

THE PATTERN IN THOMAS MERTON'S

CABLES TO THE ACE

by **Gail Ramshaw**

The tradition of the American epic poem, evident in the works of Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, Hart Crane, and William Carlos Williams, is also seen in the major poems of Thomas Merton. Since *The Geography of Lograire* is an incomplete posthumous publication and is thus difficult to discuss definitively, Merton's 1968 poem, *Cables to the Ace*, provides the better opportunity for such form criticism.¹ Typically in the American epic poem the protagonist-poet, usually standing within a specific geography, juxtaposes his art to the American experience within a lengthy series of sections which may range from self-contained poems to newspaper quotations. One task which form criticism brings to the genre of the American epic poem is the search for the pattern within the form. Is there a logic to the ordering of the sections beyond the sequence of publication? If so, what is the logic? If not, does the lack imply artistic deficiency? The following study will demonstrate both Merton's process of composition in the writing of *Cables to the Ace* and the pattern which exists within the

1. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968). Subsequent references to this edition will be cited in the text.

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completed poem. For, in this case, the genre of the American epic poem has a pattern: a dialogue between the noise of the world and the voice of myth is patterned into a widening gyre with three focal points, the prayerful lyrics of sections 7, 45, and 80.

We must begin by admitting that if any pattern exists in *Cables*, it is, at first, next to invisible. The poem is comprised of an epigraph, a prologue, an introduction, 88 sections, an epilogue, and a curious final phrase. No outline or table of contents is published or has been found among Merton's papers. Of the critics who have discussed this work, none has noted any order to the sections.² One study calls the poem "a mosaic of prose and poetry."³ The word "cables" in Merton's title implies the plural: many poems. The subtitle repeats the plural in "Familiar Liturgies." In the prologue (p. 1) Merton uses the plural in calling his poems "Horatian Odes" and "mosaics." Until the final typescript the poem was entitled *Edifying Cables*, this title also supporting a hypothesis that the poem is a collection of poems, the order of publication being no more, but no less arbitrary, than that in any collection of poems. In writing to Jacques Maritain of this work, Merton uses the plural verb: "*The Edifying Cables* are finished. . ."⁴ Found among Merton's papers was a stray piece of paper which describes the poem:

Edifying Cables

On the surface the poetic statement was toneless, and now discordant, deliberately illogical, tentative and crude. Below the surface lies something more deadly: a subliminal irony, a savage elaboration of the absurd. This is far from the dry alienated complaint of Eliot's "Hollow Men." It is rather an active involvement in contemporary absurdity, a Zen-like zest in the ring of hollowness inside the experience of the sixties.⁵

Here also the word "illogical" suggests a composition without grand design.

But literary critics are seldom contented with the poet's own analysis, and so we shall test the assumption that the poem is constructed without inherent logic. It is not clear in Merton's comment whether the piece is illogical only "on the surface." One way to trace the logic of the poem is to

2. Luke Flaherty, "Thomas Merton's *Cables to the Ace*: A Critical Study," *Renascence* 24 (1971), pp. 3-32; Victor A. Kramer, *Thomas Merton* (Boston: Twayne, 1984), pp. 127-135; Walter Sutton, "Thomas Merton and the American Epic Tradition: The Last Poems," *Contemporary Literature* 14 (1973), pp. 49-57; and George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978), pp. 173-176.

3. Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1979), p. 138.

4. Thomas Merton to Jacques Maritain, 18 November 1966, Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College.

5. Thomas Merton, "Comment concerning *Edifying Cables*," Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College.

discover the logic of its composition. Somewhere in the process of composition, whether in the original writing or in a subsequent reordering, the poet might give evidence of the work's pattern. We will trace the composition of *Cables to the Ace* through the following stages: its antecedents in stories and correspondence, Holographic Notebook # 15, sequences of extra poems, and three typescripts.⁶

We begin before the poem's beginning, in the short story entitled "Martin's Predicament, or Atlas Watches Every Evening."⁷ By playing with the myth of Atlas, Merton focuses on "imperatives," modern society's substitution of impersonal commands for personal communication. Noise obliterates voice. To discipline Atlas, whose movements are causing world chaos, the protagonist Martin becomes an autocrat:

We must have imperatives. And in fact we have them. I may humbly say that I am a man of imperatives. I am jokingly referred to as "Mr. Imperative." He stands up and begins to dictate telegrams: *Plan complete protection and worldwide total control remaining flexible while matching research with cosmic needs NOW* ("MP," p. 119)

Martin, the modern man, regards himself as an imperative: "That's why I regard myself as global imperative number one" ("MP," p. 121).

