Sacred Play:
Thomas Merton's *Cables to the Ace*

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Thomas Merton's *Cables to the Ace* is the first of two book-length poems written at St. Mary of Carmel, the Gethsemani hermitage where Merton lived from August 1965 until his death in 1968. In his essay, "Merton's Hermitage," Belden Lane argues that Merton's writing became more subversive and playful after the move to St. Mary of Carmel. The hermitage was a place where the unconscious could be "unhoused," Lane argues, a place that invited Merton to give up the need to "be someone, to nurture his artificial persona as ideal monk and renowned writer. . . . He began to play the fool more creatively than ever, and to make mistakes which would free him from the weight of a contrived self he had nurtured so long."[1]

The author of *Cables to the Ace* is certainly not afraid to "play the fool." Composed in spontaneous verse paragraphs Merton calls "cantos," *Cables* challenges most everything we know about how to write (and read) a poem—including the idea that poetry should progress from start to finish. The 88 cantos of *Cables* can be shuffled like a deck of cards—one sense of the "ace" in its title. Readers may enter the poem almost anywhere—reading from back to front or from the middle out—as if "plot" is less important than experiencing the poem from all sides, like a montage or cubist painting. Merton scatters quotations across the book like handfuls of seed. He even moves back and forth between French and English. He slips in and out of the subversive "anti-language" he had used for years in his correspondence with his friend, Bob Lax—a language of parody, ambiguity, and word-play which Merton called "macaronic" writing.[2] The poem rotates through dozens of voices and perspectives—sometimes straight-ahead first person, sometimes a disembodied omniscience disconnected from any particular character or context. It changes moods: playful, angry, surreal, apocalyptic. It changes genres: from lyric poetry to science fiction, from film and radio scripts to parodies of advertising

and news broadcasts, from a quote by Meister Eckhart—"No man can see God except . . . through folly"—to something Merton picked up from *Esquire* magazine.[3] In the course of writing *Cables* he had asked his friend, W.H. Ferry, to mail him some "good, gaudy, noisy *ad* material," and Ferry had sent him, among other things, copies of *Playboy*, *Fortune*, and *Esquire*. Merton wrote back to say, in effect, enough is enough: "for petesake [sic] no tearsheets from Playboy. . . . It was all I could take. Am still retching. Weak stomach. Getting old. Too long in the woods. Can't handle Esq. Old gut won't hold it."[4]

"Playing the fool" means many things to Merton. It suggests a deeper capacity for risk and emotional intimacy—a self unhoused and unguarded. It marks his interest in new styles of experimental poetry: from the Latin American surrealism of Nicanor Parra to the spontaneous playfulness of the Beats. "My head is a boney guitar," the Beat poet, Bob Kaufman, writes, "strung with tongues, plucked by fingers and nails."[5] In German, as Merton knew, the word for holy—"selig"—is the same as the word for silly, and playing the fool allowed Merton to deflate pomposity and religious self-righteousness, including his own, and explore a style of writing that was more like prayer: attentive, limber, tuned like a boney guitar to the eccentric rhythms of God.[6]

But there is another meaning to the foolishness of *Cables*, as we will see. Playing the fool is a response to *power* for Merton and an intervention in a mass culture that left him sick at heart: "It was all I could take. Am still retching." This kind of play acts like a Brechtian "alienation effect" within Merton's poetry: it causes us to question social conventions we would otherwise take for granted and reveals toxic or sinister aspects of everyday life so grooved into our cultural unconscious we barely notice they are there.[7] "The right fragrance," a voice whispers in the poem, "is so right it is not noticed."[8] The foolishness of *Cables* makes us notice. Merton defamiliarizes the "right fragrance" (or voice or gesture or perspective). He demythologizes social constructs that seem so natural and inevitable that we do not think of them as "constructs" at all, not something we learn but something we are, and so beyond the reach of conscious thought and revision.

