[TMA 15 (2002) 121-135]
ISSN 0894 4857

The Influence of 'Beat' Generation Poetry on the Work of Thomas Merton

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Thomas Merton balanced a public voice with a strong interior emotional life in the Cistercian contemplative tradition. Yet in his later poetry, Merton's writing reflected the technical experiments of his contemporaries who embedded political and social concerns within literature. In Merton's *Cables to the Ace*, he sought to balance the political weight of a symbol against the emotion of a visual image. *Cables* is a lamentation, a liturgy framed in secular language directed to an audience that included the Beat poets who argued about the death of the best minds of a generation of Americans, a decade before the media argued about the death of God. The public identities of Beat generation poets rested on the pose of being angry, misunderstood and rebellious. The movement included Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Robert Kelly, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Gregory Corso, Jack Kerouac and Ken Kesey. Though Merton felt a spiritual kinship with the Beats, his journal entries and correspondence with Robert Lax show an impatience with any poet trying to preach, to play the guru; as the decade waned he became less eager to jump on the City Lights bandwagon. Nonetheless, by the 1960s, his literary reputation established, Merton had looked for heaven in a grain of sand, and in an epic poem. Less religious men had. Merton admired his contemporaries who had written large, epic-length poems like Ginsberg's *Howl* or William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*. This admiration included the Objectivist poet Louis Zukofsky, whose poem *A*, a 800+ page libretto, composed over a 50-year period, spanned generations. Though not very well known to the American public, the attempt set Zukofsky as a poet's poet, in Merton's view, an exceptional writer, who could tell a story, write an autobiography, if you will, through poetry.

Unlike the hippies of the 1960s of whom Merton disapproved, the Beat generation of the 1950s defined itself as being about poetry. Despite the profanity of their language, Merton saw the movement as essentially religious. The Beats' philosophy was counter-cultural; resistant to the materialism lambasted in Allen Ginsberg's poem, 'Supermarket in California'. Merton saw advertising as a source of spiritual corruption not so much because it inspired greed, but because it led souls into a profound confusion about the nature of creativity. As advertising homogenized the aesthetic of cultural production, it accentuated the tendency to regard 'genius' as an expression of individualism, that situated the artist as a hero, 'the high priest in a cult of art that tends to substitute itself for religion'. As true creativity could be mistaken for godliness by the unchurched, Merton argued, religiosity among Christians could be confused with salesmanship, and simply mirror the wrongs of creative advertising. In his journal entry of 5 May 1967 (Ascension Day), Merton condemned the whole business of public culture that 'fabricates' importance so everyone knows the same names. Neither knowing the headliners of the day nor not knowing them matters, he argued, because 'One needs a whole new language' in order to speak truth plainly. That quality of brash, even brazen protest against the bourgeois life of capitalist materialism, a trademark of the Beat generation and of the Objectivist school of poets, including Zukofsky and Charles Olsen, is incorporated along with the detritus of advertising, commercial language and business in Thomas Merton's *Cables*.

Merton valued classic form in religion and in art, that which endured beyond the limits of the time and place of its composition. He believed a poet had to search within for meaning and reach out, technically, to the level of a Homer, Dante or Milton. The classic vernacular was a language of inner experience rendered through metaphor. It did not have the 'quality of necessity', egotism or urgency that Merton said characterized more prosaic poetry, but was concerned purely with the aesthetic, the transcendent, and yet each word or rhyme established its own necessity within the context of the sentence or line.

