of *The Human Condition* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, continued to compel Merton's attention from 1963 forward in the form of her haunting portrait of Adolf Eichmann, the S. S. officer in charge of deporting millions of Jews to the death camps of the Third Reich.⁵ In this paper I focus upon Merton's reading and appropriation of Arendt, particularly her Eichmann report, and explore the notion of contemplation as a response to the Eichmann predicament as they both understood it.

THOMAS MERTON AND HANNAH ARENDT

We do not know what, if anything, Merton knew of the life of Hannah Arendt. For instance, no correspondence seems to have occurred between them, a surprising fact given Merton's inclination to write authors whose works compelled his interest. If he had known of her biography one finds it easy to imagine his sense of being a marginal self resonating with her affinity for the "pariah." Arendt's biographer, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl writes:

The friends of every sort and also the historical figures with whom Arendt felt special affinities, like Rosa Luxemburg and Rahel Varnhagen, had one

3. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1968), p.5. Emphasis is my own.

4. Note *Conjectures*, especially pp. 285-290 which concern Merton's response to Arendt's Eichmann report.

5. Arendt's report of the 1961 Eichmann trial originally appeared in *The New Yorker* during February and March 1963. In May 1963 her material was published in book form under the title *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963). Hereafter cited in the text as *Eichmann*.

characteristic in common: each was, in his or her own way, an outsider. In Hannah Arendt's personal lexicon, *wirkliche Menschen*, real people, were "pariahs." Her friends were not outcasts, but outsiders, sometimes by choice and sometimes by destiny. In the broadest sense they were unassimilated. "Social nonconformism," she once said bluntly, "is the *sine qua non* of intellectual achievement." And she might well have added, also of human dignity . . . Hannah Arendt maintained her independence and she expected her friends to do the same.⁶

In this respect Merton resembles Arendt's friends and she those free persons with whom he felt deep kinship.

By 1963, when Merton first encountered Arendt's *New Yorker* series on Eichmann, he already knew certain of her major works. On 13 May 1960 he wrote to John Harris: "I have been reading a fabulous book, *The Human Condition* by Hannah Arendt, the one who wrote such a good one on *Totalitarianism*. This is very fine, once one gets into it. And for once someone is saying something really new, though it is also really old. I recommend it."⁷ According to Michael Mott, the next day's journal entry similarly indicated that he was reading *The Human Condition* and that this "had disturbed [him] as greatly as reading Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*."⁸ If, in Merton's eyes, Shirer had chronicled the Nazi collusion of technology and death, Arendt's analysis of modernity described an eclipse of genuinely political (and thus, for her, human) value for which the Nazi program might furnish the most blatant instance.⁹ The "fabulous" character of *The Human Condition* — that which Merton might have found to be "really new" and yet "also really old" — rests in Arendt's stubborn refusal to surrender the meaning of human activity to the constraints of its modern context and her retrieval of the Greek notion of free "action" as a distinguishing feature of human life. Merton could only have read of these things with a sense of collegiality.¹⁰

6. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. xv.

7. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*; ed. by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 395.

8. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 396. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Mott*.

9. For Merton's interest in this aspect of Shirer, note *Conjectures*, pp. 241-242. For Arendt's analysis of modernity, see *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 248-325. We should note that, for Arendt, the term "political" implies not our usual connotation of "governmental," but refers more fundamentally to that which occurs whenever men and women act freely with and in the midst of one another (thus *Human Condition*, pp. 192-207).

10. The philosophical and public tone of Arendt's writing should not divert us from seeing in *The Human Condition* a commitment kindred to Merton's own. Arendt's refusal to accept the constraints of modern culture as a definitive context for human life exercises the same impulse as Merton's "world-renunciation" or detachment as, for instance, when he writes: "... what I abandoned when 'I left the world' and came to the monastery was the *understanding of myself* that I had developed in the context of civil society — my identification with what appeared to be its aims" (*Conjectures*, p. 47). Moreover, Arendt's

Regardless of interest, Merton's reading of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* did not issue in significant written response.¹¹ Such is not the case, however, when he takes up Arendt's Eichmann report. His journal entry for 27 March 1963 indicates that he is reading Arendt's *New Yorker* articles and is devastated by them (Mott, pp. 396 and 625, n. 308). That devastation gave rise to several different writings which have their roots in Arendt's account of the Eichmann trial: a) the reflections published in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*; b) the poem, "Epitaph for a Public Servant;" and c) the essay, "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann." Following a discussion of Arendt's own thesis regarding Eichmann, we will consider each of the writings in turn.

ARENDR AND THE "BANALITY OF EVIL"

Merton was not the only one called into response by Arendt's Eichmann report. The publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* created a vitriolic controversy whose fallout continues to be evident in studies of the holocaust.¹² In certain respects, the complex burden of the Eichmann trial made controversy inevitable. Before its attendant legacy of incomprehensible suffering and atrocity, no judgment could be adequate nor interpretation of events satisfactory. Moreover, any judgment or interpretation could only risk intrusion upon, if not betrayal of, the intensely personal memories

notion of "action" as an expression of a distinctive human freedom and *not* of necessity ("labor") nor utility ("work") locates that which is peculiarly human in a realm familiar to the Merton who writes: "He who receives the grace of this kind of religious illumination is given a freedom and an experience which leave him no longer fully and completely subject to the forces of nature, to his own bodily and emotional needs, to the merely external and human dictates of society, the tyranny of dictatorships. This is to say that his attitude to life is independent of the power inevitably exercised over him, exteriorly, by natural forces, by the trials and accidents of life, by the pressures of a not always rational collectivity" (*Conjectures*, pp. 88-89).

11. His references to these works is largely citational or allusive. See, e.g., the quotations from *Totalitarianism in Conjectures* (pp. 104 and 108) and the reference to *The Human Condition in Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 7. Note also Merton's passing references to Arendt's article, "Truth and Politics," in *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 249-250; and to her introduction of Bernd Naumann's *Auschwitz* in "Auschwitz: A Family Camp," *The Nonviolent Alternative* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), p. 150. On the taped lecture, "Second Century Apologists: Tertullian," Merton refers to Arendt as the one who wrote the extremely good book on *Totalitarianism* and acknowledges her "subtle, deep classical background." He goes on to say in a manner that will be familiar to listeners of the taped lectures, "She sounds like Tertullian, though Tertullian writes about ten times better than she does." See Tape # 14a, Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky.

12. For an overview of the controversy, see Young-Bruehl, pp. 347-378. Note also the following: *Die Kontroverse* (Munich: Nymphenburger, 1964); Randolph L. Braham, *The Eichmann Case: A Source Book* (New York: World Federation of Hungarian Jews, 1969), pp. 144-174; and Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*; ed. by Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978), pp. 225-279.

of horror that surrounded the trial.¹³ When coupled with Arendt's bold style and subtle use of concepts, these seeds of controversy yielded bitter, aggressive conflict.

The controversy focused primarily on three dimensions of Arendt's report: a) her guiding thesis that Eichmann, in his utter normality, manifested the banality of evil; b) her criticism of the conduct of the *Judenraete*, the Jewish councils, during the deportation stage of the "final solution;" and c) her probing inquiry into legal and political dimensions of the trial. Though each of these aspects raised acute issues, much of the actual conflict was exacerated by her critics' blatant distortion of what she had written. Arendt's own view of the trial challenged certain "versions of survival," interpretations of an event made by those persons whom the event has victimized.¹⁴ Thus, what she had written could not provoke, because it called into question basic assumptions out of which other persons had sought the meaning of their own profound suffering.¹⁵ But what she did not say also provoked as, in the controversy, her critics unfairly took the banality of evil for the banality of suffering and her unfortunate discussion of the *Judenraete* for comment on the Jewish people as a whole, including those victimized in the camps.