Not noticing, however, is deadly. Merton peoples his poem with a host of characters who are being extinguished by subtle manipulations of power—half-conscious, often child-like "trainees" who are learning cultural scripts that are killing them.[9]

Merton's concern for these "fatal children"—for *us*—is moral and spiritual as well as literary.[10] The play Merton has in mind is not the ethically neutral "free play" of Derridean deconstruction but something closer in spirit to the wise fools of Zen Buddhism or the holy folly of Meister Eckhart or the sacred play of Thoreau's *Walden*: didactic play, play with an urgent moral and spiritual purpose, the kind of play that might save one's life.

Quiet Desperation

As he pulls back the veil to reveal the toxic effect of social norms, Merton follows the lead of nineteenth-century American romantics like Henry David Thoreau, another heart-sick hermit diagnosing his country's spiritual malady from a one-room cabin in the woods. "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," Thoreau writes, in one of the most famous sentences of American literature. "What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats."[11] He should know. By the time he started *Walden*, Thoreau was out of work, grieving the death of his brother, John, and experiencing at Walden Pond the first stirrings of the tuberculosis that would eventually end his life. And so: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." But what Thoreau goes on to say is equally important: "There is no *play* in them."[12] He means, of course, no joy, no delight in the adventure of living. But he also means "play" like the play of a hinge: looseness, flex, bend. More than frivolity or quirkiness, play serves a moral purpose in *Walden*: it promotes spiritual growth by loosening rigid or compulsive habits and opening the spiritual seeker to experimentation and change. Play is the antidote to desperate thought. It is associated for Thoreau with nimbleness, looseness, suppleness, the ability to change course, the ability to change the paradigm. Thoreau thinks of it almost in physical terms: as a light-handed athleticism of mind constantly adapting to new perspectives and revising fixed assumptions in the light of fresh experience.

Merton liked to joke that he set off to the woods "with Thoreau in one pocket" and "St. John of the Cross in another."[13] Merton dips into Thoreau's transcendentalism from time to time in *Cables*—which he calls "Swimming in Walden Pond"—and uses the figure of the "nubile swimmer" to evoke the athleticism of Thoreau's limber mind and the capacity for play so important to the spiritual

vision of *Walden*.[14] But *Cables* is no transcendental poem. The cubistic proliferation of voices and narrators in *Cables* operates without a consistent or privileged center. It is hard at times to know which voice is actually "Thomas Merton," and the poet shows little interest in the adaptive but ultimately unified self of nineteenth-century romanticism. In this sense, Thoreau is less important as a stylistic and philosophical model for *Cables* than any number of modern and postmodern writers—from Pound and Joyce to Bob Dylan and Allen Ginsberg. What is important, however, is Thoreau's understanding of the moral function of literature: how it inculcates a notion of the good in people and intervenes in the moral crisis of a culture. As Stephen John Mack points out, the idea that literature has a moral (rather than purely aesthetic) function has a long tradition in Western criticism, beginning with Aristotle.[15] Unlike Aristotle, however, Merton and Thoreau do not see that purpose in terms of edifying *models*: aesthetically pleasing pictures of the good life or good person (which comes off as just another kind of salesmanship in *Cables*). What matters instead is the writer's ability to defamiliarize cultural constructs that permeate the life of a society and shape the subjectivity and needs of its people—constructs, both Merton and Thoreau stress, which serve the historical interests of power.[16] Literature of course is one of those constructs, and Merton uses the cranky voice of the Prologue in *Cables*—an "author" giving advice and instructions to his readers—to de-mystify literary power and make the book's designs on us still more apparent. Although neither writer would phrase it quite this way, literature serves a moral purpose by making *ideology* visible and helping readers glimpse compulsive and unconscious norms—Thoreau's "quiet desperation"—obscured by habit, tradition, indifference, or routine. These norms comprise what Merton calls the "habit frequency" of American culture—a set of ready-made scripts that play like a radio station in the minds of his characters.[17] Disrupting that frequency—by expanding the band-width of his poem to include dozens of other voices, messages, communications, "cables"—Merton introduces sacred elements of literary and spiritual play.[18]