This same image of imperatives is found in Merton's correspondence with Robert Lax. Included with a letter of 24 February 1965 is a "Book of Proverbs," of which the following is an excerpt:

1. I will tell you what you can do ask me if you do not understand what I just said
2. One thing you can do be a manufacturer who makes appliances
3. Be a Man-u-fac-tu-rer
4. Be a manufac
5. Make appliances sell them for a high price
6. I will tell you about industry make appliances
7. Make appliances that move
8. Ask me if you do not understand what is move
9. First get the facts
10. Do not understand
-
32. Apply this to the facts and see what happens
33. Wear dermal gloves in bed.
34. Here is an appliance that will terrorize mothers
35. And fight the impossible
36. Man-u-fac-ture: wear it on your head.

6. The unpublished works were organized for this study and are on file at the Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College.

7. Thomas Merton, "Martin's Predicament, or Atlas Watches Every Evening," in *Raids on the Unspeakeable* (New York: New Directions, 1966). Hereafter referred to in the text as "MP."

37. Wear dermal gloves on your head every morning.
 38. Beat it here come the mothers⁸

In a later letter to Lax, Merton uses the theme of imperatives to criticize the censorship imposed upon him at the monastery:

Dear Russ and Bill.

Well you are probably wondering why I haven't written from the camp for so long. I'll tell you about it. The camp has been on fire for months. It all started in the flypaper factory where I was chief in charge of Trappist fly paper a communist front organization numbering millions. I'll tell you about the millions some other time. The fire began in the *imperatives* section.

Let me tell you about our imperatives section. Just a moment. Let me tell you about it. The best way to tell you is to tell you our product. We make imperatives. They are like fly paper. A simple imperative is "Stay on the flypaper Jack or just try to get off anyway" that is one of our more simple imperatives. I make millions. Each imperative is a communist front. Behind the flypaper is a communist fly who is not on paper. He is classified. (CAL, pp. 60-61).

In examining Merton's Holographic Notebook # 15,⁹ one sees why the Atlas story and the Lax correspondence are so significant. On the notebook's cover is written in Merton's hand, "Notes for Poems -- Cables for an Ace and unpublished Aug. 1965," and in this notebook are dozens of entries -- poems, quotations, comments -- 52 of which become sections in *Cables*, most having undergone few alterations from notebook to publication. The notebook begins with the several poems which eventually become sections 66, 67, and 69 of the poem and which develop the theme of society's imperatives. The abrasiveness of society's imperatives is followed by six poems describing the poet's hope for love and order. However, with an illogic which becomes a regular feature of Merton's construction of the poem, this unit at the opening of the notebook is broken up in the final *Cables*, so that the order becomes sections 66, 67, 69, 76, 11, 7, 8, 9, and 12.

Throughout the remainder of this working notebook some poems merely follow the previous poem consecutively, with no links between adjacent poems evident; other poems grow out of the previous poem, extend its theme, or comment upon it. In either case, sometimes the order of composition is retained in the published work, but more often it is not. For example: the title of poem 14 in the notebook, "To sons: not to be

8. Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *A Catch of Anti-Letters* (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1978), pp. 58-59. Hereafter referred to in the text as CAL.

