

FROM PROPHECY TO PARODY:

THOMAS MERTON'S

CABLES TO THE ACE

by **David D. Cooper**

During the 1960s, Thomas Merton was perhaps best known, especially among post-Vatican II Catholics, for his efforts to fashion a viable Christian humanism in a post-Christian era of religious reform.¹ At a time too of great social upheaval and personal unrest, many readers turned to Merton's writings on the curative possibilities of contemplation, a timely and natural outgrowth of Merton's own monastic experience.² Merton's new humanism and his claims for the therapeutic potential of solitude shared two things in common. Each were responses to alienation as the distinguishing feature of life in advanced technological civilization. And each was forged from the crucible of critical social theories which sought, through rigorous dissent, to revitalize that civilization with humanist reforms.

1. Merton's major essays on Christian humanism have been collected in *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), pp. 133-232.

2. See, e.g., "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude" in *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1960), pp. 170-207; "Creative Silence" in *Love and Living*, pp. 38-45; and "Rain and the Rhinoceros" in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 9-23.

Nowhere are those common elements more pronounced than in Merton's late poetry, especially *Cables to the Ace*, his radical experiment with the language of alienation and its implications for a new poetry -- an anti-poetry -- of pure signs. The new poetry that began to appear in the mid-60s, that is to say, entirely abrogates traditional symbolism in favor of *indicative signs*. Its distinguishing hallmark is Merton's wholesale renunciation of conventional syntactical patterns of meaning and inherited standards of poetic truth, which help account for the opacity and, at times, the utter abstruseness of his later poetry and its abrupt departure from any of his previous work. Merton's anti-poetics suggests generally, then, that he believed a poetry stripped of the efficacy of symbolic language was a poetry essentially of unmeaning, a poetry of denatured tropes parroting the banality of the contemporary mind. Merton's new humanism was the response of a committed humanist outraged by the dehumanizing effects of mass culture. Similarly, his new poetry was the reaction of a poet angered by what Merton once described as "the spasmodic upheaval of language" reflected in mass culture modes of discourse.

This issue of Merton's anti-poetics has been widely discussed in Merton scholarship,³ and it is difficult to pin down a consensus among literary critics, some of whom have gone to extraordinary lengths to unspool the Gordian knot of *Cables to the Ace*.⁴ It may well be, in the final analysis, that Merton's purpose in *Cables* was only to frustrate critical good sense and create a post-modern paean to unmeaning whose sole aim was to dislocate decoding efforts. A curious spectre haunts *Cables*. Might it be a repository of jokes where Merton pokes fun at literary scholars who seem bent, as he once said of Joyce studies, on pursuing "an academic treasure hunt which [Joyce] took far less seriously than they?" In any event, in the following discussion of Merton's late poetics we will try to avoid springing the playful traps strewn especially throughout *Cables*, choosing instead a safer, less problematic course: namely, that Merton's denatured anti-poetics was his way of entering, as a poet, into the consciousness of alienated man and mimicking his style of speech -- his way, he himself remarked, of declaring war on dehumanizing modes of contemporary discourse which exacerbate human alienation. Like Merton's radical humanism, his new poetry is, above all, a poetry of dissent.

3. See Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1979), pp. 134-147; Sister Therese Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1979), pp. 97-114; and George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978), pp. 173ff.

4. See, e.g., Luke Flaherty, "Thomas Merton's *Cables to the Ace*: A Critical Study," *Renascence* 24:1 (Autumn 1971): pp. 3-32.

2. One thing is certain: any discussion of Merton's anti-poems cannot be separated from his continuing interest in critical social theory. Among important direct influences and models -- such poets as Merton's friends Robert Lax⁵ and the Chilean anti-poet Nicanor Parra⁶ -- Merton also needed a firm theoretical and philosophical basis for his experiments with a new poetry. He found that substratum in the writings of Herbert Marcuse whose model of a one-dimensional society merged into a perfect partnership with other writers who had previously shaped Merton's radical humanism, including Marx, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Albert Camus, and Erich Fromm.

Marcuse's social critique, set forth in *One-Dimensional Man*, uncovered serious deficiencies in modern industrial society which he felt had led to an advanced state of human alienation. By way of quick overview, Marcuse argued that contemporary society was so dominated by the technological processes of production/distribution/consumption that it had succumbed, in effect, to a technological totalitarianism. A society under the domination of its technology not only determines the occupations, skills, and attitudes of workers necessary to sustain its technological apparatus, but, according to Marcuse, it must also control and define the needs and aspirations of its workers. Technological totalitarianism -- defined by Marcuse as "a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests"⁷ -- effectively obliterates any distinctions between private and public life and individual and societal needs, thus creating a "one-dimensional society" comprised of one-dimensional persons. When economic and technological contingencies prevail, such things as individuality, dissent, and non-conformity lose their critical function -- indeed, Marcuse claimed, they become socially useless.