Arendt's thesis concerning the banality of evil dominated Merton's attention more than did her historical and political questions. Accordingly, we will point our discussion toward exposition of this thesis. For Arendt, reflections on the banality of evil began with her perception of the ordinariness of Eichmann. The obscene atrocity of Auschwitz seemingly required in the human imagination a diabolical beast to account for its horror and Eichmann's prosecutor stood ready to deliver such a beast with repeated declarations of "and there sits the monster responsible for all this."¹⁶ But no amount of rhetoric could transform "the figure in the glass booth" into a dark villain of hatred or psychopathic fury of malevolence. To everyone's

13. In this regard, see Elie Wiesel, "A Plea for the Dead," in *Legends of Our Time* (New York, Schocken, 1982), pp. 174-192. Michael Berenbaum has argued that Wiesel intends this essay as an attack upon Arendt's work but, even so, the point would transcend the limitations of her book to include virtually any attempt to interpret the holocaust, especially from socio-historical perspectives. See *The Vision of the Void: Theological Reflections on the Works of Elie Wiesel* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), pp. 194-200.

14. On "versions of survival," see Lawrence L. Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany, SUNY, 1982).

15. In particular, her thesis that Eichmann's evil had its source in an all too ordinary banality challenged attempts to underscore the extraordinary character of the suffering by pointing to an extraordinary agent.

16. Arendt's quotation of Gideon Hausner, *Eichmann*, p. 8. Arendt recognized that the prosecution's strategy presupposed Eichmann to be a "perverted sadist" and thus intended to "display Bluebeard in the dock" (p. 276).

surprise, including Arendt's, Eichmann displayed virtually no extraordinary capacity for hatred or anything else. Young-Bruehl notes that Arendt's "first reaction to the 'man in the glass booth' in Jerusalem was that he was *nicht einmal unheimlich*, 'not even sinister,' not inhuman or beyond comprehension. She was startled."¹⁷ So were many others when the unmasking of Satan showed him to look and act much like the rest of us.

Eichmann's ordinariness went beyond appearance to claim a chilling psychological normality. In his environment he "fit in;" he behaved as expected and more or less like everyone else. As Arendt depicted him, the Nazi bureaucrat adapted so well to his milieu that he became virtually indistinct from it, buying a certain absence of personal turmoil through an obedient adjustment to atrocity. Free from obsession with base motives and hatred, unplagued by demons of conscience, and loyal to the norms of his social context, Eichmann was certified by at least six psychiatrists as "normal":¹⁸

"More normal, at any rate, than I am after having examined him," one of them was said to have exclaimed, while another had found that his whole psychological outlook, his attitude toward his wife and children, mother and father, brothers, sisters, and friends, was "not only normal but most desirable" — and finally the minister who had paid regular visits to him in prison after the Supreme Court had finished hearing his appeal reassured everybody by declaring Eichmann to be "a man with very positive ideas." Behind the comedy of the soul experts lay the hard fact that his was obviously no case of moral let alone legal insanity. (*Eichmann*, pp. 25-26)

Eichmann's normality reflected only that he was no exception within the Nazi regime, a fact that created a dilemma which Arendt saw clearly. The corollary to Eichmann's well-adapted normality was simply that "under the

17. Hannah Arendt, p. 329 (from a letter of 15 April 1961 written by Arendt to her husband, Heinrich Bluecher). The perception was not Arendt's alone. Avner Less, who interrogated Eichmann for the Israeli police, recalls: "My first reaction when the prisoner finally stood facing us . . . was one of disappointment. I no longer know what I had expected — probably the sort of Nazi you see in the movies: tall, blond, with piercing blue eyes and brutal features expressive of domineering arrogance. Whereas this rather thin, balding man not much taller than myself looked utterly ordinary." *Eichmann Interrogated: Transcripts from the Archives of the Israeli Police*; ed. by J. von Lang; trans. by R. Manheim (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983), p. v.

18. One of the haunting dimensions of the Eichmann case is that his gross crime is motiveless, at least in the sense of lacking any particular animus toward the Jews whose extermination he was bringing about. Were orders given to annihilate some other group Eichmann would have complied just as easily (*Eichmann*, p. 25). Moreover, not only did he lack base motives toward his Jewish victims (p. 30), but he lacked real motives altogether in his general conduct. For example, "he did not enter the Party out of conviction, nor was he ever convinced by it — whenever he was asked to give his reasons, he repeated the same embarrassed clichés about the Treaty of Versailles and unemployment; rather, as he pointed out in court, 'it was like being swallowed up by the Party against all expectations and without previous decision. It happened so quickly and suddenly.' He had no time and less desire to be properly informed, he did not even know the Party program, he never read *Mein Kampf*. Kaltenbrunner had said to him: Why not join the S. S.? And he had replied, Why not?" (p. 33). Arendt notes, "as for his conscience, he remembered perfectly well that he would have had a bad conscience only if he had not done what he had been ordered to do — to ship millions of men, women, and children to their death with great zeal and the most meticulous care" (*Eichmann*, p. 25; note also, pp. 91 and 95).

conditions of the Third Reich only 'exceptions' could be expected to react 'normally' " (*Eichmann*, pp. 26-27). Could Eichmann, in and precisely because of his normality, know the criminal nature of his acts? In his sanity could he judge right from wrong?

If Arendt saw that Eichmann's evil resulted not from psychological aberration nor from gross and willful malevolence — that he was "not Iago and not Macbeth" (*Eichmann*, p. 287) — she certainly perceived that his evil was nonetheless evil, terrible and terrifying in its normality.¹⁹ This evil of Eichmann, as she understood it, grew from banality and mirrored a "sheer thoughtlessness" (*Eichmann*, p. 287) that pervaded the total behavior of this ordinary doer of monstrous deeds. As the Eichmann example made clear to Arendt, banality, not harmless stupidity, becomes evil in its eclipse of the fundamental activities which allow a human being to judge right from wrong, to know what one is doing, and to be linked meaningfully to others in a community of discourse. Eichmann did not set out to do wrong, but sacrificing to banality his ability to think and speak, neither could he do right — an impairment which, in his "normal" situation, meant also that he could not *not* do wrong. Therein he becomes an agent of atrocity; therein, his evil.

