Madness and Meaning: Thomas Merton's Reading of Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault and the Babble of the 1960s

By **Joseph Q. Raab**

Introduction

The Bible illustrates the tension between madness and meaning by contrasting the story of the tower of Babel and the story of Pentecost, the antitypes of Babylon and Jerusalem. The Hebrew "Babel" (לבב) means "the gate of God" and refers to the place in the Genesis narrative where men tried to "make a name for themselves" by building a tower to heaven (Gen. 11:1-9). But the result of their efforts ended instead in "balal" (לַלָב), a "confused mixture of sounds and incomprehensible languages," and in the destruction of the tower.[1] In the story of Pentecost, the Spirit descends upon the friends of Jesus in Jerusalem as tongues of fire that bridge linguistic divides and people of many nations and languages can understand the meaning of the gospel message preached by the Apostles (Acts 2:1-13). The tension between madness and meaning is a perennial one. The prophet's role is ever to critique the madness and absurdities of an idolatrous Babel and to point toward the peace of Jerusalem.

From the Abbey of Gethsemani and from his hermitage on its grounds, Thomas Merton saw the world of the 1960s as Babel's tower. Dehumanizing political and economic systems, the violence of racial injustice, the escalation of war in Vietnam and the policy of Mutually Assured Destruction (with the ironic acronym of MAD) reflected a widespread madness. *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* was a blockbuster hit in 1963, and *MAD Magazine* nearly quadrupled its readership throughout the decade.[2] In 1969, just after Merton's death, Richard Nixon would become president and describe his own foreign policy as "Madman Theory," hoping his adversaries would believe he was mad enough to deploy his nuclear arsenal at the slightest provocation.[3] Many people blamed the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s for causing all the madness, but Merton saw these movements as responses to a madness as old as Babel. The biblical narrative framed Merton's perspective on the madness of his world, but the work of many of his contemporaries helped to sharpen it.[4] In this essay I explore how Merton's reading of Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault sharpened his perception of the world's babble, concluding by highlighting Merton's prophetic pointing to Christ, quietly present beneath the confusing and clamoring voices of an idolatrous Babylon, as the one who opens the gate of heaven and saves us from the world's madness.

Hannah Arendt and Eichmann's Babble

Hannah Arendt was already an established public intellectual when she volunteered in 1960 to cover the trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann for *The New Yorker*.[5] She had studied in Berlin under Romano Guardini, the influential Catholic theologian, and under the pivotal

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philosopher Martin Heidegger. Her doctoral dissertation focused on the concept of love in the works of St. Augustine, and she developed her political philosophy around his understanding of *dilectio proximi*, or love of neighbor.[6] The publication of her first major work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, established her as a keen analyst of society's ills;[7] and her second major work, *The Human Condition*, strengthened her reputation as a formidable thinker.[8]

The Origins of Totalitarianism focused, among other things, on the role of propaganda in producing what Arendt called "the ideal totalitarian subject." She wrote: "the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the committed Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction . . . and the distinction between true and false . . . no longer exist" (Arendt, *Origins* 474). In Arendt's analysis, propaganda was essentially babble produced to confuse people so profoundly as to turn them into subjects who would passively acquiesce to the dictates of the ruler. It had little to do with persuading people to believe in official lies and everything to do with cultivating blind obedience. The public realm in such a state is characterized by distrust and fear, and this by insidious design. She wrote: "in an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses reach a point where they believe everything and nothing, think that everything is possible and that nothing is true" (Arendt, *Origins* 382).

In May of 1958 Merton read *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and admired its "terrible insights."[9] His portrayals of Nazi war criminals in poems from the 1960s parallel Arendt's characterization of the ideal subject of totalitarian rule. Specifically, two of Merton's poems portray men who have lost their ability to think for themselves and who find comfort in their blind obedience. In "Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces" (1961),[10] Merton reconstructs the figure of Rudolf Höss, an Auschwitz commander, from Höss's own words recorded in the transcripts of his 1947 trial in Nuremburg:

> I was the commander I made improvements and installed a guaranteed system
> taking account of human weakness I purified and I remained decent . . . .
>
> How I commanded and made soap 12 lbs fat 10 quarts water 8 oz to a lb of
> caustic soda but it was hard to find any fat . . .
>
> All the while I had obeyed perfectly