With its emphasis on repression and subjugation of individual needs, Marcuse's model of the one-dimensional society carries profoundly anti-humanistic consequences. He insisted that the prevailing societal forces of process, technique, and operation subvert the economic, political, and intellectual freedom of individuals. Individual needs, he stressed, collapse under the tyranny of vested collective interests, the kinds of interests "which

5. See especially Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *A Catch of Anti-Letters* (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1978).

6. See Merton's translations in *Poems and Antipoems*, ed. Miller Williams (New York: New Directions, 1966).

7. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 3. Further references appear in the text.

perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice." "The more rational, productive, technical, and total the repressive administration of society becomes," Marcuse concludes, "the more unimaginable the means and ways by which the administered individuals might break their servitude and seize their own liberation" (pp. 6-7).

Of particular interest to Marcuse, and more germane to his influence over Merton's new poetics, was the way in which one-dimensional behavior and thought are expressed in modern modes of communication.⁸ Discourse in a one-dimensional society, Marcuse considered, must reflect the same repressive and totalitarian characteristics as the economic and political forces which manipulate individual needs in order to sustain the collective technological agenda. The language of one-dimensional man, Marcuse claimed, testifies then to those societal forces responsible for his repression. Thus, language in a one-dimensional society has yielded to a progressive "functionalization" which repels non-conformist and idiosyncratic elements from the patterns and movements of speech. One-dimensional language is dominated by "operationalism;" it is the language of "technological reasoning" which rigorously promotes positive thinking and action, a language "that orders and organizes, that induces people to do, to buy, and to accept." Moreover, Marcuse argued, this functional language stifles "transcendent, critical notions;" it disables such rhetorical elements as "symbols of reflection, abstraction, development, contradiction." Above all, by devaluating transcendence, dissension, contradiction, critical reflection, etc., functional discourse "*militates against a development of meaning,*" Marcuse writes, because "it does not search for but establishes and imposes truth and falsehood."

Marcuse examined the concrete manifestations of one-dimensional discourse in such areas as contemporary patterns of syntax and usage, historical writing, political language, and advertising copy. He summarizes:

Abridgment of the concept in fixed images; arrested development in self-validating, hypnotic formulas; immunity against contradiction; identification of the thing (and of the person) with its function -- these tendencies reveal the one-dimensional mind in the language that it speaks. (pp. 96-97)

And he concludes:

In and for the society, this organization of functional discourse is of vital importance; it serves as a vehicle of coordination and subordination. The unified, functional language is an irreconcilably anti-critical and anti-

8. See especially "The Closing of the Universe of Discourse," *Ibid*, pp. 84-120.

dialectical language. In it, operational and behavioral rationality absorbs the transcendent, negative, oppositional elements of Reason. (p. 103)

3. Turning now to Merton, ample evidence -- stated explicitly or otherwise implied -- suggests that he interpreted Marcuse's functional discourse as the language of alienated man. In *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, for example, Merton announces his complete agreement with Marcuse's critique of one-dimensional thinking and discourse "in which," Merton writes, "the very rationality and exactitude of technological society and its various justifications, add up to one more total mystification."⁹ Consider further Merton's essay "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?," a wide-ranging series of reflections and commentary on the fate of symbolism in technological society. Although Merton does not cite *One-Dimensional Man* directly, the essay resonates with Marcuse's ideas. It may be appropriate to argue, then, that Merton used Marcuse's insights into the functionalization of modern language as a springboard to discuss its spiritual ramifications. If, as Marcuse claimed, modern language had succumbed to sheer operationalism, Merton argued, by extension, that the functionalization of discourse had been accompanied by a gradual *dysfunctionalization* of symbolic language. And it followed for Merton that this erosion of the power of the symbol and the deterioration in the modern person's capacity to respond to symbolic language are "alarming symptoms of spiritual decay."

Merton attributes the degradation of symbolic language in scientific and technological society to "an incapacity to distinguish between the *symbol* and the *indicative sign*." The preeminent function of the sign, Merton explains, is to communicate practical and factual information. The symbol, in contrast, has no utilitarian value whatsoever; it does not convey information or *explain*. Given then the overwhelming premium set on function, operation, and process in modern mass culture, as Marcuse had argued, the nonutilitarian symbol is drained of its efficacy and routed from the language of mass-man.

Useless as a means of communication, Merton comments on the higher purpose achieved by the symbol, "the purpose of going beyond practicality and purpose, beyond cause and effect."¹⁰ He stresses the trans-

9. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), pp. 139-140.