For Arendt, banality was tantamount to the inability to speak or think (*Eichmann*, p. 49). In Eichmann's case this took the form of being devoutly oriented toward clichés, toward the stock phrases and formulas which seemed to elate, but which could only, in effect, isolate him from any reality that might provoke or disturb. What clichés he had not inherited from his environment he unwittingly forged on his own through endless repetition of his own references to incidents which potentially offered elation. Thus, in a rare moment of at least accidental clarity, Eichmann commented: "Officialesé [*Amtssprache*] is my only language." Arendt continues, "But the point here is that officialesé became his language because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché" (*Eichmann*, p. 48). Where clichés furnish the basic rules of play for one's action, thought

19. The motiveless crime is not less scandalous, but all the more so for its underlying indifference robs victims of the distinctiveness and, if one may speak of it in this way, the dignity that even honest hatred confers. Thus Elie Wiesel writes, "To be indifferent — for whatever reason — is to deny not only the validity of existence, but also its beauty. Betray and you are a man; torture your neighbor, you're still a man. Evil [what Arendt would term "wickedness"] is human, weakness is human; indifference is not." *The Town Beyond the Wall* (New York: Schocken, 1982), p. 177. Martin Buber suggests a comparable distinction when he writes, "Yet whoever hates directly is closer to a relation than those who are without love and hate. . . . Primal man's experiences of encounter were scarcely a matter of tame delight; but even violence against a being one really confronts is better than ghostly solicitude for faceless digits! From the former a path leads to God, from the latter only to nothingness." *I and Thou*; trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribners, 1970), pp. 68 and 75.

will appear unnecessary and, in its critical function, undesirable. It will vanish along with the prospect for judging right from wrong and thereby knowing what one is doing.²⁰ Where language is given over to slogan, the genuine speech which relates persons and guards their sense of reality also ceases to exist. Its loss, marking the reign of illusion, prevents a basic accountability for human affairs and denies human beings the task of justification — the possibility of making sense to themselves and each other.²¹ Such an exile of speech and thought leaves a void within which banal selves surrender their power not to do evil and thus become ever vulnerable to agency in monstrous deeds.

Banal selves such as Eichmann can function well in any situation that offers clear rules of play and allows for conduct to assume the nature of a cliché. But once thought and speech have been eclipsed these same persons can no longer judge the rules nor act in contexts where the formulas of right behavior do not apply. Thus Arendt noted:

In the setting of Israeli court and prison procedures hé [Eichmann] functioned as well as he had functioned under the Nazi regime but, when confronted with situations for which such routine procedures did not exist, he was helpless, and his cliché-ridden language produced on the stand, as it had evidently done in his official life, a kind of macabre comedy. (*Mind*, I:4)

Banal persons cannot function in an environment in which they are free to be responsible for the norms of conduct and to act with creative discernment amid human ambiguity. Inevitably seeking *some* context within which they can attain normality, they can be no better than the ethos which they would serve and, having yielded critical capacities, will embody its worst tendencies without compunction. Without speech and thought such persons lack the power to act differently. More pointedly, once they surrender self to the tyranny of normality's cliché, they forfeit the power to act at all.

In Eichmann's case this banality results in a stark loss of self-

20. Thoughtless agents are "unknowing" not in the sense of ignorance or stupidity, i.e., that they do not see the consequences of their action, but that they have given up the vantage point of critical discrimination and thus may deceive themselves that, in its normality, a monstrous deed is somehow right. They know, for instance, that the releasing of Zyklon B in sealed chambers leads to the death of those trapped within, but somehow no longer know that this act of normal political obedience is also heinous murder. Arendt notes that the Nazi affinity for so-called "language rules" [*Sprachregelung*] — "what in ordinary language would be called a lie" — goes hand in hand with the rhetoric of cliché and combines to obscure the reality of any deed (*Eichmann*, pp. 85-86, 287).

21. On the suppression of reality by cliché, see Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977). I:4. Note also Arendt's reminders that where speech is denied its power to reveal the personhood of its speaker (as in the case of every cliché), the collusion of words and violence are never far behind (*Human Condition*, pp. 179-180).

cognizance (the basis for the “macabre comedy” Arendt perceived). Left perforce to role-play himself Eichmann’s clichés mired him in blatant contradictions which reveal not so much guile as alarming self-deception. Nowhere does the absence of self-cognizance appear more striking than in the gallows rhetoric of Eichmann. Wishing long life for Germany, Argentina, and Austria, Eichmann concluded his last words with the cliché reserved for funeral oratory: “I shall not forget them.” Elated by the slogan, he had failed to perceive that this was his own funeral. Accompanying such a total blank of insight, Eichmann’s final statement demonstrated to Arendt a “grotesque silliness” and seemed to summarize “the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*” (*Eichmann*, p. 252).

If the force of banality could be seen only in its reflection of the banal person, then we would view in Eichmann a “pathetic comedy,” a perverse drama within which the actor never attains the gravity of self-awareness or serious intent. As Arendt saw, Eichmann dies as a victim to his own banality, ultimately trivializing even his own death. But, in effect, banality such as Eichmann’s does not confine itself to the banal person. It enters the common world with serious consequence for all those who live therein and depend upon human responsibility for the sustenance and quality of life. On the one hand, banal persons cannot genuinely act in response to another human, for their conduct is circumscribed by the rules governing their self-serving normality. On the other hand, this limitation means that not only have the banal become a cliché to themselves but, in their eyes, every other has become similarly objectified, robbed of the pertinence of his or her own speech and thought and the rights that such confers. Given any authority, the deeds of the banal can only turn oppressive, for banality cannot tolerate human distinctiveness — that which makes us all exceptions — any better in others than in its own herd. The human distinctiveness which makes speech and thought vitally necessary challenges the rhetoric of cliché and the normal conduct which issues from it. Accordingly, in a season of banality the distinct presence of others must be suppressed along with that human voice lost somewhere within the banal self. In the pursuit of normality the banal may banish from their world those real persons which call them to speak and think as unique selves. The status of normality will assure them that to destroy the alien or the exceptional is no mistake. As Arendt’s portrait of Eichmann ever reminds, here the pathetic comedy of banality becomes the haunting tale of evil, grave and consuming.

MERTON'S CONTEMPLATION OF EICHMANN:

CONJECTURES ON THE BANALITY OF EVIL

Merton's reflections collected in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* contain several discussions of the holocaust including his consideration of Arendt's Eichmann report.²² These pages, along with the poem "Epitaph to a Public Servant" and the essay "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann," comprise Merton's written response to Arendt's depiction of Eichmann and are the only places where he so explicitly engages in dialogue with her text. In *Conjectures*, as in the other writings, he appropriates Arendt's thesis as a base from which he articulates certain implications of the Eichmann event.

Noting the shattering power of Arendt's text, Merton finds in Eichmann's case an indictment of the world's conscience that gives the trial a scope larger than the reckoning of Eichmann's individual fate. Merton gleans the trial's global indictment from the seeming inadequacy of any judgment rendered to Eichmann. In confronting Eichmann, not only do the "stereotyped answers fall all to pieces" but so do the forensic concepts of morality and the legal machinery they would authorize (*Conjectures*, pp. 286 and 288). Accordingly, at one level, the trial indicts the Western world for the impotence of its moral and legal traditions: they cannot sufficiently respond to Eichmann's atrocities. But at another level, as Merton saw, the limitation of those traditions share in the making of Eichmann, or at least in the creation of his conspicuous sense of guiltlessness. Echoing Arendt, Merton writes:

What judgment could *add anything* to the judgment already implied in the fact that a man who was by certain accepted standards quite honest, respectable, sane, and efficient could do the things he did without feeling that he was wrong? The judgment falls not on Eichmann alone, but on our whole society. (*Conjectures*, p. 288)

That "certain accepted standards" failed to challenge Eichmann's sanity indicts those standards and the persons allegiant to them. In this way the social dimension of Eichmann's case issues in an accusation of the world which hosted his crimes against humanity.²³

22. In addition to Merton's discussion of Arendt (pp. 285-290), note the comments on W. L. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (pp. 241-243) and Quasimodo's poem, "Auschwitz" (pp. 57-58).