The 1960s found clerics, students and poets engaged in constructing poetry of protest emerging from the absorption in the cultural moment. American poetry written by Louis Zukofsky and the Objectivists, William Carlos Williams and the Imagists, and by the Beat generation changed the craft of poetry by popularizing the vernacular. Merton's personal journals, letters and poetry are imbued with a clear sense of his audience's values as contemporary. He admired poets who remained 'free', who were not driven to be prophets, and who realized ' that one life

does not exhaust the possibilities of one man', as Merton wrote in his review of Zukofsky.[1]

As he explained to Zukofsky, Merton had grown up in a world full of myth and symbol, and sought to 'reconcile' the poetic technique that completely stripped the symbol of that, using only visual images for impact. He tried to find a middle ground where he could integrate a 'direct and continuous relation with the visible' and yet allow for a symbolic power. [2] Merton called this balance the 'Paradise' mentality, found in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, William Carlos Williams's poetry and essays, and according to Merton, in Louis Zukofsky's poetry. Just as he admired Milton's sense of space, the distance between heaven and hell—'Nine times the Space that measures Day and Night'—so he admired Williams's use of concrete images that sounded like a Haiku or Koan: 'so much depends on a red wheel barrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens'. Similarly, he admired Zukofsky's childlike sense of rhythm and rhyme: 'I'm a mosquito/May I Bite your big toe? Here's ten dollars/Use it/as you know'.[3] The paradise mentality enabled the poet to structure ideas 'musically instead of logically', to accept the ways in which 'life's silences are mined with love' and for the reader to 'hear with a paradise ear' the cosmology of love, the Franciscan and Ignatian acceptance of finding God in all things, and incorporating all into the creative fecundity of the poetic, the transformative experience, even things mundane or commercial. [4]

The poets of the Beat generation, Merton wrote, got into trouble when they substituted social activism for religion and confused freedom and dignity with perpetual motion. In 'Prophetic Ambiguities: Milton and Camus', an essay written in October 1966 first published in the *Saturday Review* of 1967, Merton described the link between Satan as the prototype for the modern guru or protest poet that he later damned in *Cables*, the paradigm of the motivated mover and shaker, who like Milton's Satan could tolerate Hell because he was seldom home.[5] In his journal

1. Thomas Merton, *Literary Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 128-33 (129). See also George Kilcourse, Jr, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1993), pp. 173-98; Thomas Merton, *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), pp 382-83.

2. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 129.

3. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I, l. 50; William Carlos Williams, *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1969), p. 30; Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 131.

4. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 131.

5. 'Prophetic Ambiguities: Milton and Camus', in *idem*, *Literary Essays*, pp. 252-60 (p. 253).

for the months during which he composed *Cables*, Merton wrote that he began reading *Paradise Lost* seriously 'for the first time in my life' and he noted the 'metaphysical restlessness' in Milton that would have been 'unthinkable' in Dante: 'Yet Dante builds a Cathedral. And we are no longer in the age of Cathedrals. Milton's movie is more like us', Merton wrote.[6]

Without undermining Milton's great achievement in the epic, Merton astutely observed the correspondence between Milton's Satan and Batman, and the sense that the celestial epic is 'structured' like a comic strip or movie. The same must be said of Merton's *Cables to the Ace*. The constant motion, frame succeeding frame, that makes up the *Cables* poem is structurally iconoclastic. By contrast, Merton's contemplative archetype, the 'Paradise Mentality', is peace, stillness: 'Not a loss of self in mystical absorption but self-transcendence in the dynamic stillness which, as the Zen Masters said, is found not in rest but in truly spontaneous movement'.[7] The modern reader who still prefers the psalms to Burma Shave jingles yet who wants something snappy is meant to confront the poem, to break through the code of intimacy, as must the reader of *Paradise Lost*, in all its 'fruitful ambiguity', to see the 'tensions' between the charismatic, the urbane rebel, Satan and the classicist.[8]

For any American poet, managing a public persona historically has been important to achieving popular success. As early as 1912 in America, Ezra Pound and Harriet Monroe, and four or five other individuals without enough poems for a book of their own, published in journals and in anthologies as an Imagiste 'movement'.[9] Their work fueled the growth of poetic principles perfected by William Carlos Williams in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and in the 1950s by Louis Zukofsky and Charles Oslon, in what the poets themselves called Objectivism (also Objectism) or 'projective' or 'open' verse, a term not entirely understood by critics and even some poetry scholars today. But Merton understood what Zukofsky and Olson were about, meditating on the object in Zen-like concentration, finding the presence of the Creator in the things created, matching the music of paradise through poetry, the song of praise

6. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (Journals, 6; 1966–1967; ed. Christine M. Bochen; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 144-45.

7. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 254.

8. Merton, *Literary Essays*, pp. 255, 252, 238. See also Arthur W. Biddle (ed.), *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Robert Lax* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2001).

9. Claire Badaracco, *Trading Words: Poetry, Typography and Illustrated Books in the Modern Literary Economy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

not about perfection but about the construction of the ordinary and the beauty to be discovered there, if only people were not too busy to look.

As an aesthetic shadow culture, Protest and Confessional poets like the Beat generation used self-referential political and autobiographical image frameworks. For example, Allen Ginsberg owed as much to William Carlos Williams as the Patterson physician did to Walt Whitman. Ginsberg's ability to publicize himself, to carve a public self that bridged the hippies and rock generations, made political poetry synonymous with the Beats. Louis Zukofsky represents another kind of poet, devoted to his inner vision, not widely recognized despite a lifetime of craft. One wonders if Merton might not have envied just a bit Zukofsky's anonymity, along with his epic poem *A* and his musical lyrics.

In Merton's Beat poem *Cables to the Ace*, composed during 1966–67, the classic saints of literature break out of their reliquaries to converse with the contemporary culture through the commentator, Merton. With an eye on the length and poetic techniques of his contemporaries, Merton incorporated phrases from the literary classics, the poetry of T.S. Eliot, William Blake, James Joyce, Dylan Thomas, Whitman, Shakespeare and Milton. The poem incorporates the prophetic and social protest dimensions of Ginsberg's 'Supermarket in California', 'Howl' and 'Kaddish' and Zukofsky's 'All', 'Poem Beginning "The" ', and *A*. As early as 1961 Merton wrote to Williams about his hope that, 'I can some time send you a long poem I think you may like'. Six years later, Merton wrote to Zukofsky that he had 'fallen head first into a long poem of my own, swimming in its craziness and trying other work and just walking in the sun'.[10]

10. Verse 69 of *Cables* imitates Louis Zukofsky's 330-line poem, 'Poem beginning The', and in Merton's list of 26 nonsequitors, where each line is numbered separately and all begin with verbs, Merton promises in the first line to 'Move that system'. The reader has already learned from Cable 55 that the 'hero does not trust the evidence of verbs'. But here the poet provides evidence, as he predicted in Cable 12, that all the symbols have moved: they have become images. Nor is the list more nonsense than that offered in the daily 'telefake' dramas of the evening, the pseudo-heroics of the cinema and sitcom. In the tabloid dream starring, in no particular order, Oliver Twist, the Maltese Falcon, the Trojan War, Little Red Riding Hood ('in chains…learns love-secrets of best looking fugitives') there are startling headlines: 'Animated clergy storms conceptual void in theo-drama while Deity groans'. The network is thus taken over, the health-buffs destroy the owls, and the 'sardonic asides' of the poet and presumably the audience bring down the whole season to crashing ruin (Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* [New York: New Directions, 1977], p. 442). Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers* (ed. Christine M. Bochen; New York: Farar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), p. 292.

Merton's aesthetic affinity with both Williams and Zukofsky led him to overlook the secular, profane yet prophetic vernacular of Ginsberg. He did not object so much on moral grounds as a priest, but because profanity was commonplace in the advertising culture:

> Not that I am mad at dirty words, they are perfectly good honest words as far as I am concerned, and they form part of my own interior mumblings a lot of the time, why not. I just wonder if this isn't another kind of jargon which is a bit more respectable than the jargon of the slick magazines, but not very much more. And I wonder how much is actually said by it.[11]