9. Thomas Merton, *Holographic Notebook # 15*, Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College. This notebook was formerly numbered 75 in initial processing by Tommie O'Callaghan.

numb," is echoed in poem 15 as the poet begs for money to "Make me numb." Yet these adjacent poems become sections 20a and 50 of the published work. Poems 24 and 25 in the notebook, lyrical dreams in which the poet merges with nature to achieve salvation, are separated as sections 10 and 72 in the final version. *Cables* retains only two small groupings in their original sequence: poems 1 to 3 become sections 66 to 69, and poems 6 to 8 become sections 7 to 9. This scrambling obscures any units which the writer originally framed. The notebook's several dominant themes -- society's imperatives, the possibility of natural harmony, the breakdown in human communication -- recur without design and suggest no organization other than the writer's varied moods. We hasten to add that even this critical treatment of the notebook, with its numbering of poems for discussion, exaggerates the order within the notebook, implying more pattern than actually exists.

In the earliest extant typescript of *Cables to the Ace*, the shape of sections 1 through 32 is evident, but the second half of the final work is not yet represented. This first group of twenty poems appears to be a random selection of individual pieces with no cohesive structure or unified purpose. The second typescript, dated September 1966, entitled *Edifying Cables or Home Liturgies of Misunderstanding*, adds twelve poems which begin to shape the end of the work. A significant omission is the imperatives section, despite the presence of the imperatives at the beginning of the notebook. *Edifying Cables* is an unsatisfactory work, too long for its random form and its lack of pattern.

A typed sequence of seventeen poems entitled "A Canto from Edifying Cables" contains material not found in the notebook. Most of this sequence becomes sections 53 through 61 of the final work. There is a second typed group of twenty-five poems which Merton filed with the typescripts of *Cables*. This group bears no title, characteristic paper, or pagination; some poems were in the notebook, none in *Edifying Cables*, but nineteen become part of *Cables to the Ace*. Still other such sequences of poems exist.

In the second draft of *Edifying Cables*, the title changes to *Edifying Cables and Other Poems*, suggesting a book of independent poems. This second rendering of *Edifying Cables* is nearly identical to the published work. Section 19 was the last addition to the work, as evidenced by Merton's numbering of 20a and 20b, to avoid renumbering the whole manuscript. Sections 62 through 69, which include the original imperatives section, do not yet appear in the manuscript.

A second notable difference between the last version of *Edifying Cables* and the published *Cables to the Ace* is the earlier manuscript's absence of Zen. It has been theorized that "transcendence through Zen" is a major structural technique in *Cables* and that the poem revolves around the reflection of Zen and mysticism in sections 37, 38, 39, 62, 80, 82, 84, and 86.¹⁰ However, sections 80 and 82 deal with Christianity more than with mysticism, and every other one of these sections was not in the manuscript until after August 1967, appearing only in the published version. It is unlikely that, if Zen were a central theme of the poem, all those sections dealing specifically with Zen would enter the manuscript at the "eleventh hour."

And so through correspondence and notebooks to typescripts and sequences one searches in frustration for an outline of the completed work. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that where intelligible logic or ironic contrast dictated the order of composition, that order is purposefully discarded as the poem takes final shape. It would seem as if the poem's last three words, "Pourrait etre continue" (p. 60), "is being able to be continued," implies that the poem has no conclusion, only an ending, and that had Merton chosen to add more sections to his work, no aesthetic principle or poetic logic would have deterred him. One might judge that, like William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, the poem ends, not because the poem brings about its own conclusion, but because the poet stopped writing.

Perhaps. But before the case for pattern is closed, let us allow the poem itself to testify. We must hear the poem repeatedly and so discover the patterns which, whether Merton intended or not, hold the ninety sections into an artistic unit which only by heeding the inherent pattern would be able to be continued. Merton told the monastery's novices that *Cables to the Ace* was composed like a symphony in different movements.¹¹ In a symphony there is something which keeps all its movements in and keeps other movements out. Such a patterning in form is hinted at in the epigraph from Alain Robbe-Grillet (title page), stating that "the questioning of the world in which we find ourselves cannot be done except by form, and not by a vague social or political anecdote."