23. The social dimension of the Eichmann case is customarily put in terms of the relation between Eichmann's activity and the immediate social ethos of Nazi Germany. Yet that social ethos, no isolated or remote entity, brings with it the larger traditions of Western culture. The crisis of that culture's religious,

Merton's concern is not to diminish Eichmann's guilt, but to include the guilty bystander in its responsibility. No one can assume a safe vantage, detached from the implications of the Eichmann trial: Eichmann has been and remains a part of our world. Here Merton recognizes that in certain of our own seemingly acceptable activities we act in ways that resemble Eichmann. Not only do we host the company of Eichmann, but we ourselves *become* Eichmann in moments of banality or blind obedience. Thus, Merton brings near the spectre of Eichmann, pointing to its presence even in the context of monastic life. He writes:

The awful details of this case can give monks food for thought. Are novices not sometimes trained to "do everything as if the abbot were watching you?" Are monks and priests not sometimes extremely upset over acts that are in fact good, not bad, but which happen to violate some tiny detail of a conventional code of observance. Is it not after all familiar to see that, when there is a choice between real charity and human compassion on one hand, and the violation of a punctilious usage on the other . . . they will prefer to violate charity rather than the observance? Violation of the observance would make them feel far more guilty . . .

(*Conjectures*, pp. 287-288)

Merton's reference to monastic communities, however, provides only a case in point for his warning that *wherever* habits of complacency or conformity supplant critical commitment Eichmann gains a posthumous long life. Though the banalities of cliché and blind allegiances have not everywhere erupted into programs of genocide, they pervade religious and political life in such a way that resist any facile separation of Eichmann's situation and the banalities of seemingly moral communities. Merton's point is simply that banality is banality: its benign forms differ from Eichmann only in degree, not in kind, and therefore themselves remain vulnerable to complicity in deeds of destruction.

Merton emphasizes in *Conjectures* that one cannot confine Eichmann's verdict to him alone: at best, the world is Eichmann's guilty bystander; at worst, his witting or unwitting compatriot in a banality ripe for evil.²⁴ If this global indictment warns Merton's readers of the dangers of

political, and humanistic traditions are here manifest both in the defendant and the world of those who must judge not only him, but indirectly themselves. It is in this respect that Merton speaks of the trial as an indictment of the Western conscience. It should go without saying that the crisis of judgment which Merton conceals belongs to the bystander's world and not that of the victim. Indeed, from a basis that transcends the concepts of morality and law, the victim's experience judges both Eichmann and the Western bystander.

24. It is in this last sense that Merton interprets Eichmann's words at the gallows as a refusal to be dismissed from the world, a refusal tantamount to saying, "Your world is full of me, I am all over the place, I am legion; and you, whether you like it or not, are going to take the same long course in wickedness and study all its details. When you have finally, with great labor learned it all, you will be even more banal and more appalling than I" (*Conjectures*, p. 290). Arendt would have agreed with Merton's sense of the legionary existence of Eichmann, but would not have ascribed such awareness to Eichmann himself.

their own indifference, it also intends to make them wary of interpreting the human situation in terms of moral principles which themselves may become banal and enslaving. On the one hand, those principles are shattered by the Eichmann trial itself, by Eichmann's appeal to his own moral virtues (*Conjectures*, p. 287). On the other hand, in their abstraction from particular human contexts, such principles may encourage an ethical banality that finds one, like Eichmann, engaging in concrete evil though with moral principles fully intact. Though Merton does not want to give up morality to a nihilism "that only opens the way to a more complete surrender to a more absolute irrationality, a more total cruelty" (p. 286), the Eichmann story makes untenable for him any retreat into moral confidence based on the rationality of principles. For Merton, one cannot respond to Eichmann with moral answers for, in a certain sense, they themselves are the problem. As such, *Conjectures* calls not only for a nightwatch against banality, but for a mode of ethical deliberation that insists upon "an existential respect for the human reality of each situation" (p. 288) and interrogates the conscience with claims of the concrete world. One forgets with peril that, in the abstract, Eichmann was a morally principled man.

EPITAPH FOR EICHMANN

In 1961, the year of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, Merton had written his signature Auschwitz poem, "Chant to be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces."²⁵ This poem experiments with a technique common in "found art" or *assemblage*, a sculpture movement popular in the 1950s.²⁶ As "found art" sought to take various common objects — whatever one might "find" — and unite them in one aesthetic form, here Merton takes verbal litter from his reading of Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, constructing from quotations of Rudolf Hoess a haunting portrayal of a death camp commander.²⁷ This same technique shapes Merton's poem, "Epitaph for a Public Servant," which bears the motto, "In

25. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 345-349. The poem appeared in *The Catholic Worker* during the Eichmann trial and its wide reprinting included publication in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's first *Journal for the Protection of All Beings* (1961). See Therese Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1979), p. 44.

26. For the designation of "Chant" as a "found poem," see Mott, p. 364.

27. Therese Lentfoehr suggests the probability that Merton had Eichmann in mind as the protagonist of "Chant" (p. 44). The poem's method of construction, however, would lead to another conclusion. Merton clearly bases his poem on Shirer's quotation of Rudolf Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz. Moreover, the commandant role so evident in the poem cannot be seen as Eichmann's, though the links between the atrocities of Hoess and Eichmann should be obvious enough.

Memoriam — Adolf Eichmann.” In “Epitaph” Merton takes direct quotations from Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, fragmenting them, isolating them from their discursive contexts, and repeating them endlessly in various juxtapositions.²⁸

Read straightforwardly, “Epitaph” makes little sense. An exercise in anti-poetry, it does not intend to.²⁹ The poem’s semantic content, like Eichmann’s own speech, is vacuous, but its effect stuns: without the diversion of discursive comment the reader confronts starkly the banality of Eichmann’s slogans, the procession of cliché and empty confession. If Merton’s *Conjectures*’ entry articulated the implications of Eichmann’s banality, “Epitaph” leads the reader to experience it verbally, to weary at its repetition, and thus prepares to protest against its continuance. The poem, though, is not simple. Merton presents Eichmann’s slogans in such a way as to insure perception of their banality and the absurdity of their meaning when taken together. Thus, more than repetition, “Epitaph” brings about a synoptic reading of Eichmann’s sayings — a near fugue of banality — that exposes the shallowness and ironic contradictions of Eichmann’s speech.

The following example should convey the spirit of the poem and illustrate Merton’s technique in “Epitaph.”³⁰ When, in a discussion of Himmler’s 1944 offer to exchange a million Jews for ten thousand trucks, Eichmann was asked if he himself had expressed any pity for the Jews, he replied: “Not out of mercy did I launch this transaction” (*Eichmann*, p. 25). “Epitaph” opens with Arendt’s direct quotation of this reply and proceeds to repeat various fragments of it in relation to other aspects of Eichmann’s behavior. Thus, the second stanza of the poem finds these fragments modifying the psychiatrist’s testimony that Eichmann’s family relations were “not only normal but desirable,” (*Eichmann*, p. 26), a counselling minister’s assessment that he was “a man with very positive ideas” (*Eichmann*, p. 26), and Eichmann’s own claim that his “whole education through [his] father and mother had been strictly Christian” (*Eichmann*, p. 30) and

28. See *Collected Poems*, pp. 703-711. “Epitaph” was first published in the May 1967 issue of *Motive*, the magazine for the Methodist Student Movement. Its actual date of composition, however, is problematic. These Lentfoehr’s contention that “Epitaph” was written at about the same time as “Chant” (1961) cannot be correct (*Words and Silence*, p. 44). Merton bases “Epitaph” on Arendt’s Eichmann report in the same way as he had used Shirer’s *Rise and Fall* as the source for “Chant” [see Appendix]. Thus “Epitaph” could not have been written by Merton before March 1963 when he first encountered Arendt’s work.