As a single instance of this larger concern, consider Merton's description of the air-conditioned waiting room in Canto 41 of *Cables*, a place where the desperation is so quiet you have to lean in to hear it:

> Approved prospect of chairs with visitors to the hero. Temperature is just comfortable for a variety of skins. It is with our skins here that we see each other all around and feel together. We are not overheated, we smell good and we remain smooth. No skin needs to be absolutely private for all are quiet, clean, and cool. The right fragrance is so right it is not noticed. The cool of the whole area is like that of a quiet car and presences. No one is really ailing and no one is quite that tired. See the pictures however for someone elsewhere who is really tired. Hear the sound of the music for someone who is relaxed (with an undercurrent of annoyance). She is glad to be sitting down with her limbs as if her long legs were really hers and really bare. This year the women all worry about their skirts. But she is well arranged. Whether they walk or sit they manage to be well arranged. In any case all is springlike with the scent of very present young women which with all our skin we recognize. Nothing is really private yet each remains alone and each pretends to read a magazine. But each one still smuggles a secret personal question across the frontiers of everybody: the skin of the body and the presence of the scent and the general arrangement. Nothing is out of place or disapproved. One by one each skin will visit the hero.[19]

By the end of the scene, human beings are merely "skin"—so dissociated and numb that they experience themselves in pieces, as body parts. The Dick-and-Jane plainness of the passage—"see the pictures," "hear the music"—conveys Merton's insight that what is happening in the waiting room is a kind of cultural "primer"—an elementary grammar in how to think and feel. And the primary lesson of that grammar is the anatomy of *cool*: "all are quiet, clean, and cool."[20] Marshall McLuhan said famously that television was a "cool medium"—meaning that it levels individuality and eccentricity downward, toward a toneless common denominator, the white-noise hum of whatever happens to be on.[21] Merton captures that tonelessness in the prose: "In any case all is springlike with the scent of very present young women which with all our skin we recognize." *What scent?* one wonders. *Whose skin? Who's speaking?* The writing floats free of any concrete referent—a "disembodied voice, seemingly in a cloud"—and Merton allows the poetic "spring" to drain out of the line to make us experience the loss of sharper accents or deeper feelings.[22]

There are many images of hell in *Cables*, and this is one of them: not Milton's "overheated" hell of demons and brimstone, but something cooler, more bureaucratic. The torments are so subtle that no one really notices they're being *pithed* in that room, de-souled, even when they stop feeling their legs. This vision of hell is close to what Henry Miller called "the air-conditioned nightmare"—an antiseptic America scoured clean of lust, hunger, fatigue, illness. "We will make you into an air-conditioned wishing well," Merton writes in Canto 43, parodying the voice of American advertising: "Afloat or abroad we will decorate your / Favorite place with monograms of daring souls / And instant specialists of flavor charm and grace / To win you baroque lawns / And crystal suitings / For your (day off) *Samedi du plaisir*."[23] This is life re-presented as an *Esquire* ad. No one smells bad. No one feels much of anything, except a vague waiting-for-Godot annoyance. The old words of Plato or Jesus flatten into advertising copy. "Grace" is a brand name. "Daring Souls" is the corporate monogram on a brand of lawn furniture. Fear doesn't go away in this happy-place fantasy. It turns inward, becoming an undertone just below the bland surface, "a secret personal question" no one is willing to share for fear of upsetting the "general arrangement."[24]