Of the ninety sections in *Cables to the Ace*, exactly half, forty-five sections, are written in prose, and the other half in poetry. The sections

10. Luke Flaherty, "Thomas Merton's *Cables to the Ace*: A Critical Study," p. 26.

11. Thomas Merton, "Father Louis Talks," Tape # 245B, Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College.

include brazen satire, percussive declamation, gentle observation, romantic lyrics, urgent imperatives, straight narratives, and quotations of one sort or another. Most of the sections participate in some way in a contest of oratory in which the noise of the world is pitted against the voice of myth. The poem is like a double fugue, in which two contrasting themes are developed both in isolation from and in relationship to one another. Prayer versus protest, mystic confronting machine, lyric and static: the poet conducts a dialogue with chaos. The dialogue is laid out in three widening gyres. The three prayerful lyrics -- section 7, "Weep, weep," section 45, "Anatole Anatole," and section 80, "Slowly slowly" -- each marks the conclusion of one cycle and in varying degrees allows or forbids the return of the noise of the world. This pattern will be examined in more detail in the later parts of this essay.

The conflict between the world and the poet is contained even in the title. "Cables" suggests society's brazen speech, its telegrams of social disintegration. In section 1 and 4 cables fail to alleviate social confusion:

Edifying cables can be made musical if played and sung by full armed societies doomed to an electric war. . . Cables are never causes. (p. 2)

"Put the whole family out into the hall." (Plato) Now they are outside receiving those hard cosmic cables without interceptions. (p. 3)

Cables are also electrical connections, symbols of impersonal communication:

They improve their imitable wire
To discover where speech
Is trying to go. (p. 10)

Found fifty persons all with wires in the pleasure center
They were being moved by rats. (p. 14)

Only in section 87 is "cables" positive: "By the cables of orioles/ I am about to build my nest" (p. 60). However, the epilogue reinforces the negative imagery as the radio blasts out the noise of its cables.

The title states that the cables are sent to the Ace. "Ace" is the expert pilot, the excellent competitor, the social critic, the sensitive perceiver with the unifying poetic vision. In section 87 the poet concludes, "As I walk away from the poem/ Hiding the ace of freedoms" (p. 60). The figure of the ace is variously the uncommitted observer; the impersonal judge; the detached mystic; and the poet who must cope with society's cables. To restate the tension Merton adds a second title, *Familiar Liturgies of Misunderstanding*. A liturgy must be familiar in order to unite the individuals to the given order. Merton contends that the society's liturgies promote not healing but

only misunderstanding. The title concedes that the voices of society are dominant, for in the end the liturgies of misunderstanding drown out the poet's attempts at prayer.

The first cycle of the poem is short, seven sections long. In sections 1 to 6 the poem speaks the noise of the world. Society is "doomed to an electric war," obsessed with the "vroom vroom of the guitars," "a heavy imperturbable beat." No indication where to stop. No messages to decode. Cables are never causes. Noises are never values" (p. 2). Section 1 joins Blake in attempting to marry heaven and hell by juxtaposing the vision of renewal with the clamor of society. In section 2 (p. 2) the seer is reduced to the scientist. The healing possible through the saints has been put into cold storage by a mechanized society bent only on individual comfort. Section 3 (p. 3) records the failure of language. Words create "more and more smoke" to surround the poet. "Some of the better informed have declared war on language." In section 4 (p. 3) Pláto's idealism yields to an epistemology in which knowledge beclouds and irritates. Section 5 (pp. 3-4) claims that eventually the manipulated individual submits to the controlling Directors. The "ironic mechanisms" have succeeded, the "electric eye" has won. Section 6 (p. 4), quoting Caliban, summarizes the theme of the failure of language. However, Caliban is evil in and of himself; he has not been corrupted by his environment, but has spoken discord into idyllic surroundings. Neither Caliban nor the poet can blame social disintegration on "society."