10. *Love and Living*, p. 67. Hereafter referred to in the text as *L&L*.

cent function of symbolism, its role as a vehicle of union and synthesis, and its power to awaken "spiritual resonances" that evoke a deeper awareness "of the inner meaning of life and of reality itself." Symbols mobilize and animate vital resources of creativity and spirituality. Merton draws on the power of symbolic language itself in an effort to approximate the function and purpose of symbolism. "A true symbol takes us to the center of [a] circle, not to another point on the circumference. A true symbol points to the very heart of being, not to an incident in the flow of becoming" (*L&L*, pp. 54-55).

The symbol [Merton writes] awakens awareness, or restores it. Therefore, it aims not at communication but at communion. Communion is the awareness of participation in an ontological or religious reality: in the mystery of being, of human love, of redemptive mystery, of contemplative truth.

The purpose of the symbol, if it can be said to have a "purpose," is not to increase the quantity of our knowledge and information but to deepen and enrich the *quality* of life itself by bringing man into communion with the mysterious sources of vitality and meaning, of creativity, love, and truth, to which he cannot have direct access by means of science and technique. (*L&L*, p. 68)

The vital role of the symbol [then] is precisely this: to express and encourage man's acceptance of his own center, his own ontological roots in a mystery of being that transcends his individual ego. (*L&L*, p. 65)

As Merton positions his discussion of symbolism's transcendent values into the context of modern technological culture -- a context clearly identifiable as Marcuse's one-dimensional society -- Merton's commentary pivots sharply into critique and lament. One-dimensional society, after all, obliterates the distinction between public and private existence; therefore, it bars contact with those ontological roots of which symbols aim to evoke awareness. Modes of modern communication, which Marcuse showed to be dominated by utilitarian processes, effectively cripple the higher function of symbolism to transcend, as Merton argued, practicality and cause and effect. The operational rationality of modern discourse -- a central premise of Marcuse's critique -- absorbs and denies transcendent vocabularies. In one-dimensional society, the symbol as a vehicle of communion, in short, surrenders to a discourse of signs with its sole purpose of identifying facts and conveying information.

Merton also acknowledges, at least implicitly, Marcuse's claims for the totalitarian character of functional language, a language that, as Marcuse says, serves only to induce people "to do, to buy, and to accept." Elsewhere -- for example in Merton's "War and the Crisis of Language," a far sharper protest against denatured contemporary prose than his

jeremiad on the degradation of symbolism -- Merton cites many examples in modern usage which illustrate the breakdown of communication into deception. By analyzing advertising copy, political jargon, and even religious language, Merton parallels Marcuse's argument that such modes of discourse reveal a language of "power," "self-enclosed finality," and "totalist dictatorship" in action. This is a language, Merton argues, of final utterance and hypnotic formulation in which "the insatiable appetite for the tautological, the definitive, the *final*"¹¹ defies contradiction and dissent and, as Marcuse stressed, militates against the development of meaning, what Merton prefers to call "the contamination of reason . . . by inherent ambiguity." Merton selects examples especially from military terminology -- such as "kill ratio," "pacification," "free zone," "liberation" -- which reflect precisely those characteristics of operationalism that Marcuse claimed preclude the genuine development of meaning. Such terms are, first and foremost, rooted in cliché. They exemplify what Marcuse described as the abridgment of concepts in fixed images: that is, they oversimplify, compress, and economize content to the point of utterly obscuring underlying concepts. This is the kind of terminology, as Merton would say, that contaminates reason through ambiguity. Specifically, Merton explains, a "free zone" is an area where anything that moves can be assumed to be the enemy and shot. He cites the case of an army major who explained the shelling of a South Vietnamese village as "liberation;" "it became necessary," the major reports, "to destroy the town in order to save it." More recent examples would include the CIA's manual for anti-Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua which urges "the selective use of violence" against government officials (assassination) and proposes the "elimination" of a popular Contra supporter in order to create a "martyr" for the cause (disloyalty and murder).

This is, by and large, a discourse of gross deception, evasion, euphemism. It is a business-like and antiseptic sort of terminology in which clinical certainty successfully masks sinister connotations. Such terms seem immune to contradiction in their masterful and unsentimental justifications of the otherwise ugly strategies of war. Although the above examples are drawn from military jargon, their distinguishing features, as Marcuse and Merton show, extend to all manner of linguistic forms in one-dimensional society. What unifies the range of discourse in such a society is the will to power which dictates ethically neutral patterns of speech. As Merton

11. Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), p. 238. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NVA*.

explains, the logic of power speaks the language of power, "a language that is all the more pervasive because it is proud of being ethically illiterate and because it accepts, as realistic, the basic irrationality of its own tactics" (NVA, p. 241). It is, above all, a language inherently dehumanizing and contemptuous of fundamental human values and needs -- a discourse, Merton writes, "of double-talk, tautology, ambiguous cliché, self-righteous and doctrinaire pomposity, and pseudo-scientific jargon that mask a total callousness and moral insensitivity, indeed a basic contempt for man" (NVA, p. 246).