29. “Epitaph” is anti-poetic in its use of fragmentation and dislocation, insisting that a reader reconstruct reality from disordered bits of direct experience. The materials of the anti-poem are cut free from the customary sense-making conventions out of the poet’s concern not to impose meaning on experience, but to let that experience bluntly speak for itself.

30. For further display of Merton’s technique, see the appendix (“The Source for Merton’s ‘Epitaph for a Public Servant’”) provided at the end of this article.

that “he ‘personally’ never had anything whatever against Jews; on the contrary, he had plenty of ‘private reasons’ for not being a Jew hater (*Eichmann*, p. 26). This second stanza reads as follows:

Relations with father mother brother
Sister most normal
Most desirable
Not out of mercy
A man
With positive ideas
(This transaction)
A Christian
Education
(Not out of mercy)
With private reasons
For not hating Jews (*Collected Poems*, pp. 703-704)

The juxtaposition of Eichmann’s claim to the merciless transaction with these other assertions empties them of any meaning they might have held in some other “language game.” The juxtaposition mires these utterances in the contradiction of a Christian education that yields no mercy, of a capacity for positive ideas that coexists with motiveless genocide, and of a normal, desirable family life that coincides with an indifference to millions of Jews that could send them to the gas chambers or exchange them for trucks both with equal compunction.

At the same time, the repetition of Eichmann’s reply leads the reader to suspect something of the assertion’s own banality; that it, too, exists as a slogan that may have no congruence with truth. The illusion is not that somehow Eichmann retained a secret mercy, but that in the elation of the cliché he ascribes to himself the more powerful role of Himmler: in truth, neither with nor without mercy does Eichmann “launch this transaction” (*Eichmann*, p. 25). Yet, as the effect of “Epitaph” makes clear, the scandal lies not in simple falsehood, but in the absurdity that reigns whenever truth and language part company. With no less than nineteen citations from Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Merton weaves the fabric of “Epitaph” that recreates for its reader the tangle of Eichmann’s absurdity and makes unavoidable the weary perception of evil’s banality.³¹

31. The numerous quotations of Arendt (and her quotations of Eichmann) suggest that one might further study “Epitaph” in the context of documentary art, i.e., art which constructs its representation of reality primarily from fragments of *realia* such as documents, letters, transcripts, newspaper and broadcast reports, etc. Documentary art, a prevalent mode of holocaust literature, can be seen in such works as Peter Weiss’s drama, *Die Ermittlung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1965); English version, *The Investigation* by Jon Swan and Ulu Grosbard (New York: Atheneum, 1966). Weiss bases his play extensively and in detail on the court records of the 1964-65 Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt. On documentary art and holocaust literature, see Sidra Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980),

THE DEVOUT MEDITATION

The third text in which Merton responds to Arendt's volume, "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann," amply paraphrases her depiction of Eichmann's sanity, his lack of disturbance that is itself so disturbing.³² While sending millions of Jewish men, women, and children to their deaths, Eichmann experiences no guilt; he eats and sleeps well. Devoted to his duty, he has pride and a certain peace of mind gained in the knowledge that he is normal, that within his context he acts in the same manner that anyone else would. While Merton adds little to Arendt's description, he proceeds to make explicit and unavoidable the implication of her study: namely, that such sanity as Eichmann's, derived from arbitrary social norms, has nothing to do with being in one's right mind. "Fitting in," or not being "impeded by [one's] disordered emotions from acting in a cool, orderly manner, according to the needs and dictates of the social situation in which [one] finds [oneself]" can scarcely guarantee right-mindedness for, as Merton puts it, the banal "can be perfectly adjusted even in hell itself" (*Raids*, p. 47). Anxiety, that disturbing voice so conspicuously absent in Eichmann, if not a constitutive feature of human identity, remains the only voice in touch with reality when human identity is threatened by inhumanity. At such times it is not dis-ease, but the peaceful no-mindedness of banality that denies true sanity and with it, the prospect of love and compassion. Perceiving no threat to one's own humanity — not even in a world gone mad — one remains blind to what imperils the life of another. For this reason, Merton reminds, in certain contexts "the worst insanity is to be totally without anxiety, totally 'sane'" (*Raids*, p. 49).³³

Though it is only a case in point, Merton clearly has in mind here the context of life after Hiroshima, life in the midst of nuclear threat. The spirit of Eichmann, for Merton, lurked dangerously within the issue of the bomb,

pp. 24-48; and James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 64-80.

32. In *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 45-49. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Raids*. For an interpretation of this essay, see Karl A. Plank, "Meditating on Merton's Eichmann," *The Christian Century* 102 (9 October 1985): pp. 894-895.

33. Merton's point shares a clear affinity with certain contemporary works of fiction such as Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York: Viking, 1962) as well as psychotherapeutic literature such as R. D. Laing's *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Ballantine, 1967). If the critique of normality was broadly current at the time of the "Devout Meditation," the antecedents for Merton would seem to date back a decade earlier to his first reading of Erich Fromm's *The Sane Society*. Thus, in a 1955 letter to Fromm, Merton writes: "I certainly agree with you that we ought to scrap the notion that mental health is merely a matter of adjustment to the existing society — to be adjusted to a society that is insane is not to be healthy" (in *Hidden Ground*, p. 313). On Merton's use of Fromm, see David D. Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), pp. 244-251.

embodied within those who with “perfectly good reasons, logical, well-adjusted reasons” might actually “press the buttons that will initiate the great festival of destruction that they, *the sane ones* have prepared” (*Raids*, p. 46). Merton’s hermeneutic move from Auschwitz to Hiroshima, from Eichmann to those who parlay nuclear arms, emphasizes again the insight of *Conjectures* with immediacy and urgency: the banality of evil does not stop with Eichmann, nor is it a peculiar feature of our enemies. It is *ours* in every instance in which we eschew the responsibility for thinking what we are doing or compromise the humanness of life in the name of our own shallow well-being.

CONTEMPLATION IN DARK TIMES

During the Eichmann trial the testimony of the Jewish poet and resistance fighter, Abba Kovner, yielded an unusually dramatic moment. Kovner, when asked how he had first heard of Eichmann, mentioned that he had learned of this man who “arranges everything” from a German sergeant named Anton Schmidt. As Kovner proceeded to tell the story of Schmidt’s heroic assistance to members of the Jewish underground — assistance for which he was eventually arrested and executed — a reverential silence settled over the courtroom. Struck by the preciousness of this story and its power to dismantle Eichmann’s appeal to the necessity of his obedience, Arendt commented:

. . . the lesson of such stories is simple and within everybody’s grasp. Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will not*, just as the lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that “it could happen” in most places but *it did not happen everywhere*. Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation. (*Eichmann*, p. 233)

Though legion, Eichmann’s spirit is not absolute. While conditions of domination may imperil the human capacity to act uniquely and banality may lull the impulse for doing so, the story of Anton Schmidt reminds that in the most desperate of seasons persons remain charged with a responsibility for the human quality of life and endowed with the freedom to preserve that humanity or at least to protest its violation.³⁴ As Arendt later wrote:

34. On the function of such protest, see Karl A. Plank, “Raging Wisdom: A Banner of Defiance Unfurled,” *Judaism* 36 (1987): pp. 323-330.