Merton saw advertising as a source of spiritual corruption not so much because it inspired greed, but because it led souls into a profound confusion about the nature of creativity. As advertising homogenized the aesthetic of cultural production, it accentuated the tendency to regard 'genius' as an expression of individualism, that situated the artist as a hero, 'the high priest in a cult of art that tends to substitute itself for religion'.[12] True creativity could be mistaken for godliness by the unchurched, Merton argued, just as religiosity among Christians could be confused with salesmanship, a mimetic mode of creative advertising. In that same journal entry on Ascension Day (5 May 1967), Merton argued for the fresh, plain language one needed in order to speak authentically as an artist.[13]

Not unlike the ascetic, the poets of the Beat generation, even the quiet and meticulous Objectivists Zukofsky and Olson, dealt in philosophical absolutes. The poetic impulse led these men, along with Merton, to want to redeem America from its habit of soul-numbing materialism and militarism. To do so, Ginsberg and his City Lights confrères assembled a public persona for the media: they had to assert themselves as a movement, and their pamphlets, books about bohemian life and their poems drew public attention. Protest, resistance and profanity were the means to what they saw as a peaceful end. Merton wrote to Williams that the Beat movement was 'certainly religious in its concerns… [W]ho are more concerned with ultimates than the beats? Why do you think that just because I am a monk I should be likely to shrink from beats?… I am a monk, therefore by definition, as I understand it, the chief friend of beats…'[14] In the summer of 1961, following publication of Merton's poem 'Chant' in the first issue of *Journal for the Protection of All Living Beings*, Merton wrote to Ferlinghetti what it meant to him to be countercultural,

11. Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 271.
12. 'Theology of Creativity', in *idem*, *The Literary Essays*, pp. 355-70 (360).
13. Merton , *Learning to Love*, p. 227.
14. Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 290.

resistant. 'I think we have to examine the question of genuine and deep spiritual non-cooperation, non-participation, and resistance… Have you by any chance read the Old Testament prophets lately? They knew how to hit hard in the right places, and the chief reason was that they were not speaking for themselves'.[15]

Cables is written in open, projective verse using the Imagists' and Objectivists' techniques, and adapting the Beat generation poets' tone of protest. In short, Merton is appealing to an audience of his contemporaries, including those bearded coffee drinkers in the cafes of fog-bound San Francisco. As Merton's journal entries recount for the months during which he composed *Cables*, when he vascillated between the emotional peaks and valleys caused by his love affair, he read Milton, and the Beat poets who were still new to him. *Cables*' lack of narrative coherence reflects Merton's compositional pace, the poetic models that were in the air in contemporary culture, and also his state of mind during the time—ambivalent, distracted, seeking the love of a woman while reluctant to let go of the monastery. Six months before composing *Cables*, Merton recorded drafting some of the 'very wild free poetry—very irrational and absurd', which he found at once 'satisfying', 'banal' and 'incoherent'.[16] On his occasional trips into Louisville for medical attention, Merton read poetry in the Bingham room of the University of Louisville Library: John Berryman's 'Homage to Mistress Bradstreet', and the Beats: '…and some [Gregory] Corso, R[obert] Creeley and others not so good (I still can't read Charles Olson)'.[17] Objecting to the self-promotion of the Beats, Merton 'doubted whether or not he should have anything further to do with their poetry'; at the same time, he sought out their work to read. His critical attitude probably reflects the influence of two visitors, Dan Berrigan and Jacques Maritain, to whom he had read 'bits' of the new *Cables* composition.[18]

Merton recorded that he was still unsatisfied because *Cables* seemed 'hollow', though he thought better of his work later after reading Milton. At the end of October he recorded finishing *Cables*, without liking or understanding what he had written. 'It is disturbing and false in many ways. It is not myself and I don't know who it is. A glib worldly spirit. Empty voices'.[19] He continued to agonize about its 'agit-prop' style melodrama, and while calling the poem 'mechanical' and an 'imitation

15. Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 268.
16. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 120.
17. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 148.
18. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 148.
19. Merton, *Learning to Love*, pp. 144, 150.

of his former vitality', he wondered in the next breath if the poem might not be 'really good'.[20] He added the French verses in late November.[21] In December, Merton continued to rework the poem, reading bits to friends in January.