Returning to Merton's discussion of the degradation of symbolism, the dynamics of his argument reduce to a basic conflict between Marcuse's totalitarian functional discourse and Merton's own interpretation of the purpose of symbolism, between a language which indoctrinates truth and falsehood and a language which promotes the search for truth. Drawing on a line from *Cables to the Ace*, at stake, Merton maintains, is nothing less than the survival of symbolic language in "a culture of bare-faced literal commands." Sounding a note of serious alarm, Merton questions that survival as long as the modern person, he suggests, remains "cut off from any reality except that of his own processes . . . and that of the extraordinary new world of his machines." "When man is reduced to his empirical self and confined within its limits, he is, so to speak, excluded from himself, cut off from his own roots, condemned to . . . a wilderness of externals . . . [where] there can be no living symbols" (L&L, p. 65).

Not willing to conclude his reflections on the dysfunctionalization of symbolic language on such a pessimistic note, Merton calls on artists and poets -- "the ones most aware of the disastrous situation [and] for that very reason the closest to despair" -- to restore vitality to the corrupt and degenerate sense of symbolism and check the process which continues to devalue symbolic language in technological society. He calls for a renewal of wisdom that, like his new humanism, "must be more than a return to the past, however glorious. We need a wisdom appropriate to our own predicament," a wisdom that recognizes and cooperates with the "spiritual and creative vitality" of symbolism and refuses, above all, any complicity with the logic and language of power. "One thing is certain," he notes finally, "if the contemplative . . . and the poet . . . forsake [that] wisdom and join in the triumphant, empty-headed crowing of advertising men and engineers of opinion, then there is nothing left in store for us but total madness" (L&L, p. 79).

4. That last comment is somewhat perplexing, especially in light of *Cables to the Ace* in which Merton, contrary to his own advice to fellow poets, eschews symbolic language. By extrapolating modes of mass culture discourse into a new poetry devoid of symbolism, the practicing poet of *Cables* sounds as if he is compromising the essayist of "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?". At least it may appear as though Merton fails to heed his own counsel because *Cables*, while by no means an exercise in "total madness," is nonetheless an anti-poetry that shuns the vitality and wisdom of traditional symbolism; it is a poetry that prefers instead to join in what Merton elsewhere condemns as empty-headed crowing along the road to lunacy. Any hints of conflict, however, between Merton's advice to other poets and his own practice of anti-poetry should not be construed as such clear evidence of cross-purposes or contradictions. After all, by mimicking the discourse of ad-men and engineers of opinion in *Cables* Merton is, in effect, condemning that discourse. Besides, Merton's approach to the fundamental issue of language, and especially the fate and the practice of poetry in contemporary society, is complicated by a separation of perspectives, by two distinct personae with separate obligations.

As a priest, for example, Merton viewed the degradation of symbolism in technological society as evidence of spiritual decay. This is the voice, then, that issues apocalyptic warning signals in "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?". This is the persona that elsewhere calls on contemporary poets to liberate themselves from society's "coercive or seductive pressures" and assesses the poet's responsibility as "a moral obligation to maintain his own freedom and his own truth."¹² It is as a priest that Merton addresses a gathering of Latin American poets whom he urges "to remain united against . . . falsehoods, against all power that poisons man, and subjects him to the mystifications of bureaucracy, commerce and the police state." Modern poets must seek their liberation, he further intones, by renouncing "tutelage to established political systems or cultural structures" and their "impurity of language and spirit . . ."¹³ As a spiritual counselor, Merton defines the poet in such homilies as these, in short, as a prophet who restores a spiritual vision to reality and the future.

But as a practicing poet, Merton seemed more interested in parody than prophecy. As a poet himself, in other words, Merton viewed the degradation of symbolism in technological society as opening up new

12. "Answers on Art and Freedom" in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, pp. 170-171.

13. "Message to Poets," *Ibid.*, pp. 155-159.