Even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may come . . . from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth.³⁵

If Eichmann manifested sheer thoughtlessness, dark times, Arendt believed, could yet host a spirit of thinking — not so much that of the professional philosopher, but of the person of conscience, like Anton Schmidt, whose uneasiness births a critical attitude toward ideology and piety. Thinking, as Arendt understood it, constitutes the self's own dialogue with itself, a reflexive interrogation that brings to bear a multiple perspective upon whatever matter confronts the self (*Mind*, I: 179-193). Such thinking, in its dyadic character, engenders a conscience — an awareness of a critical voice within oneself — that both accuses and liberates. As accusing, the thinking conscience takes away any complacent satisfaction with clichéd answers that may console or elate but cannot stand the ordeal of examination. As liberating, the thinking conscience frees one from the tyranny of oppressive ideologies by exposing at once their relativity and the prospect of acting in new and surprising ways. Anton Schmidt, as he supplied papers and vehicles for the Jewish partisans in Poland, embodied not only the spirit of the courageous actor, but of Arendt's thinker. His capacity to judge good and evil and to act accordingly presuppose the prior activity of thinking, a habit of conscience that required suspicion of Nazi morality, no matter how dominant in his environment, and a recognition of a basic freedom to act independently of that morality. At dangerous odds with his environment and unwilling to forsake the self-examination of conscience, Schmidt could not claim the ease of Eichmann's sanity; but in his capacity for thinking he was redeemed from the banality of evil and for a righteous martyrdom.

Arendt devoted her final writing, *The Life of the Mind*, to an account of this activity of thinking, explicitly casting it as the singular alternative to Eichmann's banality.³⁶ Where Arendt moves from the Eichmann predicament to a constructive response in her writings on thinking, we might look

35. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), p. ix.

36. Posthumously published, *The Life of the Mind* was a lengthy development of the concerns Arendt had already showed in her seminal article, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," *Social Research* 38 (1971): pp. 417-446. Here, as in the subsequent book, she specifically justifies taking up the category of thinking as a response to the thoughtlessness of Eichmann. Her inquiry into thinking shows a clear moral trajectory as she asks, "Do the inability to think and a disastrous failure of what we commonly call conscience coincide?" and "Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results, could this activity be of such a nature that it 'conditions' men against evil-doing?" ("Thinking," p. 418).

for a comparable move in Merton's prose and poetry. While Merton's writings that explicitly treat Eichmann have focused on the predicament and its implications, his writings on contemplation provide an apt basis for a critique of the banality of evil that gives insight into the nature of Eichmann's banality and offers an alternative to it. Indeed, Merton's notion of contemplation, like that of Arendt's thinking, stands over-against Eichmann as a source of light in the darkest of times.

Though Merton does not specifically consider him in writings other than those we have discussed above, Eichmann appears allusively in much of Merton's prose as an unnamed anti-type of the true contemplative: he is the guiltless ape, pulling levers in space and being "bothered by no metaphysical problems" (*Conjectures*, pp. 60-61).³⁷ He is the self of the crowd who "does not talk [but] produces conventional sounds when stimulated by the appropriate noises," the one who "secretes clichés."³⁸ He is one of those who "will live 'good lives' that are basically inauthentic In order to avoid apparent evil, [he] will ignore the summons of genuine good."³⁹ As Eichmann's *persona* had shaped the countenance of the "sane" ones that Merton so feared, so as anti-type does it inhabit his contemplative writings in the guise of those who have surrendered to false selfhood, the orientation utterly contrary to contemplation.

As Merton perceived him, Eichmann's behavior would show him to be a totally false self, one who is defined exclusively by his social function whose security he protects at all costs (*NS*, pp. 34-36). As such his banality differs from simple shallowness or political naivete and cannot be abstracted from the crisis of existential life which all persons face. For Merton, human life, in its myriad forms of finitude, frightens with a dread that does not go away:

. . . underlying all life is the ground of doubt and self-questioning which sooner or later must bring us face to face with the ultimate meaning of our life. This self-questioning can never be without a certain existential 'dread'

37. The parallel to Eichmann becomes obvious when read in tandem with "A Devout Meditation." If, in that essay, Merton pointed to the danger of Eichmann's sane heirs launching nuclear destruction convinced that "it is no mistake," here he moves from the obedient, guiltless ape to those who may enter space and with obedient guiltlessness blow up the world: "We will not feel guilt in space . . . From Mars or the moon we will blow up the world, perhaps. If we blow up the world from the moon we may feel a little guilt. If we blow it up from Mars we will feel no guilt at all. No guilt at all. We will blow up the world with no guilt at all. Tra la. Push the buttons, press the levers! As soon as they get a factory on Mars for banana-colored apes there will be no guilt at all" (*Conjectures*, p. 61).

38. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962, © 1961), p. 55. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NS*.

39. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1971), pp. 103-104. Hereafter referred to in the text as *CP*.

— a sense of insecurity, of 'lostness,' of exile, of sin. A sense that one has somehow been untrue not so much to abstract moral or social norms but to one's own inmost truth . . . a profound awareness that one is capable of ultimate bad faith with himself and with others: that one is living a lie.
(CP, p. 24)

False selfhood arises as an inauthentic response to that dread, an attempt to avert the crisis of "the ultimate meaning of [human] life" with projects that would intimate human power and determination. False selfhood, that mode of "ultimate bad faith," would supplant the fact of human finitude with the illusion that human beings control the terms of their existence. As such, the false self lives the lie which ignores the reality of its own death. Seen as a false selfhood, the Eichmann predicament cannot be posed as the simple banality of Nazi answers, as if some other ideology would have redeemed this bad faith. Concerned to "fit in" to whatever ethos would take away the dread of existence and give him a secure identity, Eichmann's predicament was to be a slave to banality as such; to serve that pervading, corrupting force that falsifies and deadens whatever reality it would hold. Moreover, slavery to banality, when seen from Merton's contemplative perspective, reflects a deep fear of life and the God who creates its condition. Ethical in its ramifications, the Eichmann predicament is theological at its core.

The life of contemplation counters Eichmann's false-selfhood in a double-edged way. First, as an act of renunciation, contemplation negates the defenses which armor persons against their finitude and thus, also, against the humanity of their life. Contemplation begins with and keeps in view the anxiety from which Eichmann would flee into banality. Second, if contemplation challenges defenses such as Eichmann's, it strikes further at the fearful vision of life which would seemingly warrant defensiveness. No eradicator of anxiety, contemplation seeks instead to enable one to perceive a deeper ordering of life within which one's undeniable finitude can be trusted and accepted.

Renunciation, the first aspect of contemplation that would arrest Eichmann's banality, expresses its roots in a tradition of *contemptus mundi*, an eschatological orientation that holds the world's activity to be ultimately inadequate for human salvation.⁴⁰ As Merton appropriates this tradition, its meaning lies not in a resentful hostility of the world, nor in a detachment from the life which occurs in it, but in a protest of the world's aims as being

40. For Merton's discussion of *contemptus mundi*, see *Conjectures*, pp. 45-53.

sufficient to sustain human life. For the contemplative, *contemptus mundi* means a renunciation not of the world but of its ultimacy: a constant struggle with the human tendency to identify with its values and a firm nonacquiescence when those values are held with absolute seriousness. As such, contemplation takes on an iconoclastic character, destroying the idolatrous links human beings forge with the world in an attempt to escape the threat of finitude. Human emptiness cannot be filled with worldly activity, for projects of the world have no more finality than the fragile person who seeks in them a consoling permanence or significance. "No pain-killer," contemplation is a "steady burning to ashes of old worn-out clichés, slogans, rationalizations . . . a terrible breaking and burning of idols, a purification of the sanctuary, so that no graven things may occupy the place that God has commanded to be left empty" (NS, p. 13).