Section 7 (p. 5) is the poet's first attempt at a plea for order. "Original Sin" commemorates Father's Day, recalling prayer to the Father and the interferences of human sin and satirizing the anthropological view of epistemology. The gentle "Weep, weep, little day," reminiscent of Blake's lyrics, looks to the Father, to the bones of the past, to the ape-like origins of humanity, and to the halting emergences of language, vainly hoping in these ancestral traces to find the father who can erase the sin. In the last stanza history itself weeps as the primates beat with the words and with the bones. Primordial history offers not the forgiving father, but rather a creature more destructive and inarticulate than its human descendant. Each stanza of the lyric ends with a short, punctuated dimeter, cutting off the longer lines with the aborted finality expressive of the failure in this search for roots.

After this lyrical plea, this failed prayer, the poem continues with its second cycle in which the world's noise dominates the dialogue. In some sections brazen satire mocks prevalent social values. Special emphasis is

placed on the failure of language to create and sustain human community. Several sections present Zen as an alternative to chaos, but the meeting of the opposites is only curious, hardly climactic. Another failure is the attempt to find a wholesome peace in natural beauty and in mythic intention. A minor theme in the French surrealist section is the death of the gods in the modern age.

Merton's search for mythic systems which can hold society together can be seen in the short section 20a (p. 16):

To daughters: to study history.

Finn, Finn
Tribal and double
Wide awake rocks
The fatal craft
Cutlash Finn
To kill time
Before and aft --
Er he sinks his fin
Again in his
Own Wake.

This short poem, an impressive condensation of Western roots, is dedicated to the daughters, to those who bear the next generation. They are to "study history," to remember their encompassing historical past, their "tribal and double." The verse recalls the incantation of the witches in *Macbeth*: "Double, double, toil and trouble:/ Fire burn and cauldron bubble." In Shakespeare's incantation the witches use past and present evil to conjure up future evil. Merton, a compatriot of witches, urges the daughters to remember the generation of evil in Shakespeare's ruthless tragedy. The name Finn recalls Huckleberry Finn, the adolescent pioneer who travels down the great American river to discover his past, present, and future and so provides a contrast between the human comedy of Mark Twain's masterpiece and the "wool of bat and tongue of dog" of *Macbeth*'s witches. "Finn" also denotes James Joyce's epic *Finnegans Wake*, a collage of western myth and civilization. In its circular composition of languages, literature, and history, *Finnegans Wake* links the details of modern life to the archetypes; thus this novel exemplifies the possibility of healing which the daughters can discover in history.

The third line, "Wide awake rocks," calls to mind Scylla and Charybdis, the crashing rocks between which Ulysses and his ship must journey. The past is not only the silent Mississippi, gently carrying Huck's raft, but also the crushing blow of the angry sea. If Finn is crushed by these rocks, not only he as a cultural hero dies; history, the sense of past time, dies

with him: "To kill time/ Before and aft." In these churning waters of time Finn now becomes a fish. He is both less and more than human, part animal, but also in part Christ, represented in Christian iconography as the fish that the Greek acronym suggests. The fate of Finn, who did not study history, is to "sink his fin/ Again in his/ Own Wake."

The Finn-fish recalls Christ who must embrace his own death in order to conquer the evil of history. These lines again suggest Joyce's novel: to attend one's own wake is to immerse oneself in the cultural wake, both the trail of the ship of life and the visit to the casket, the life and death journey of the mythical heroes. By living within the cultural wake, one prepares for the horror of one's own. "Again. . . Wake" repeats the allusion to Joyce's work which commemorates all of sleep, just as Ulysses who travels between the rocks commemorates all of wakefulness.

In less than thirty words Merton has shown the daughters how to study history by remembering and heeding Greek myth, British tragedy, American adventure, Irish folklore, Joyce's comedy, and Christian symbolism. In ten short lines these diverse mythic systems are brought together into one pattern, and the chaos of historical amnesia is challenged by the power of the voice of myth.

The context of oratory continues until Caliban and his chaos reenters in section 44. Just as the plea of section 7 is preceded by Caliban in section 6, so section 45 follows Caliban in section 44. Section 45, the precise center of the work, "Prayer to Saint Anatole," marks the close of the second and wider cycle. It has been suggested that St. Anatole is a reference to Anatolius, 230-282 A.D., a Laodicean bishop with a reputation for wide knowledge in the sciences.¹² Merton may also be playing on the Greek noun *anatole*, a significant word in the New Testament's accounts of the Messiah's birth. The word is variously translated east, rising, branch, and Messiah, and so in one word provides, through a pun, the entire myth of the Messiah as a branch arising from the east. Merton's lyric, by looking to science, air travel, and air warfare as a possible savior, recalls both a scientific bishop and a search for the Messiah in the sky.