The "I" making the assertions is almost unrecognizably human, except for the detectable pride in the voice over his busyness and obedience. Lest the reader of Merton's poem assume of posture of moral superiority over Höss, Merton has the commander address the reader directly at the end of his poem in a way that evokes horror and a sickening sympathy:

> You smile at my career but you would do as I did if you knew yourself and
> dared . . .
>
> Do not think yourself better because you burn up friends and enemies with
> long-range missiles without ever seeing what you have done

In "Epitaph for a Public Servant: In Memoriam – Adolf Eichmann" [1967] (*CP* 703-11), Merton presents another subject of totalitarian rule who can no longer question power, whose only language is "Official orders" (l. 81):

> 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? (ll. 90-98)

In "Thomas Merton and Hannah Arendt: Contemplation after Eichmann," Karl Plank notes that the figure of Eichmann appears allusively in much of Merton's later writing as an antitype to the true contemplative.[11] In "Epitaph for a Public Servant" the Apostle Paul, a true contemplative, seems to stand allusively behind Eichmann. St. Paul, ambitious for the higher gifts, puts away childish things and surrenders to mercy. Eichmann, who is content with his gift for "truth insofar as it / Depends upon [himself]" (ll. 106-107) thinks that "Repentance is for little children" (l. 30) and that becoming a man means acting "not out of mercy" (l. 1). The phrases "Repentance is for children" and "not out of mercy" are repeated throughout the poem, revealing Eichmann's toxic notion of manhood in contrast to St. Paul's idea of what it means to put away childish things.

In Merton's only published play, *The Tower of Babel*, Babel's inhabitants hold a trial to determine who is to blame for the destruction of the tower.[12] Robert Daggy summarized it:

> words are first tried in court, but . . . are acquitted because the people think they will cease to exist if they stop talking. That is why Silence is crucified in the end. Truth, Propaganda, and Falsehood are tried. Truth is found guilty and sent to the salt mines because he tells the people that they destroyed their own tower . . . . Propaganda . . . [blamed] "The religious warmongers, the clergy, the freemasons . . ." The people liked hearing this and Propaganda was sent forth to form the minds of the young. Then Falsehood took the stand and told the people: "The tower has never been destroyed [because I have never been destroyed]. And because I am everywhere, everywhere is the tower of Babel." (Daggy 13-14)

Merton read Arendt's coverage of the Eichmann trial in 1963. Taken out of the context of the fascist Babel of Nazi Germany and placed on trial in Jerusalem, Merton found Eichmann and the madness of his world unmasked. Part five of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, "The Madman Runs to the East," is full of Merton's tormented reactions to Arendt's coverage of Eichmann's trial – what he called a "multiple indictment of our world."[13] Though Eichmann had been found guilty and put to death, Merton cautioned his own readers about Eichmann's refusal to become silent. He imagined Eichmann's last words, "what he would have said explicitly if he had known a human language of some sort," as declaring "Your world is full of me, I am all over the place, I am legion" (*CGB* 265).

In his most direct commentary on the trial, "A Devout Meditation on the Memory of Adolf Eichmann" from *Raids on the Unspeakable*,[14] Merton explains that what bothered him most

from Arendt's report was the pronouncement that Eichmann was "*perfectly sane*" (*RU* 45). The psychiatrist who examined Eichmann found him to be an ordinary, dutiful man, not even anti-Semitic. Merton did not doubt Eichmann's sanity but he was deeply troubled by it. He wrote:

> The sanity of Eichmann is disturbing. We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people. We rely on the sane people of the world to preserve it from . . . madness . . . . And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the *sane* ones who are the most dangerous. . . . We can no longer assume that because a man is "sane" he is therefore in his "right mind." . . . [P]erhaps we must say that in a society like ours the worst insanity is to be . . . totally "sane." (*RU* 46-47, 49)

For as impactful as Arendt's material on propaganda and on Eichmann had been for Merton, *The Human Condition* was perhaps even more so. He began reading *The Human Condition* in mid-May of 1960, and called it a "cardinal book, a hinge on which one's whole thought can turn" (*SS* 389). In it, Arendt employed the tensions between private and public life, and between contemplative and active life, as hermeneutical tools to ground her judgments regarding the political landscape of the modern world, which she found imbalanced in the extreme. His journals from early June 1960 include several pages where he made notes on the work. On June 12, after finishing *The Human Condition*, Merton listed a series of her clear conclusions. The first three represent themes in his own political and prophetic writing from the nineteen sixties:

> 1) *Vita Activa* [the active life] lost its point of reference in contemplation – thereby becoming purely active – i.e. degenerating from *political action* to *fabrication* to *laboring* and finally to that completely empty activity of *job holding.*
> 2) Being has been replaced by *process*. The process is everything. Mod[ern] man sees only how to fit without friction into productive process . . .
> 3) Cartesian Doubt and Galileo's Telescope [have given] man an "Archimedian point" from outside the world [and thus have] *alienated man from the world* and from experience of the world.[15]

The Human Condition, in Merton's reading, described the correlation between modernization and dehumanization stemming from the alienation of human activity from its contemplative ground, and it deepened his appreciation for the public dimension of his monastic vocation. He wrote: "One of the chief personal conclusions I draw from this book . . . . [is the] obligation of the Xtian contemplative to *renew* and *recreate*" public life. "Xtianity needs to produce *great men*. . . . *not successful men* . . . [but] great in understanding, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, men of tragic stature" (*TTW* 12).

Arendt inspired Merton to take his social responsibility more seriously, not in spite of the fact that he was a contemplative, but precisely because of it. The barrage of social essays that fired from his pen in the 1960s was triggered, in part, by reading her work. She helped him see the need for contemplative outreach to a world alienated and dehumanized by propaganda and doublespeak, a world in which evil had become banal. The work of Michel Foucault, though not as impactful as Arendt's had been for Merton, further informed his concern over the world's babble, and helped him see that abusive power exercises a process of objectification, demonization and scapegoating that destroys meaningful dialogue and inexorably leads to violence.

Michel Foucault and the Madness of Civilization

As a gay youth living when homosexuality was widely considered a mental illness, even in his own liberal France, Foucault was plagued by depression, suicidal ideations and self-harming behavior. He was an outsider, but was he mad? Early in his studies, Foucault read an essay by Friedrich Nietzsche entitled "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life,"[16] which would focus his academic career on examining the dynamics of power in the modern capitalist state, and his subversive readings of history tended to upend the commonsense view that society had progressed in its treatment of outsiders, the mentally ill, the sick and criminals.[17]

In his pivotal work *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault traced the western conception and treatment of "madness" from the late Middle Ages through the Renaissance to the Age of Reason. Foucault discovered that persons considered mad during the Middle Ages were valued in society as individuals who experienced and exposed the limits of reason and provided glimpses of the mystery. During the Renaissance and through the Age of Reason, however, madness ceased to be regarded as natural and integral to the broad scope of human experience and became the new leprosy.

As José Barchilon notes in his Introduction to *Madness and Civilization*, "In the middle of the twelfth century France had more than 2,000 leprosariums . . . [however] as leprosy vanished, in part because of segregation, a void was created and the moral values attached to the leper had to find another scapegoat. Mental Illness and unreason attracted the stigma to themselves" (Foucault, *Madness* vi-vii). The *Ship of Fools* traveled the rivers during the Renaissance, then asylums took the place of the leprosariums during the Age of Reason. Foucault's reading of the history of madness unmasked a sickness behind the so-called "sanity" that objectified and opposed madness as an enemy to be eradicated. "Be careful whom you choose as your enemy," said Nietzsche, "because that's who you become most like."

Merton had followed Foucault's writing through the 1960s, occasionally commenting in his journals about an article he had read by or about him, but a sustained engagement with Foucault's thought appears in his 1968 essay "War and the Crisis of Language," where Foucault's ideas inform the title itself, and become the focus of section VII of that piece.[18] In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault examined the discourse of early psychotherapy and showed how doctors would utilize the mental frameworks of the mad in order to manipulate their thought and behavior by creating what Foucault called a "crisis of language." Since there was no reasoning with a madman, the doctor had to meet the patient on the patient's own terms. Foucault described the process:

> For in the patient's insane words there is a voice that speaks; it obeys its own grammar, it articulates a meaning. Grammar and meaning must be maintained [by the doctor] . . . the same language must continue to make itself understood, [the doctor] merely [brings] a new deductive element to the rigor of its discourse [leading to an eventual] crisis by which the language is confronted by itself and forced to argue against the demands of its own truth. (Foucault, *Madness* 188)

To elucidate what he meant, Foucault recalled a story of a madman who believed himself to be dead and so would not eat. In order to get his patient to eat, the doctor presented the madman with an image of a dead person eating (in Foucault's terms, he introduced the deductive element) and the patient accommodated himself to the idea that the dead do in fact eat, and so began to eat. Following Foucault's lead, Merton, in his article, finds it ironic and even humorous that the doctor

who accommodated himself to the madman's logic "shared so much of the madness" (*PP* 309). Foucault's anecdote ends not with the patient believing that he is alive, but only believing that the dead eat, and the doctor believing that convincing the patient that dead people eat was a laudable achievement. Who is mad now?