possibilities for an innovative poetics: a radically experimental, post-modern anti-poetry notable for its lack of any moral fervor or prophetic spirit, a poetry that does not resist "the mystifications of bureaucracy, commerce and the police state" but rather submits to such mystifications. Both the poet and the priest recognized, as Merton -- echoing Marcuse -- says in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, that "Western culture . . . [had] reached the climax of entire totalitarian rationality of organization and of complete absurdity and self-contradiction" (p. 140). The priest resisted that recognition because it raised the specter of a modern ethos alien to his spiritual traditions. But the poet, especially of *Cables to the Ace*, accepted it and sought after an aesthetic appropriate to what Marcuse had defined essentially as a one-dimensional society distinguished by one-dimensional thought and behavior. If, when speaking as a priest, Merton urged other poets to liberate themselves from that ethos, as a poet he entered it and began experimenting with the kind of poetry, as he notes in a review of Roland Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero*, "which reminds the reader not to get lost . . . in false complicities with the message or the emotion, not to get swept away by illusions of inner meaning, a slice of life, a cosmic celebration, or an eschatological vision."¹⁴ This is a poetry -- an *anti-poetry* -- that does just the opposite of what traditional poetry, empowered by symbolism, should do. Anti-poetry does not bring the reader "into communion with . . . mysterious sources of vitality and meaning, of creativity, love, and truth." Merton defines the purpose of anti-poetry and the role of the anti-poet most succinctly in an entry in *The Asian Journal*: "The anti-poet 'suggests' a tertiary meaning which is not 'creative' and 'original' but a deliberate ironic feedback of cliché, a further referential meaning, alluding, by its tone, banality, etc., to a *customary and abused context*, that of an impoverished and routine sensibility, and of the 'mass-mind,' the stereotyped creation of quantitative response by 'mass-culture.'"¹⁵ The anti-poet abandons all conventional postures and approaches because "he can no longer trust the honesty of his customary dialogue with the rest of society." He is cut off from public discourse in a culture of specialization and separation where, as the poet Wendell Berry has more recently suggested, "the old union of beauty, goodness, and truth is broken." The anti-poet must then surrender "all charismatic exaltation, all aspiration to

14. *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 142. Hereafter referred to in the text as *LE*.

15. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1975), p. 286.

power, all *numen*, all that would seem to give him some ascendancy over the reader" (LE, p. 145).

In a manner of speaking, then, the anti-poet declares himself poet laureate of Marcuse's one-dimensional society. "Marcuse," Merton acknowledges in *The Asian Journal*, "has shown how mass culture tends to be anticulture -- to stifle creative work by the sheer volume of what is 'produced,' or reproduced. In which case, poetry . . . must start with an awareness of this contradiction and use it -- as anti-poetry -- which freely draws on the material of superabundant nonsense at its disposal . . . and feed [it] back . . . into the mass consumption of pseudo-culture" (p. 118).

5. So the following discussion of entries selected from *Cables to the Ace* builds on the fundamental proposition that Merton's radical aesthetic of the anti-poem incorporates many elements of Marcuse's "functional discourse" in one-dimensional society.¹⁶ As indicated earlier, however, any effort to give a comprehensive and unified reading of *Cables* is bound to be frustrated by its apparently purposeful uncenteredness and its anything-goes free-wheeling pitch. Many things tumble together in disarray. While melancholic (as in Cable 12, for example), it is at times utterly comic, as when a midget suddenly pops out in Cable 27 and cries: "Hats off! Hats off to the human condition!" In a Prologue which is bullying to the point of insult, Merton sets the stage for an aggressiveness that also surfaces in many *Cables*, the same sort of aggression that heated much of Merton's social criticism and prompted him once to confess to a certain petulance rooted in egotism. Some *Cables* are grossly, though playfully nonsensical, while in others the babble gives way to esoteric utterance, pensive and wise (*Cables* 37 and 38). One may wonder too why Merton saw fit to include some of the love poems he wrote for a nurse in Louisville: for example Cable 78, "Harmonies of Excess,"¹⁷ where a serene lyricism seems so discordant and compromised as it jostles against the opposite moods of its neighboring entries. All of this makes for a disorienting reading experience, a disruptive, automatic, random conjoining of disparate elements -- "mosaics," Merton called them, or "Familiar Liturgies of Misunderstanding" -- where poetry and anti-poetry, verse and prose blocks fire, so to speak, in cylinders oddly

16. Selections are taken from *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 393-454.

17. These so-called "love poems" have been collected in *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1986).

out of time. Nonetheless, we can at least identify a major leitmotif that trails through *Cables to the Ace*: it can be read profitably as a sustained Marcusean meditation on the dysfunctionalization of symbolic language in technological society, a sort of anti-poetry *qua* social criticism.

In *Cables 1* and *2*, for example, Merton immediately pits the quantitative function of signs against the qualitative values of the symbol and judges the outcome. "Cables" -- as in *telegraphic* cables -- are themselves signs because their purpose is to convey information, to communicate not commune. In *Cables 1* and *2*, then, messages skip across the page like electric pulses -- short syntactical bursts punctuated by stops -- "played and sung" by one-dimensional societies ill-fated by a totalist technocracy.

1.

Edifying cables can be made musical if played and sung by full-armed societies doomed to an electric war. A heavy imperturbable beat. No indication where to stop. No messages to decode. Cables are never causes. Noises are never values. With the unending vroom vroom vroom of the guitars we will all learn a new kind of obstinacy, together with massive lessons of irony and refusal. We assist once again at the marriage of heaven and hell.

2.

A seer interprets the ministry of the stars, the broken gear of a bird. He tests the quality of stone lights, ashen fruits of a fire's forgotten service. He registers their clarity with each new lurch into suspicion. He does not regret for he does not know. He plots the nativity of the pole star, but it neither sets nor rises. Snow melts on the surface of the young brown river, and there are two lids: the petals of sleep. The sayings of the saints are put away in air-conditioned archives.