"Anatole Anatole" (p. 31) begins like ancient church collects with a statement of the human condition. Jets streaming across the sky separate the poet from the saint. Not the Spirit's flame but "the chemical flame" inspires this prayer: the fire enlightening this plea is the burning bomb damage, the music is "electric lyres" and "fatal recorders." The central

12. Luke Flaherty, "Mystery and Unity as Anagogical Vision in Thomas Merton's *Cables to the Ace*," Master's Thesis, University of Louisville (1969), p. 68.

section of *Cables*, a letter to a saint, is itself a cable to an ace: yet in the midst of the cultural warfare the communication is unsuccessful.

The third and final cycle in the poem comprises the second half of the work and culminates in section 80, the poem's only effective prayer. A dozen of these forty-five sections convey the same worldly noise which has pervaded the first half of the work. Some sections have given way to a defeated sense of loss. Merton satirizes the distorted values and language of the media in his newscast (section 48) and in "Dramas of the Evening" (section 70). The imperatives of society, which we first met in the Atlas story, take up sections 67 and 69. Again a natural order is evoked, the romantic aesthetic recalled, Zen and mysticism attempted; even the Christian mystics Eckhart, Ruysbroeck, and Theresa of the Heart offer their voices to the dialogue.

The climax of the third cycle is the most eloquent section of the work, section 80 (p. 55). The Christian paradox of life within death lies in the image of Christ walking through the garden: the garden of Eden, the garden of Gethsemani, the Easter garden. Christ comes "through the ruins," the wrecked cities." and the frightened disciple, who in meeting Christ sees "only the harvest moon," has chosen natural cycles as his symbol. The first three stanzas begin "Slowly slowly," recalling the "Weep, weep" of section 7 and the "Anatole Anatole" of section 45. The stanzas are filled with the falling rhythm of trochees: slowly, garden, speaking, sacred, branches, cornfields, harvest, murmur. The wait for the eschaton is apparent: Christ comes only slowly. The poem's last stanza responds to the frustrated petition of section 7, which sees historical humanity for the bones that they are, and ends, "Weep little history." Section 80 answers the previous faltering prayer in this way:

The disciple will awaken
When he knows history
But slowly slowly
The Lord of History
Weeps into the fire.

The small-h history of human knowledge is contrasted with the capital-H History of the realm of God. Salvation comes not in cultural heroes but in a weeping Lord, whose voice speaks from within the noise, who will put out the fire in the ruins with his tears. This penitence brings nearly to an end the babble of society's cables. The disciples will awaken when the ability to balance life and death is realized.

The final nine sections present the artistic dilemma in personal terms. The prayer has steadied the poet: the poet tries now to retain that

stability in light of the world's chaotic forces. There is little noise here in the end, only musings on peace. In the last section the poet "shuts down its trance" (p. 60), and the epilogue concludes the poem with the radio blaring out its nonsensical slang and toothpaste ads. Even though the last plea was heard, even though the Lord of History has been summoned, the ace must still hear the cables, for the noise remains.

One can hardly suggest that *Cables to the Ace* is a structural masterpiece. Merton never made explicit any logic for the ordering of his ninety sections. However, the evidence of the poem makes us admit the power of the lyrical pleas, "Weep, weep," "Anatole Anatole," and "Slowly slowly," and one cannot dispute that the placement of these lyrics and of the poems around them creates a pattern of three cycles, always widening out into the noise of the world. Thus while the work is not flawless in construction nor are individual sections perfect in word selection, the poem is a powerful statement of the twentieth-century myth maker, an epic of the American poet, a sustained experience of the dialogue between the noise of the world and the voice of myth, and it remains a major piece of Merton's poetic legacy.