In July 1966, Cid Corman suggested Merton 'Must read all of Zukofsky', but Merton wondered how to obtain the books.[22] No doubt the obscure work of Zukofsky was unavailable in the University of Louisville library. By October, Merton tired of Corman, calling him 'pontifical', and turned to Zukofsky himself in order to obtain the books.[23] It was Zukofsky who sent Merton copies of his work to read. In his November 1966 review of W.W. Norton's edition of Zukofsky's collected short poems, Merton wrote that he thought Zukofsky 'one of the best poets writing in America today—has perhaps been the best for many years… Zukofsky has probably done more for the language of poetry than any other American writer'.[24] In Zukofsky's identification of the enduring poetic principles, the Objectivist's perspective on the meditative text, the word itself as a focus of contemplative attention, Merton would have found a kindred spirit. Zukofsky wrote, 'And it is possible in imagination to divorce speech of all graphic elements, to let it become a movement of sounds'.[25]

In March, Merton received letters from Zukofsky, who had read revisions of *Cables*, and he sent the books. Of Zukofsky's poem *A* Merton wrote that it was 'more moving than any other modern poetry I have read'.[26] Merton especially admired the musicality of Zukofsky's words, without any pretense or artificial poetic flourish. The image Merton records in his journal from *A* (#6) illustrates his comprehension of the typical Objectivist use of image, where the idea of the image is embedded in an animated landscape, and objects wrapped in haiku-style metaphors, move by an unseen power, usually electronic, the type of movement one reads often in Merton's *Cables*.

> The fir trees grew around the nunnery,
> The grille gate almost as high as the firs,

20. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 152.
21. Merton, *Learning to Love*, pp. 155-56.
22. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 163.
23. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 98.
24. Merton *Learning to Love*, p. 148.
25. Thomas Merton, review of Zukovsky in *idem*, *Literary Essays*, p. 128. The review was written in November 1966 and first published in *The Critic* 25 (Feb–March 1967) under the title 'Paradise Bugged', pp. 69-71.
26. Louis Zukofsky, *A* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 566-69.

> Two nuns by day passed in black, like
> Hooded cameras, as if photographing the world'.[27]

Though he found Olson's poetry less appealing, Merton read Zukofsky's prose remarks on Objectivist poetic thought, and wrote: ' This I think must contain a lot of important directions and suggestions'.[28]

Symbols in poetry can create a wall between the poet and reader. At this point in Merton's reading, the appeal of the autobiographical voice, the plain speech, punctuated by the concentrated, meditative gaze on an objectified, unsentimental image is great enough, as one reads Merton's journals for this period, to assert the claim for the influence of these poets on Merton's own poetry. As Olson wrote, 'a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing, in short…its particularity'.[29] In *Cables*, Merton incorprated the Objectivists' attitude, which was intensely observant of the details of the image without the emotional or psychological freight of the past. He wrote to Zukofsky in the Spring of 1967:

> I have naturally grown up all full of myth and symbol and sound and explanation and elaboration… In the long run I think one can have both the direct and continuous relation with the visible and also see it as a symbol but not as containing a symbol that is something else and of something else. Hence what I really would like to do with Olson is reconcile his direct way with also a traditional symbol way that is properly understood.[30]

Cables to the Ace is a poem about the loss of symbols in a world of fragmented images, and it occurs on several levels: emotional, verbal, visual. Merton declared 'mass psychosis' the result for his age, when cosmic symbolism was submerged by a 'tidal wave of trademarks, political party buttons, advertising and propaganda slogans', and poets were driven through the 'cultural garbage' to seek vital symbols among the 'moonlit cemeteries of surrealism'.[31] Composed during the turbulent year when his relational life threatened his vows as a monastic, the poet's anxiety about that contradiction informs the technical level of the poem. Interwoven within that nonverbal paradox of emotion, fragments of mass media language, while perfectly good for public poets like the Beats, threaten the interior life, the serenity of the poet's prayer, as an incandescent, material world creates continual losses of rhythm in the poem. Visually, the poem is frameless. Though refrains and themes

27. Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 206.
28. Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 206.
29. Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 206.
30. Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 293.
31. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 333.

make the whole hang together and work as a poem, each verse sustains its own visual metaphors, and they are more often realistic than symbolic; that is to say they are flattened, more journalistic than literary. But that may be the poet's point, to illustrate the tension between the language of the world, advertising and doxology. True and false worlds wage a battle of words in *Cables* as fierce as in Milton's epic, pre-lapsarian world.