"Cables are never causes. Noises are never values." The higher critical functions of causation and value judgment are drowned out here by the hypnotic "heavy imperturbable beat" of Cable (sign) language and absorbed into the omnipresent white noise of vrooming guitars, captured elsewhere, in *Cable 77*, in a better image as "the copyrighted tornado/ Of sheer sound." The seer in *Cable 2* speaks a different language. He interprets and tests and registers clarity. His knowledge derives from intuition. His plotting of the origin of a star does not follow the precise mathematical procedures of astronomy. He exercises higher order cognitive and intellectual faculties, in other words, which Marcuse claims are essentially those of the non-conformist. But the fate of Merton's non-conformist poet-seer in a world where there are "no messages to decode" is hinted at by the nature of the objects upon which the seer trains his intuitive powers. Those objects are metallic and strangely funereal: "the broken gear of a bird," "stone lights" and "ashen fruits," the kinds of objects which might clutter a sterile,

even irradiated landscape. The potential symbolic value of a bird or of lights and fruits is negated anyway by the adjectives which modify them. The ultimate fate of the seer is indeed sealed when Merton negotiates a final non-sequitur leap: "The sayings of the saints are put away in air-conditioned archives."

Merton arrives at a similar judgment in Cable 5 where the form of commentary first changes from prose blocks to verse.

Gem notes
Of the examiner
Or terminal declarations:

The Directors
Have engineered a surprise
You will not easily discover:

The speech -- the "Notes" -- of the examiner in these lines is that language of self-enclosed finality -- or "terminal declaration" -- which Marcuse identifies as the chief characteristic of totalitarian discourse. It is the speech of directors and dictators and those "engineers of opinion" whom Merton had previously ostracized in his essay on the degradation of symbolism. Their surprise is not only hard to discover but, once discovered, it quickly slips away.

Come shyly to the main question
There is dishonor in these wires
You will first hesitate then repeat
Then sing louder
To the drivers
Of ironic mechanisms
As they map your political void

Functional discourse dehumanizes; there is dishonor in the language of cables and electric wires. But even if the "you" addressed in the stanza hesitates through faint recognition, he still seems doomed to a hypnotic speech of drives and mechanisms. Cut off from participation in a deeper ontological reality, he enters a landscape of his own emptiness where the directors happily survey his "political void." And among the "many original/ Side effects" of residence in that wasteland of mechanisms, that ethos of operationalism, is that "Each nominal conceit/ Will be shot down by an electric eye" and "Events are finally obscure forever." Symbol and metaphor, along with the critical self-reflection and indeed the very evidence of history itself -- those things Marcuse identifies, in short, as "transcendent functions" -- are stifled and incapacitated until

You wake and wonder
Whose case history you composed

As your confessions are filed
 In the dialect
 Of bureaux and electrons.

Merton had previously defined the purpose of symbolic language as awakening awareness or restoring it; he characterized the symbol as a vehicle of self-discovery. But here functional and operational modes of speech prevail -- "the dialect," that is to say, "Of bureaux and electrons" -- so the case history of self-awareness, arrived at through modes of self-reflection such as confession, becomes little more than fodder for the filing cabinet, like those sayings of the saints shelved away in hermetic archives. Little wonder that Merton immediately follows in Cable 6 with Caliban's curse, quoted from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "The red plague rid you/ For learning me your language!"

Throughout these early entries Merton establishes clear links between his own Cables and those various features that Marcuse identifies as preeminent hallmarks of functional discourse in advanced technological society. In the Cables which follow Merton continues to expand those linkages by further developing the controlling image of electricity, an especially ironic choice in light of Merton's own death by accidental electrocution. Electricity is exquisitely organized power transmitted through networks of highly organized circuits, cables, conduits. It is a perfect image for the coordination of functional energy, and Merton uses it to portray a social environment, as Marcuse might say, entirely dominated by its technological apparatus, a social order wired-in to process and technique. Merton traces patterns of electrical flow from the specific to the global -- from "academies of electrical renown" to "the electric village" and "the electric world" and finally to an "electric universe." Ultimately the "electric cosmos" itself comes to resemble a macrocosmic circuit board where everything -- commerce, industry, agriculture, politics, education, metaphysics, religion as well as all modes of human discourse -- flows through "imitable wires," "everlasting carbon vines," and "electric walks." Time itself marches in the electronic parade, for even "the next ice-age [is programmed] from end to end."

Technological totalitarianism -- the politics of Merton's electric village -- must insulate itself, as Marcuse further reasoned, against any non-conformist or idiosyncratic elements which might challenge the organization and control of vested collective interests. It stands to reason that errant pulses or surges are to Merton's electric ethos what dissent, non-conformity, and individuality are to Marcuse's one-dimensional

society. Following the metaphor, an electric cosmos must be glitch-proof and protected against anything that threatens to blow a fuse or trip a circuit.