Merton responds to the desperation of the waiting room by introducing elements of randomness and surrealism into the "general arrangement" of the poem. In one of his notebooks, Merton wrote that the essential quality distinguishing poetry from prose was that poetry was "useless"[25]—that is, unbound by workaday norms. Poetry is language "on vacation": "The poet has not announced these mosaics on purpose," the narrator declares in the Prologue. "Furthermore he has changed his address and his poetics are on vacation."[26] In this mood, Merton tried dozens of sound and thought experiments in his writing—visual poems (which look like what they describe), found poems, spontaneous poems—to loosen the strictures of high art and make it dip below the conscious, cerebral surface. In this period, Merton read and translated the Spanish surrealists Rafael Alberti, Alfonso Cortes, and Nicanor Parra. Parra visited Merton at Gethsemani in the spring of 1966, and Merton adapted what he called the "nonsense" of Parra's *Poems & Antipoems* to his own writing in *Cables* and *The Geography of Lograire*.[27] During this period, Merton also read the Beat Generation poets—whom he called the "esoteric American pontiffs of the day"[28]—and may have modeled the "fatal children"

of *Cables* on the "angel-headed hipsters" of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, spiritual seekers who are also being pithed by American culture—"present[ing] themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy."[29] Like Parra, Alberti, and Ginsberg, Merton sought to release poetry from the dominant rules of academic formalism and recover its ancient roots in dream, vision, and the unconscious—the secret undercurrents of the psyche denied by the waiting-room primer of cool. "[T]he peculiar chaotic intensity" of the Spanish surrealists, Merton wrote in an essay on Rafael Alberti,

> results from a rich profusion of unconscious images jarring against one another in creative dissonances and dream-like shock effects with a result quite different from the dry, dead-pan parade of objects (and "objective correlatives") with which we have become familiar (and perhaps so exhausted) in English and American verse.[30]

The prime figure in the other—formalist and academic—stream of modern poetry, T.S. Eliot, who of course coined the term "objective correlative," makes a brief appearance in *Cables*, stumbles across Eve shopping for "naked fruit" in Merton's version of Ginsberg's California supermarket, and is so spooked he has to look away: "Eve moves: golden Mother of baroque lights. She visits a natural supermarket of naked fruits. . . . T.S. Eliot is vexed and cannot look."[31] Risking the disdain of Eliot-inspired academic formalists—which *Cables*, by the way, received in spades—Merton turns to the "dream-like shock effects" of surrealism as a liberating alternative to objectivity and formal control.[32] And he discovered an unlikely source for this project in the poetry and lyrics of Bob Dylan.

Lynn Szabo notes that Merton's friend, Ed Rice, had sent recordings of Dylan to Merton in the hopes that he would review them for *Jubilee*. In a notebook, Merton writes that "Dylan sees life as a mosaic of unrelated [and] superficial images—clashing in a ludicrous entertainment that has its own special significance."[33] Whether or not Dylan "sees life as a mosaic," Merton certainly did. And Merton's description of Dylan's writing—"ludicrous entertainment that has its own special significance"—could stand as a motto for *Cables*. In a topsy-turvy world where "sanity" was

no impediment to the barbarism of the Nazis (an argument Merton poses in his essay on Adolf Eichmann) and where being well-adjusted constitutes a kind of spiritual death (as in the waiting-room scene of Canto 41), the madness of the outsider may yet lead us home. In that sort of world, a Christian poet may discover in the "ludicrous" (from *ludus*: game or play) an alternative to the psychopathology of everyday life Merton found movingly revealed in Dylan.

When Dylan asks, "where have you been, my blue-eyed son?"—as he does in the 1963 song, "Hard Rain"—the child/prophet answers in a series of surrealistic images that don't "mean" in the way popular songs are supposed to mean—at least not in the how-much-is-that-doggie-in-the-window style American audiences had cherished a few years earlier:

> Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?
> Oh, what did you see, my darling young one?
> I saw a newborn baby with wild wolves all around it,
> I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it,
> I saw a black branch with blood that kept drippin',
> I saw a room full of men with their hammers a-bleedin',
> I saw a white ladder all covered with water,
> I saw ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken,
> I saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children,
> And it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard,
> And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall.[34]