As in Zukofsky's poems, in *Cables* several voices sing at one time. The lack of coherent narrative framework accentuates the projective style of Merton's objective technique. In the sense that Olson used the terms, projective verse was intended to reach across the footlights, so to speak, and grab the reader by the ear. The difference between the theories of objectivism and Zukofsky's poetry is music, the fundamental classic principle of poetry. In his review-essay on Zukofsky's poetry, Merton praised the poetry as combining the Zen-like attention to ordinary life in all its details, and structuring the ideas 'musically rather than logically'.[32]

Finally, there is a loss of ego in *Cables*: the poet himself disappears beneath his verses, as Olson, the Objectivists, or the desert fathers would prescribe. Behind the poetic formlessness of the *Cables* poem and the absence of steady metre, the TV glares, jazz and rock music grind, the computer screen glows, the news machine blaring headlines paid for by advertising shouts and grins. Now and again, the poet intrudes, talking about life in the monastery, then he slips into the wings, the bystander-observer.

Olson called 'objectism' a combination of prayer and Zen meditation. The underlying metaphysical structure was to rid the poem of the 'interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul, as being a particularly Western point of view that subordinated the objects to himself. 'For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, the more likely to recognize himself as such the greater his advantages, particularly at that moment that he achieves an humilitas sufficient to make him of use', Olson wrote.[33]

Olson's literary critique derived from a pure aestheticism, but his description of this style of writing poetry might have been written by Merton or one of his Zen masters. Olson wrote:

> It comes to this: the use of a man, by himself and thus by others, lies in how he conceives his relation to nature, that force to which he owes his

32. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 132.

33. Charles Olson, *Selected Writings* (ed. Robert Creeley; New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 24-25.

> somewhat small existence. If he sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself… [I]f he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secret objects to share. And by an inverse law his shapes will make their own way. It is in this sense that the projective act, which is the artist's act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than the man.[34]

Cables represents a curious balance between the interior and exterior values that infused poetry during the 1950–70 period. The poet's advertisement of *Cables* begins in the subtitle, that it is about 'liturgies of misunderstanding', but the poet writes in a confessional voice so 'familiar' to the popular reader, and to the popular Beat writers, that he cannot help but be understood. The poem appears to be about the death of literature, the supremacy of the material and commercial language, yet the denouement of the poem has its own secrets, written in French, and seems more love poem than prayer. *Cables* are of course the poet's own numbered lines, for this is a poem about the writing of poetry, dedicated to his close friend and fellow poet Bob Lax with whom he corresponded in code-like punning and who leapt for joy upon receiving *Cables*: 'each message wrapped in its own numbered cookie is each more terrifying than the next. Reader is thrown in a parox of frightened delight…'[35]

What makes the Prologue striking, and more like the Beats than like Whitman, is the contemptuous gaze it directs toward the reader. Rather than the traditional role of the prologue, which is apology, sympathy and invitation, Merton jibes: 'You, Reader, need no prologue. Do you think these Horatian Odes are all about you…? Go advertise yourself… What more do you want, Rabble? Go write your own prologue'.[36] This tone is adapted from the Beat poets, especially Ginsberg: I submit Merton is really talking *to* the Beats rather than *about* his subject. It is about as far from the humility he admires in Zukofsky and praised by Olson as pure 'objectism' as it is far from the Fourth and Walnut vision. Yet the overall spirit of the poem, to see and use evil to touch and describe the good, is as much Milton as it is Franciscan.