In a further allusion to the operational and behavioral rationality that Marcuse claimed necessarily governed one-dimensional thought and behavior, Merton devotes Cable 19 to a vignette depicting a man wired to a rat's brain in the laboratory of a behavioral scientist. It is a morbid presentation of human behavior shaped and controlled by the mechanisms of pleasure and punishment. "Split second doses of motivation/ Keep you in stitches," Merton writes, and human ecstasies are triggered by rats pushing "pleasure buttons." This is a claustrophobic nightmare that effectively underscores Marcuse's contention that "the more total the repressive administration of society becomes, the more unimaginable the means and ways by which the administered individuals might break their servitude and seize their open liberation." In fact, portraits of such "administered individuals" appear frequently throughout *Cables*. Merton uses the behavioral scenario, for example, in Cable 52 where strictly controlled and ordered human behavior is likened to the robotic activity of an ant, obediently carrying out "his appointed task" and mindlessly following "his appointed round/ In the technical circuit." Or consider the businessman in Cable 50 whose entire being is shaped by the pleasures of "Cracking new money." He worships "truth-telling twenties/ And fifties that understand," and he offers a prayer to "the cunning dollar": "Make me numb/ And advertise/ My buzzing feedbacking/ Business-making mind." His consciousness and conscience and spirit owe allegiance to a cult of commerce that provides for all his values, aspirations, and needs. "The dollar . . . tells me no lie/ . . . [it] knows and loves me/ And is my intimate all-looking doctor." Like this disciple of commerce, all of Merton's portraits of administered, alienated individuals reflect operational minds in action: minds that define objectives -- pleasure, wealth -- and identify means -- conformity, commerce -- while betraying an astonishing ineptness in such things as ethical calculation, moral reasoning, and critical self-reflection.

Rats, ants, robotic businessmen -- these, as Merton would no doubt prefer to say, are anti-portraits of human beings reduced to ciphers by the cult of order and organization. These are persons dehumanized, alienated, stripped of their individuality, just like the woman in Cable 43 who is transformed into an empty caricature of the ideal Woman by the ad-man -- the shaman of one dimensional society -- who sells her a new face. Here again the operational mind springs into action: a mind that defines an objective (beauty) and identifies a means (cosmetics) without the slightest

pause for or interest in any authentic self-awareness. Here is a ritual seduction, an esoteric initiation into the cult of eternal youth, a baptism in cosmetics full of magic and mysterious charms. "Let us cool your bitter sweet charm," chants the ad-man, "with incense and verse." He conjures a "rich pigment," "a new glaze of ours . . ."

. . . to melt away
 Stubborn little worries known as lines
 To restore with magic lanolin our flawless picture of
 YOU
 Yes you, our own pity-making sweet charade of oils

This is only one entry among many others in *Cables* where Merton parodies the popular genre of Madison Avenue. Like Marcuse, Merton was fascinated by the language of advertisement, especially its incantory and charismatic power, as Marcuse said, to induce people to do, to buy, to accept. Incidentally, while working on *Cables*, Merton received regular consignments of ad-copy which he requested from his friends. "I would much appreciate good, gaudy, noisy *ad* material," he mentioned to W. H. Ferry, noting "how conscious [I am] of the wacky material there is to exploit in ads." (Apparently Merton had his limits. After receiving a bundle of such ads, he quickly returned notice: ". . . Enough! . . . Am still retching. Weak stomach, getting old . . . Old gut won't take it. This will be quite enough to produce the long poetic retch I was planning."¹⁸) As he said in "War and the Crisis of Language," it is "the vocation of the poet -- or the anti-poet -- *not* to be deaf to [advertisements] but to apply his ear to their corrupt charms." Among such consignments of ad material, and perhaps as a prototype for the cosmetics ad that he parodies in Cable 43, Merton cites in that essay the example of an Arpege hair spray advertisement culled from *The New Yorker*:

A delicate-as-air-spray
 Your hair takes on a shimmer and sheen that's wonderfully young.
 You seem to spray new life and bounce right into it.

He celebrates this hair spray verse as a "masterpiece" of anti-poetry that stands "inviolable in its own victorious rejection of meaning." Like the lanolin magic of Cable 43, Arpege "is endowed with a finality so inviolable that it is beyond debate and beyond reason . . . at once totally trivial and totally definitive." That "it has nothing to do with anything real" seems of little consequence or concern. And like the "flawless picture of YOU" conjured in Merton's own ad parody, Arpege "is so magic that it not only

18. *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 229.

makes you smell good, it 'coifs' you with a new and unassailable identity." By applying his ear to the charm of ad copy in *Cables*, Merton not only parodies its linguistic features but he enters into the mentality of salesmanship and what he firmly believed to be its consciousness of moral illiteracy. That, as Merton said, is the duty of the anti-poet: to "feedback" for mass culture consumption a language that testifies to the impoverished and dehumanized sensibility of the mass mind.