For the generation coming of age during the Vietnam War, the Patti Page puppy-songs could well seem insane while the bleeding branches and hammers of "Hard Rain" were nothing if not real. Like many of the songs in *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, "Hard Rain" is a study of progressive trauma. The damage in "Hard Rain" spreads out from the physical body of the sufferer to transform and mutilate everyday things—ladders, hammers, weather, trees: "I saw a black branch with blood that kept drippin'." It is not that Dylan's prophet/son cannot see or show the physical suffering of the children, and so projects that wounding onto innocent landscapes. Rather Dylan suggests how trauma ripples out from individual victims to change the way they experience the world, as if

trees (as well as children) can bleed and hammers (as well as bodies) be wounded. Indeed Dylan suggests that the tools one might use to repair the "real," those bleeding hammers, are just as damaged as everything else.

The problem for the children in "Hard Rain" is that they feel too much. The damage keeps spreading. The problem for the children in *Cables* is that they do not feel at all, mouthing ad slogans to mask private distress and substituting media stereotypes, as Ross Labrie has argued, for original, idiomatic experience.[35] Like many writers in the 1960s, Merton felt that language had been cheapened and debased by American mass media, its edges ground down by advertising, television, politics, and most especially by the Vietnam War—which created ingenious new ways of *not* showing the suffering children and bleeding trees: *pacification, free-fire zones, protective reactions, collateral damage.*

What results from this debasement is a slippery, only half-true media-talk Merton calls "the monogag":

> For a nominal fee one can confide in a cryphone
> With sobs of champagne
> Or return from sudden sport to address
> The monogag
> The telefake
> The base undertones of the confessional speaker
> Advising trainees
> Through cloistered earphones.[36]

Sometimes we hear the "monogag" by itself in *Cables*, as a newscast or advertisement. Sometimes a media voice is positioned against older discourses in the poem: the voices of Plato, Christ, Eckhart, Blake—often presented as "(Plato)" in the soft whisper of the parentheses. And if it is a competition, the media voice is winning: using up the good words—*grace, daring, cloistered, confessional*—drowning out competing discourses or relegating them to parenthetical margins. And worst of all, translating the intimate language of subjectivity and spirit into the same impersonal dialect: "You wake and wonder / Whose case history you composed / As your confessions are filed / In the dialect / Of bureaux and electrons."[37]

There is a great deal at stake here. The confessional programs humming through media cables are not a distraction from the real,

Merton suggests. Rather they produce and organize the real, blueprinting in people the deep pattern of feelings and fears that constitute humanness in a particular time and place: what it means to be a woman, a man, a poet, a Christian. In this sense, the "base undertones" of television and advertising represent a novitiate for "cloistered" "trainees"—a rigorous pedagogy in a certain kind of cultural gospel.[38] The undertones are *base* not because they are venal or crass—or at least not only in that sense—but because they are so *basic*, so fundamental to a certain way of experiencing the world. Despite the apparent plurality of voices in this media pedagogy, what we hear, Merton suggests, is basically the same chorus, the same half-hearted "monogag." And it's *gagging* the trainees—choking them, making them sick at heart—like Allen Ginsberg's angelheaded hipsters or Bob Dylan's blue-eyed son.

For Dylan, such language is broken: "I saw ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken." And the alternative is a different kind of music and a different kind of poetry, something jarring and surrealistic and decidedly un-pretty. An antipoem. An anti-pop-song. This is 1968, after all. The year of the Tet Offensive, Dr. King's assassination, the race riots in Newark, Watts, and Detroit. When Jimi Hendrix played "The Star-Spangled Banner" at Woodstock, he turned it into a wailing, Stratocaster guitar scream. *Cables to the Ace* is like Merton's guitar scream, the antipoetic jeremiad of a Catholic mystic writing experimental poetry in a 20x20 cinder-block room in rural Kentucky—and yet absolutely tuned in to the hard-rock bass line of American culture. That is how *Cables* begins, with Merton hearing power guitar chords through the high-tension wires of a suspension bridge:

> Edifying cables can be made musical if played and sung by full-armed societies doomed to an electric war. A heavy imperturbable beat ... 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.[39]

Bob Kaufman heard guitars in his head. Merton hears guitars in the wind, in the wires of a bridge, in the "vroom vroom vroom" of an "electric"—that is, massively televised—"war." And the guitars are all telling him the same thing: a hard rain's a gonna fall.