Merton struggled in *Cables* to restrain emotion and yet employ it in the service of the image, as did Williams and Zukofsky. For example, one with which Merton would have been familiar, is the posture of the poet as the wisdom figure, and the reader as congregant in Williams's poem 'Tract' (1927), directed to mourners who misunderstand grief. Williams,

34. Olson, *Selected Writings*, p. 25.
35. Olson, *Selected Writings*, pp. 23-25; see also Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 293.
36. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 452.

a physician, of course encountered death frequently, and he tried to demystify the poetics of death by emphasizing its realism through mundane images. The poet urges his 'townspeople' to 'knock the glass out' of the hearse that separates the bereaved from the dead. Williams wrote that people possessed the 'ground sense necessary' to understand the metaphysics of death and that they 'have it over' a 'troop or artists' who try to mask its realities. The image Williams urges on the townspeople who are using a polished black hearse is a weathered farm wagon—he doesn't damn one thing without offering a solution within an alternative vision of reality. Williams's preaching in 'Tract' escalates when it comes to the driver's top hat, when the poet's voice really becomes strident, a pitch found more often in Ginsberg or in Merton's Prologue.[37]

A further illustration of the expression of inevitability in the relationship between Imagist and Objectivist poetic techniques in Merton's *Cables*, can be found in a close reading of two verses, nos. 13 and 30, each offering important examples of significant images well controlled. Verse 13 is a vision of Louisville's workaday world, stasis in the midst of hubub. The subtitle, 'The Planet over Eastern Parkway', refers to the major tree-lined boulevard in Louisville leading to the Medical Arts Building and St Joseph's Infirmary, where Merton often went for medical care and to either call or meet the student nurse, and Lourdes Hall, where she lived. The verse portrays an 8 a.m. rush hour, where executives gather like horses at the starting gate and drive like crazy at the sound of the 'smart pistol', their alarm clocks. By evening, after the workday ends, the 'cart wheel planet' sets, and people go home to their evening pursuits illuminated by 'electric stars'.[38] By centering the motion in the images, Merton evokes tranquility or stillness in the midst of metropolis. In this time-lapse photographic image that sustains the verse, lights streak across the static black background of the natural night. But absence of light in Merton is not absence of meaning, it is the beginning of not knowing, of contemplation.

The resemblance between this verse and Williams's 'Yachts' and 'The Term' is in the expression of inevitability, of eternity in motion, whatever the fate or plight of humans. There is silence behind the motion, surely, but it is a silence of the deaf, and of the dead. In both Williams's poems, the contemplative poet observes the inevitable motion surrounding the focus of his gaze, the object of his contemplation. In both poems, the rhythms of the ordinary drown out the cries of human suffering:

37. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 395; William Carlos Williams, *Selected Poems,* pp. 12-14, 71-72, 91-92.

38. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 403.

callous indifference to human suffering is the basis of the realities both poets face. In 'Yachts', a boat race turns ugly: as the cries of men overboard are met by 'skillful yachts' passing over their drowning bodies in the sea in order to get to the finish line. In 'The Term', the poet's gaze is on a rumpled sheet of paper, 'the length and bulk of a man' rolled down the street by the wind as a car drives over it, then is picked up again 'to be as it was before'.[39] In *Cables* awe is engulfed by the mundane, by business, habit triumphs over inspiration, and both condition a type of blindness to human suffering. Embedded within the poem dedicated to listening is a Zen-like meditation on seeing.