What Merton does in "War and the Crisis of Language" is flip the script so that he exposes the madness behind the so-called sane and reasonable world, and directly confronts its babble. Unlike the doctor who attempts to create a crisis of language, Merton simply exposes the crisis the world is already in. His essay demonstrates that the powerful, whether it be the marketing madmen of Madison Avenue who manage to sell a hair spray called Arpege because it has what "no other hairspray has. It has Arpege" (*PP* 304), or the military madmen at the Pentagon, who boast about creating a "free zone" in Vietnam by destroying all buildings and vegetation so as to prevent people "from moving freely" in that zone, speak a confusing and self-contradictory language (*PP* 306). He is less concerned about advertisers manipulating consumers than he is about governments and military powers objectifying enemies "out there" and justifying wars through double-speak and appeals to necessity.

The fear of losing power compels those who have it to perceive others as threats, and threats become enemies: "anyone who does not agree, who is outside the charmed circle [of power], is wrong, is evil, is already in hell" (*PP* 311). Merton wrote:

> The dialogue then proceeds in a way that reminds us of Foucault: 1. Rational discourse with the enemy is useless. He does not understand rational discourse and makes negotiation an opportunity for lying . . . . He *has* to cheat. 2. Therefore he has to be dealt with solely in the framework of his madness and wickedness, his propensity to lie and cheat. . . . To grant him reasonable conditions would be to treat a madman as a rational being, which would be the worst possible kind of mistake. (*PP* 310)

The insane enemy only understands punishment. "But the punishment must be shown to him in terms of his own madness. He must see that his own destructive violence will lead inexorably to one consequence: his own annihilation" (*PP* 310). The language of power, of the war-maker, turns out to be nothing but babble because it "is *self-enclosed in finality*. It does not invite reasonable dialogue, it uses language to silence dialogue, to block communication" (*PP* 311).

Our Own Mad World

When Merton wrote about madness in the 1960s he was describing, in accord with Arendt, a collective alienation from the contemplative ground of creative action that leads to dehumanization and the desecration of language. He was describing, in accord with Foucault, destructive power relations, and the destruction of meaningful dialogue by the objectification of those we dismiss and the demonization of those we fear. Are we any better off today?

In *Trump and a Post-Truth World*, Ken Wilber describes what he calls our "aperspectival madness" that has turned the word "truth" into a euphemism for a power grab. He laments:

> there is no difference between fact and fiction, news and novels, data and fantasies . . . everything handed to us by yesterday is not a real and enduring truth, just a fabricated fashion of history. It is our job to accept none of it, and instead only strive for a total self-created, self-initiated autonomy (which

very soon becomes indistinguishable from "Nobody interferes with my narcissism!").[19]

Wilber notes that in spite of the fact that critics like Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor were constantly pointing it out, the deconstructionists did not seem to notice or care that they were committing the "performative contradiction" by asserting that there is no truth, except for their own universally true statement that there is no truth. Oh the madness!

Should we be surprised, then, that the current U.S. administration offers "alternative facts," and aggressively undermines the work of journalists with repeated allegations of "Fake news"; or that Russian operatives exploit social media platforms to create confusion and distrust by floating conspiracies like "Pizzagate" and spreading misinformation in an effort to get an aspiring dictator elected? It's easy to begin to feel as though citizens are being transformed into ideal subjects for totalitarian rule, worn down by babble designed to make us line up, afraid and confused, behind the big man with the weapons and the wall who will protect us from the Hondurans, the Mexicans, the Iranians, the Chinese and the North Koreans.