Merton's response in *Cables* is to offer a "new kind of obstinacy" to the waiting-room primer of cool.[40] The poem, therefore, is a massive counter-lesson of "irony and refusal" that turns loose

dozens of outlaw voices—still present but so faint one can barely hear them: sobs, whispers, nursery rhymes, a bird song, a doorbell, the sound of someone being called back to consciousness ("Bernstein! Can you still hear me? Are you conscious?"), the sound of "ten thousand crickets in the deep wet hay of the field," the "Nine even strokes" of the Gethsemani bell calling the monks to prayer.[41] When T.S. Eliot hears the nine strokes of the church bell at Saint Mary Woolnoth in *The Waste Land*, it is just more noise, more of the Babel of the Unreal City, and a reminder of how far we have fallen. It feels a little like death: "And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. / Flowed up the hill and down King William Street, / To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours / With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine."[42] When Merton hears the church bells at Gethsemani, it's a nine-beat canticle of morning. It is Thoreau's chanticleer delivering a wake-up call to a barely conscious America: *Can you still hear me? Are you conscious?*

Running the Vote Backwards

The surrealistic derangements of poetry may not be so "useless" after all. It may well take a certain kind of poetic violence to jar the mother-wit free and help us return to our senses, as Thoreau would say—in part, because the "senses" are not given but *made*, rehearsed through cultural primers so intimate and invisible we barely notice them. Most of the time the cultural primer is so naturally and inevitably a part of our identity—so *us*—that we do not think of it as cultural at all. The problem is not that we hear one monogag or see one telefake. We see thousands of them—until we do not see them any more: "The right fragrance is so right it is not noticed."[43] Finally the scents and images feel natural, a part of what we might now call the cultural unconscious. So that our bodies are no longer our own, and we stop feeling our legs. So that other ways of being in the world look foolish, "ludicrous"—which is to say, holy.

To recover this holiness, Merton turns back the clock and appeals to states of memory and imagination existing *just before* the slogans and stereotypes took hold:

> What do you teach me
> Mama my cow?
> (My delicate forefathers
> Wink in their sleep)

"Seek advancement
Then as now
And never learn to weep!"

What do you want of me
Mama my wit
(While the water runs
And the world spins)
"All the successful
Ride in their Buicks
And grow double chins"

What do you seek of me
Mama my ocean
(While the fire sleeps
In well baked mud)
"Take your shotgun
And put it in the bank
For money is blood."[44]

In contrast to the totalizing language of the monogag, Merton makes us hear, almost simultaneously, two different voices: something aggressive and contemporary: "seek advancement," "never learn to weep," put blood money "in the bank." And something just behind that voice, an earlier discourse of nursery rhymes ("Mama my cow") and childhood dreams ("While the water runs / And the world spins"). It is hard not to gender the two voices: a father tongue that's rule-bound and prescriptive, concerned with banks and Buicks. And a mother tongue that is playful, sleepy, funny, a little surrealistic. The father tongue uses exclamation points. The mother tongue does not care much about punctuation one way or the other but is partial to the parentheses with its sly whispers: "(While the fire sleeps / In well baked mud)." The father tongue lays down the law. It issues "bare-faced literal commands." It calls the reader, "Buster." It does not like a lot of backtalk. The mother tongue is all backtalk. You ask questions in the mother tongue: "What do you want of me?" You dream in the mother tongue: "Mama my ocean." You tell jokes in the mother tongue: "My delicate forefathers / Wink in their sleep." Merton's point is that you know the mother tongue when you hear it. This other, earlier way of thinking and feeling is back there—not lost, just layered over with all sorts of slogans and instructions: "seek

advancement," "never learn to weep." And the poem serves as a kind of catechism leading us back to the place just under "their song": "My vow," the poet tells us, "is the silence under their song."[45]