Merton's verse 30 of *Cables* also works on images of objective indifference and emotional paradox within a metaphor or automated motion: 'An electric goat's head/Turns and smiles/Turns and smiles/Ten stories high/Emerald and gold'. This advertisement or neon billboard, an image from New York's Times Square, is juxtaposed to a placard-wielding clergyman standing on the street corner, silently revolving, perhaps circling by walking in place, offering a homiletic encouragement by sloganeering, 'You can still win'. Significantly, there is no exclamation point at the end of this slogan, but like the wounded football hero in verse 28, this 'nominee to share the human condition' declares 'straight fact'. The clergyman's message also reads like an advertisement, a motivational sign for the profiteer's rat race described in verse 13 on Eastern Parkway's rush hour. A comparable example, one Merton would have known, is found in Williams's 'The Term', a crumpled test paper rolls down the street in the wind and is crushed by a car: 'Unlike/ a man it rose/again rolling/ with the wind over/and over to be as/it was before'.[40] In both Merton's poem and in that by Williams, the image is centered in the mind's eye while the electronic, objective thing around it rolls over and over, indifferent to human beings. Emotional indifference to other humans is sinful in Williams's and Merton's worldview—a philosophy shared by the Beats, though the word 'sin' was not in their vocabulary.

The 'killer', Merton argues in *Cables*, is not merely the electricity of the city, the media or the 'solemn twittering of news', but, more gravely, the 'image in the magic', the emotional 'chloroform' that 'slowly consumes the energy of motors', that keeps 'the dimly lighted bottles' 'full of flowers' in the 'night sanctuaries', the restaurants and bars of the lonely that sustain the chattering, in an otherwise emotionally soundless universe,

39. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 44.
40. Williams, *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1969), pp. 91-92.

punctuated only by the human cry, 'NOW', in the next apartment, and the sound of the flush toilet that closes verse 30.

Beyond the explicit level of the images Merton employs throughout *Cables*, where the city is a circus, there is the image of the war-machine, the Nazi holocaust about which so many good people, even in the church, remained aloof. The poet's philosophical response to indifference is that it's a matter of existentialist 'roots' and 'moss', deep-seated and the habits or routines that grow slowly on the surface and mask reality. From the poet whose epiphany about the spiritual unity of the mass culture was manifest on Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, seeing the 'anxiety of cities' as skulls or as pearls was a spiritual choice. Merton could be a harsh social critic, acerbic and contemptuous in tone, leaving this reader to ponder if he struggled, and to what extent, to pull himself out of his own darkness. Or was the harsh critical tone something he used because he had read it in the contemporary poetry of the Beats?

Both Merton and the imagist poets worked in stark contrasts, chaos and peace, hubub and stillness, racket and silence, despair and joy. In Williams's world of the 'Yachts', 'Tract' and 'The Term', the silent movie, the reeling automaton is a metaphor for indifference in which muffled cries of the lost go unheard. The haiku-style image, the snapshot of the wheelbarrow is meant to concentrate the reader's mind. There is something youthful in that simple concentration, and a different level of complexity is required adequately to render the architecture of the modern mind. In Merton (*Cables* 77), the poet writes that he is 'Working his way through adolescence', growing toward full sound, metal strings, and the nine fond harmonies that never leave his thoughts, meaning something closer to Zukofsky's libretto, one assumes. Merton is content, though, to be a 'messenger', living out of the shadow of town. To an extent, the poet in *Cables* functions as a reporter, and the stanzas are news stories. Yet the poet-monk shares openly with the reader the pretense of objectivity: this is not a story or narrative about reality, the poet sings, it is meant to involve the reader in the poem's reality through alarm, humor, recognizable people. Of all the available masks exhibited throughout *Cables*, many are less opaque than the poet-monk. Never 'familiar', 'it is often the most naked', nor is sending disturbing messages 'without risk', but his comfort is in his freedom: 'Nothing that is chosen is unbearable'.[41]

One can conclude that as *Cables* incorporated many varied types of language, media, news, advertising—even those things Merton thought a corrosive force—the poem also can be said to reflect the impression

41. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 448.

other poets made on Merton. At the time he composed *Cables*, Merton was reading widely in the poetry of the Beats, as well as in Milton.

Merton believed that real poetry, like valid prayer, is pure communication, in the childlike, faithful sense of saying emotionally direct and uncomplicated things in simple words—trusting someone is there to catch the words as they fall. Analysis of his method of composition demonstrates he admired contemporary models of poetic techniques he wanted to try, and that he did so, within the disciplined restraints imposed by his love for paradise.