Contemplation, as iconoclasm, has a self-consuming character that refuses to stop at critique of the world or any of its given objects. It aims not simply at *contemptus mundi*, but at a basic openness of the self to God's presence and thereby must challenge whatever the self would hold as idol. Not only worldly activity, but the pursuits of faith may be conscripted by the self in quest of its own security and at that point stand as idols to be renounced in contemplation.⁴¹ The final idol to be overcome, if "the place that God has commanded to be left empty" is indeed to be empty, is simply one's own self, for there is generated the fear that leads one to seize the world, secular and religious, as a source of refuge; there, in the self, is found the bits and pieces of finite reality that no one wants to take with less than ultimate seriousness. In contemplation, *contemptus mundi* becomes a self-critique, fundamental and thorough.

Deprived of the world as a defense, the contemplative is turned back upon his or her own resource and discovers starkly the ultimate emptiness of the self. Yet this only confirms the suspicion that had prompted false selfhood in the first place and so the contemplative experiences anxiety, the dreadful sense of having no haven from his or her deepest fear. Accordingly, Merton warns, "Let no one hope to find in contemplation an escape from conflict, from anguish or from doubt. On the contrary, the deep, inexpressible certitude of the contemplative experience awakens a tragic

41. The point parallels the insight of J. D. Salinger's memorable character Zooey who says: ". . . as a matter of simple logic, there's no difference at all, that I can see, between the man who's greedy for material treasure — or even intellectual treasure — and the man who's greedy for spiritual treasure. As you say, treasure's treasure, God damn it, and it seems that ninety per cent of all the world-hating saints in history were just as acquisitive and unattractive, basically, as the rest of us are" [*Franny and Zooey* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961), pp. 147-148].

anguish and opens many questions in the depths of the heart like wounds that cannot stop bleeding" (*NS*, p. 12).⁴²

The contemplative's anxiety, intensified in the renunciation of defenses, distances him or her from the undisturbed sanity of Eichmann. Like Arendt's thinkers who must question all answers — including and especially their own — the contemplative faces a heightened uncertainty that knows keenly the provisionality of the human self: born to die, no self can know, articulate, or live the final truth which is God's to reveal — a mystery. Thus, where Eichmann invests the Nazi mythology with the authority of final truth and the power to secure the meaning of his existence, the contemplative's anxiety issues in a basic doubt of any worldly truth and its cheap promise of security. Where Eichmann can, without guilt, deport millions of Jews to their death, contemplatives awaken to the constant reality of their own bad faith and the burden of responsibility. Where Eichmann, asleep to what threatens himself, can acknowledge no jeopardy to others in his mad world, the contemplative's dread provides a source for compassion for those with whom they share the sleepless night. Though profoundly disturbing in experience, the truth of the contemplative's anxiety humanizes in effect. Those who can face it without illusion cannot be seduced by false gods to slay that which is human in themselves and each other.

Still, the contemplative's capacity for anxiety does not fully resolve the predicament of false selfhood. Anxiety, for Merton, was not the goal of contemplation but, rather, the condition within which the contemplative finds freedom from false attachments. So liberated, the contemplative might then discern a deeper vision of life that breaks the compulsion to conform to orders that may themselves be false or empty. By combatting not only human defenses, but the need for defensiveness, contemplation brings to bear its second challenge to Eichmann's banality.

Eichmann's predicament reflects a captivity to illusion about himself, the world of human others, and the ultimate meaning of created life. Seen starkly, life's mortality condemns and the nearness of others endangers with reminders of limitation and futility. So threatening is this perspective that it leads some to flee from life — the very condition which poses the

42. Merton understands that the anxiety which combats false selfhood, an existential anxiety rather than neurotic, has a creative function necessary for growth. Thus, while devastating in its attack upon the false self, such anxiety must be affirmed as a beckoning to maturity. See Merton's review article which treats the work of Reza Arasteh: "Final Integration: Toward a Monastic Therapy," in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (London: Unwin, 1980), pp. 205-217. Note also Cooper, *Art of Denial*, pp. 179-185.

crisis of mortality — and surrender to a banality which promises distraction from the pains of finitude. In his banality, Eichmann binds himself to a vision of a secure self and a world in which others either promote that security or become enemies to be destroyed without compunction; seeking the solace of illusion, he denies death in himself and freedom in the actual others with whom he shares the world.

The contemplative cannot deny the perception of finitude: too rending is the anguish that tears the soul “like wounds that cannot stop bleeding.” Yet, where Eichmann’s banality represses this basic conflict of mortality, the contemplative turns toward the darkness of the human condition and enters its heart more deeply. Accordingly, though Eichmann and the contemplative share a common human condition, they perceive it from different vantage points, a difference which decisively shapes the actions which each undertakes. In flight from finitude, Eichmann escapes to a shallowness that thins life so as virtually to guarantee its collapse, rhetorical warranties notwithstanding. Where all things are viewed under the lens of superficiality no substantial meaning can emerge to frame the darkness which frightens unto banality. The actions of one so frightened can only harbor an unceasing defensiveness that may maim and kill to protect the illusion of security. The contemplative, however, seeks intimacy with the depth of life, especially its darkness. From the vantage of depth the glimpse of any meaning holds the prospect of an enduring truth within the darkness itself. Such a prospect opens the contemplative to the world of human others whose presence may bring darkness near and to the God whose light appears in the shadows of human existence.⁴³

Only by risking life, its finitude no less than its promise, does one gain the vantage from which can be seen an illumination of darkness. Eichmann’s banality mires itself in a desperate cycle, for in the fearful flight from life’s depths he only superficially avoids the crisis of his humanity while remaining completely outside the domain where its meaning is won or lost. The contemplative, however, liberated from false attachments, knows a freedom to pursue life’s depth and thereby finds access to a vision which the banal deny themselves. For Merton, the contemplative enters a desert of darkness and there stands open to a deeper perception of reality, a *paschal* order that finds the presence of God bringing life from death in all its permutations (*CP*, pp. 34 and 106). There in a human wasteland, the

43. For a congenial consideration of depth, see Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God is Search of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1955), pp. 3-23.

contemplative knows what Eichmann cannot: that one loses life not by death but by fear; that where God brings life from death no human insecurity can finally threaten or estrange, or can ever warrant the flight from the depth of human life; that darkness is not all. Death and anxiety — finitude in all its forms — remain in the contemplative's world as part of life's own mystery; but gone is the defensiveness that would seek to flee these realities; banished is the fear that would find shaken souls hiding from God and each other in a tangle of desperate banalities.⁴⁴

Put simply: Eichmann's evil does not grow from his humanity, but from his dreadful attempt to escape it. Contemplation, as Merton understood it, enables one to see that such an escape is futile, destructive, and ultimately unnecessary. The contemplatives who have no need to fit into structures of oppression become conspicuous actors, guardians of the human, in their non-compliance with the world's evil. Not only do they resist the legacy of Eichmann, but they embody light in dark times, sanity in seasons of madness. In this the vocation of the contemplative, as well as of the thinker, becomes one with the human calling.

44. For discussion of this perspective in a biblical context, see Karl A. Plank, *Paul and the Irony of Affliction* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).