Conclusion

In the 1960s Thomas Merton ran like a madman to the East, but he stood his ground as a prophet. Babylon defines power in human terms as the capacity, as Merton says, "to define how you think things ought to be and then make them come out that way by cunning or by force" (*PP* 311). But Jerusalem, as an archetype of Heaven, speaks of a divine power that appears in a fallen world as weakness. In his "Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants," Merton points readers toward the one they can trust and tells them where to find Him (*ESF* 70-89; *CP* 372-91). In the essay, Merton rages against the cold war superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union who are idolatrous of power and wealth, and whose "*unmitigated arrogance*" (*ESF* 78; *CP* 380) toward the rest of the human race causes them to objectify people of poorer lands as inferior, and to exploit them as proxies in their hotter wars against each other. The idols of the superpowers may differ, Merton wrote, "but their madness is the same: they are the two faces of Janus looking inward, and dividing with critical fury the polluted sanctuary of dehumanized man" (*ESF* 73; *CP* 375).

The monk, however, points not in the direction of the powerful giants, but to the poor, the foreigner, and the stranger to discover in "unfamiliar accents" (*ESF* 80; *CP* 382) the voice of the one worthy of trust. "Christ is found not in loud and pompous declarations but in humble and fraternal dialogue. He is found less in a truth that is imposed than in a truth that is shared" (*ESF* 81; *CP* 383). Merton's discovery of Christ coincided with his capacity to withdraw from the world's babble and to recover the contemplative ground of creative action. His own gift for this enabled him to cut through the noise and to critique the idols of power and greed that obscure the real gate of heaven which is not a tower built by humans but an omnipresent gift of the Creator. Merton wrote, "I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere" (*CGB* 142).

1. Babel's English homophone "babble" assumes the meaning of *balal*.
2. Al Feldstein was editor of *MAD Magazine* from 1956 to 1974 and is credited with popularizing the magazine through his tenure: see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mad_(magazine)#History.

3. See H. R. Haldeman, *The Ends of Power* (London: W. H. Allen, 1978) 122.
4. In his essay "Thomas Merton's Critique of Language" (*The Merton Seasonal* 27.1 [Spring 2002] 11-15), Robert Daggy notes the influence of Erich Fromm, Marshall McLuhan and Herbert Marcuse on Merton's thought regarding Babel's madness and the incoherence of its speech (subsequent references will be cited as "Daggy" parenthetically in the text).
5. The trial took place in 1961 and Arendt's coverage of it was published in *The New Yorker* in February and March of 1963. It was also published in book form that same year as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).
6. Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
7. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken, 1951); subsequent references will be cited as "Arendt, *Origins*" parenthetically in the text.
8. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
9. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 204; subsequent references will be cited as "*SS*" parenthetically in the text.
10. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 43-47 (subsequent references will be cited as "*ESF*" parenthetically in the text); Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 345-49 (subsequent references will be cited as "*CP*" parenthetically in the text).
11. Karl Plank, "Thomas Merton and Hannah Arendt: Contemplation after Eichmann" *The Merton Annual* 3 (1990) 121-50; available online at http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/3/Plank121-150.pdf.
12. Thomas Merton, *The Strange Islands* (New York: New Directions, 1957) 43-78; *CP* 247-73.
13. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY; Doubleday, 1966) 261; subsequent references will be cited as "*CGB*" parenthetically in the text.
14. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 45-49; subsequent references will be cited as "*RU*" parenthetically in the text.
15. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 11; subsequent references will be cited as "*TTW*" parenthetically in the text.
16. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life" (1874), a chapter in Nietzsche's book *Untimely Meditations.*
17. On the treatment of the mentally ill, see Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Random House, 1965) (subsequent references will be cited as "Foucault, *Madness*" parenthetically in the text), originally published in French as *Histoire de la Folie* (Paris: Plon, 1961); on his reading of the way teaching hospitals train doctors to dehumanize and objectify patients through what he called the "medical gaze," see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception* (New York: Pantheon, 1973), originally published as *Naissance de la Clinique: Un Archeologie du Regard Medical* (Paris: Plon, 1963); on his reading of the birth and effects of the modern penal system, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon 1977), originally published as *Survelier et Punir: Naissance de la Prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).
18. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 300-14 (subsequent references will be cited as "*PP*" parenthetically in the text); originally published in Robert Ginsberg, ed., *The Critique of War: Contemporary Philosophical Explorations* (Chicago: Regnery, 1969) 99-119.
19. Ken Wilber, *Trump and a Post-Truth World* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2017) 7-8.