That sensibility, moreover, is so vulnerable to the persuasive and hypnotic power of manipulation, as Marcuse argues, that its higher order intellectual skills are crippled. Such cognitive functions as abstraction, conceptualization, synthesis, demonstration, and critique atrophy when operational logic (designation, identification, assertion, imitation, etc.) dominates consciousness and modes of thought. If modes of discourse reflect modes of thought, it follows that language itself becomes what Marcuse calls a "closed language" that "does not demonstrate and explain -- it communicates decision, dictum, command" (p. 101).

Much of the abstruseness and the frankly annoying incoherence of *Cables*, then, might well be the result of Merton's implementing a Marcusean-like "closed language" and capitalizing especially on the disruption of meaning inevitable in a language closed to higher order cognitive functions. The anti-poet not only "feeds back" an impoverished sensibility, he taps the rich resources of "superabundant nonsense" at his disposal, as Merton notes in *The Asian Journal* with direct reference to Marcuse, and returns it too back into mass culture circulation. Throughout *Cables* Merton often taps into that reservoir; he borrows popular modes of discourse and parodies their formal structures while simultaneously disrupting and disjuncting patterns of meaning.

For example, by culling terminology common to manufacturing and industry -- the accepted and standard jargon of commerce -- Merton assembles such terms into a syntactical cackle in Cable 25: "Elastic programs to draft nonspecialist energy and rotate funds to speedup intake of output." In addition to ad copy, similarly farcical constructions are used to satirize business memoranda (Cable 26), academic discourse (Cable 33), gossip columns (Cable 41), even cut lines for newspaper photographs (Cable 70): "Clean-cut pirate meets and befriends priceless stolen owl. . ." The ultimate dismembering of semantics occurs in Cable 48, a ludicrous burlesque of a newscast. It is sufficient to quote only the first stanza:

Children of large nervous furs
Will grow more pale this morning

In king populations
 Where today drug leaders
 Will promote an ever increasing traffic
 Of irritant colors
 Signs of this evident group
 Are said to be almost local

Here are typical references to time and place: this morning, today, local. And Merton selects stock verbs which are common to any news broadcast: "promote," "are said to be." But the factual certainty one expects from a newscast is derailed by the passive voice. Besides, time, place and action are mediated by nonsensical constructions. Absurd adverb and adjective clauses, random modifiers, and non-sequitur transitions sabotage logical semantic relationships until meaning is so disrupted that the broadcast collapses into an inane babble, into "a copyrighted tornado/ Of sheer sound."

Let us consider finally Cable 30 where all of these previously discussed elements fuse together into a distinctly Orwellian meditation on the utter banality of an utterly ordinary day: the day, we might say, of a typical one-dimensional citizen in a typical one-dimensional society. During this day, events are strung together by a chain reaction of signals, and people go about their activities as if switched on and off by terminals in a grid. The functional discourse of signs and its potential to dehumanize; the controlling image of electricity; totalitarianism, operationalism, automatization; the parody of ad copy; and the broken syntax of nonsense -- all of these are indiscriminately conjoined to depict the narcosis of human routine in an environment cluttered with signs. Morning begins with the ubiquitous sounds of sizzling bacon and perking coffee ("the chatter of meats" and the "Nine o'clock boil"), which in turn trigger an exodus of crowds and traffic into high rise buildings topped with flashing neon signs -- "An electric goat's head/ Turns and smiles/ Turns and smiles" -- which in turn switch on a counter-exodus back through "Names Omens Tunnels" to "Night sanctuaries/ Imaginary refuge/ Full of flowers" and "The solemn twittering of news," until the entire day disappears into a vortex of ultimate unmeaning as

The iron voice in the next apartment
 Cries NOW
 And you flush the toilet.

Cable 30 is probably one of the purest examples of anti-poetry in *Cables to the Ace*. It is composed entirely of signs, like the literal blinking tautology of that absurd flashing neon goat's head. The crowds that shuffle along "in

cotton mist/ And Chloroform” are composed of entirely alienated individuals bereft of ontological roots, so the poem itself is stripped of symbolic language. Cable 30 refuses any participation in an ontological or religious reality of which, as Merton claimed, symbols evoke awareness. There is no “mystery of being, of human love, of redemptive mystery, of contemplative truth” in Cable 30’s “energy of motors.” Even the pitiful clergyman in the anti-poem joins the mindless march as he “goes by/ With a placard/ ‘You can still win’.” Christian confidence in salvation -- The Good News -- is just another message, another billboard ad in this ethos of signals and signs.