APPENDIX

THE SOURCE FOR MERTON'S
"EPITAPH FOR A PUBLIC SERVANT"

As the following parallels make clear, Merton bases his Eichmann poem on quotations taken from Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Viking, 1963).

Merton's
"Epitaph for a Public Servant"

Arendt's
Eichmann in Jerusalem

"Not out of mercy
Did I launch this transaction"

Eichmann was asked: "Mr. Witness, in the negotiations with your superiors, did you express any pity for the Jews . . .?" And he replied: "I am here under oath and must speak the truth. Not out of mercy did I launch this transaction." (p. 25)

Relations with father mother brother
Sister most normal
Most desirable
Not out of mercy
A man
With positive ideas
(This transaction)
A Christian
Education
(Not out of mercy) With private reasons
For not hating Jews

[One of the psychiatrists] had found that his whole psychological outlook, his attitude toward his wife and children, mother and father, brothers, sisters, and friends, was "not only normal but most desirable" — and finally the minister who had paid regular visits to him . . . reassured everybody by declaring Eichmann to be "a man with very positive ideas." (pp. 25-26)

"Not out of mercy did I
Launch this"
Christian education
Without rancor
Without any reason
For hating

". . . for my whole education through my father and mother had been strictly Christian." (p. 30)

He "personally" never had anything whatever against Jews; on the contrary, he had plenty of "private reasons" for not being a Jew hater. (p. 26)

"I ENTERED LIFE ON EARTH
IN THE ASPECT OF A HUMAN BEING
AND BELIEVED
IN THE HIGHER MEANING"

"Today . . . I begin to lead my thoughts back to that nineteenth of March of the year 1906, when at five o'clock in the morning I entered life on earth in the aspect of a human being" . . . an event ascribed to a "higher bearer of meaning." (p. 27)

Without any ill-feeling
Or any reason for
This prize-winning transaction

"I ENTERED LIFE ON EARTH"
To launch a positive idea
"But repentance is for little children"

I entered life on earth
Bearing a resemblance
To man
With this transaction
In my pocket
Relations most normal
Most desirable
Father mother brother sister
In the aspect
Of human beings
One and all without any reason
For ill will or discourtesy
To any Hebrew
Or to Israel
But without
Ideas

"Repentance is
For desirable
Little children"

Without any transaction

ii

"I NEVER HARBORED ANY ILL FEELING
AGAINST THE JEWS DURING THIS ENTIRE
TRANSACTION
I EVEN WALKED THROUGH THE STREETS
WITH A JEWISH FRIEND
HE THOUGHT NOTHING OF IT."

iii

Yet I was saddened at the order
I lost all joy in my
Work

To regain my joy
Without any reason
I joined the Party
I was swallowed by the

He had never harbored any ill
feelings against his victims. (p. 30)

[Eichmann] proposed "to hang myself
in public as a warning example for
all anti-Semites on this earth." By
this he did not mean to say that he
regretted anything: "Repentance is
for little children." (p. 24)

"Even in my elementary school, I had
a [Jewish] classmate with whom I
spent my free time . . . The last
time we met we walked through the
streets of Linz, I already with the
party Emblem . . . in my buttonhole,
and he did not think anything of it." (p. 30)

"I lost all joy in my work, I no
longer liked to sell, to make calls." (p. 31)

"It was like being swallowed up by
the Party against all expectations
and without previous decision. It
happened so quickly and suddenly." (p. 33)

Party
 Without previous
 Decision and entered
 Upon my apprenticeship
 In Jewish
 Affairs.

Saddened at the Order
 And the merciless
 Affairs
 Of my learning
 Fast
 To forget
 I resigned from various
 Associations dedicated
 To merriment lectures
 And Humor refined
 Humor!

From then on
 Official orders
 Were my only language

iv

I lost all joy
 In my work
 And entered life on earth
 In the aspect of a human
 Believer

They were all hostile.
 The Leader's success alone
 Proved that I should subordinate myself
 To such a man
 (Relations most normal)
 Who was to have his own thoughts in
 [such a matter?]
 In such a transaction?
 Who was I
 To judge
 The Master?

I lost all joy
 I believed in destiny
 I learned to forget
 The undesirable Jew.

v

I was born among knives and scissors

When Kaltenbrunner suggested that he enter the S. S., he was just on the point of becoming a member of an altogether different outfit, the Freemasons' Lodge Schlaraffia, "an association of businessmen, physicians, actors, civil servants, etc., who came together to cultivate merriment and gaiety . . . Each member had to give a lecture . . . whose tenor was to be humor, refined humor." (p. 32)

"Officialese is my only language." (p. 48)

"At that moment, I sensed a kind of Pontius Pilate feeling, for I felt free of all guilt." Who was he to judge? Who was he "to have [his] own thoughts in this matter"? (p. 114)

He was born on March 19, 1906 in Solingen, a German town in the Rhineland famous for its knives, scissors, and surgical instruments. (p. 27)

One of the few gifts fate
Bestowed on me is a gift
For truth in so far as it
Depends on myself.

I make it depend
On myself.

Gifted.

They were all hostile.

Repentance is
For little children

Depending on knives and scissors

vi

To grant a mercy death
Institutional care

Not out of mercy
Did I dare

To launch an institution
Or the gifted Leader's
Solution
Not out of mercy
Did I dare

O the carefree relation
The well-run institution
The well-planned
Charitable care

To grant a mercy killing summer
Vacation
To the hero nation
Not out of mercy
Did I dare

I welcomed one and all
To the charity ball
In the charitable foundation
For the chosen nation
I spent sleepless nights
In care

Who was to have his own thoughts
I granted
To very many
A mercy death
With institutional
Care.

"One of the few gifts fate bestowed
upon me is a capacity for truth
insofar as it depends upon myself."
(p. 54)

The gassing in the East — or to use
the language of the Nazis, "the
humane way" of killing "by granting
people a mercy death" began on almost
the very day when the gassing in
Germany was stopped . . . None of
the various "language rules,"
carefully contrived to deceive and to
camouflage, had a more decisive effect
. . . than this first war decree of
Hitler, in which the word for
"murder" was replaced by the phrase
"to grant a mercy death." (p. 108)

I never asked
For any reward.

vii

At the end
A leaderless life.

No pertinent ordinances
To consult

Not out of mercy
Did I launch this transaction

No pertinent orders
Lolita? "An unwholesome book"

Repentance is for little children

"I sensed I would have to live a leaderless life, I would receive no directives from anybody, no orders and commands would any longer be issued to me, no pertinent ordinances would be there to consult — in brief, a life never known before lay before me." (p. 32)

... the young police officer in charge of his mental and psychological well-being handed him *Lolita* for relaxation. After two days Eichmann returned it, visibly indignant; "Quite an unwholesome book," he told his guard. (p. 49)

viii

As I entered it
So I left it
LIFE
In the aspect
Of a human
Being

A man with positive
Ideas
With no ill will
Toward any Jew

A man without reason
To hate his fellow citizen
Swallowed up by death
Without previous decision
A believer

Long live Argentina
Long live Germany
We will meet again
And again
We have been chosen partners
Not out of mercy
Amid knives and scissors
In a positive transaction
Without any reason
For serious concern

"After a short while, gentlemen, we shall all meet again. Such is the fate of all men. Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria. I shall not forget them." (p. 252)

WHO THEN SHALL CHERISH HIS OWN
THOUGHTS?

Gentlemen Adios
We shall meet again

We shall be partners
Life is short
Art is long
And we shall meet
Without the slightest
Discourtesy

Repentance is
For little children.