"Their song," as it happens, is a gender pedagogy in very specific sexual roles. How to be a man: seek advancement, never learn to weep. How to be a woman: wait for the hero, worry about your skirt. To challenge this ideology, Merton shows it being formed. He takes us back to the "trainee" level of consciousness and has us listen to the "base undertones of the confessional speaker / Advising trainees / Through cloistered earphones." At this early stage, the "base undertones" may still sound a little phony, a little *truthy*, and the trainees may be open to other ways of being in the world. Once the program is complete, however, and the trainees start talking like the Marlboro Man—"I will get up and go to Marble country / Where . . . all the cowboys look for fortunate slogans / Among horses' asses"—the game's pretty much up. They cannot tell an ad slogan from a horse's ass.[46]

Merton calls this cultural re-wind—"run[ning] the vote backwards"—a phrase that emerges in Canto 66, one of the pivotal scenes of the poem as a whole:

> Oh yes it is intelligence
> That makes the bubble and weather of "Yes"
> To which the self says "No."
>
> Science when the air is right says "Yes"
> And all the bubbles in the head repeat "Yes"
> Even the corpuscles romp "Yes"
>
> But lowdown
> At the bottom of deep water
> Deeper than Anna Livia Plurabelle
> Or any other river
> Some nameless rebel
> A Mister Houdini or somebody with fingers
> Slips the technical knots
> Pops the bubbles in the head
> Runs the vote backwards
> And turns the bloody cooler
> All the way
> OFF.[47]

Running the tape backwards is a dream of artistic and spiritual innocence shared by many writers—especially in the midst of war. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, for instance, Kurt Vonnegut shows a deeply traumatized Billy Pilgrim becoming "unstuck in time."[48] As Billy watches a late-night movie about American bombers during World War Two, he sees the film in reverse. He watches American bombers open their bomb bay doors and miraculously shrink the fires on the ground and suck flame and bomb fragments back into metal canisters in the bellies of the planes. He watches German fighter planes draw bullets out of the bodies of some of the American crewmen. As the film continues, he sees the American bombers fly backwards in formation to bases in England where women unload and disassemble the canisters and re-bury the raw, innocent minerals in the earth. Vonnegut lets the tape continue rewinding in Billy's mind, long after the film is over. Billy watches the American fliers turn in their uniforms and become high school students again. He watches Hitler turn back into a baby. As the rewind continues, Billy watches the world roll back through countless centuries until it reaches "two perfect people named Adam and Eve."[49] Merton allows his poem to follow the same course and register the same longing: for the Garden, for Eve shopping for "naked fruits," and for our earliest memories of "Mama my ocean," when the fires of war still slept "In well baked mud."[50]

But why run the *vote* backwards—rather than the *tape* backwards, as Vonnegut does? Merton's phrasing stresses the crucial role of *consent* in this cultural process. Unlike Billy Pilgrim, who denies the possibility of free will in order to protect himself from the terrors of the war, Merton insists on free choice, even in the midst of one of his most searching examinations of social control. We may not have personally ordered the "Deathloving Jacks" to drop napalm and incendiary high-explosives on Vietnam.[51] But the social and economic choices *we're making here and now*, Merton stresses, support that terror, profit from it, and give it meaning. Gethsemani Monastery is less than twenty miles from Fort Knox, Kentucky, and Merton could hear the pounding of the Fort Knox guns during morning prayer. Belden Lane describes how Merton "watched with horror as huge SAC bombers flew over the hermitage, no more than 150 feet above the trees."[52] In Merton's view, there is no "Walden Pond" in 1968, no place of withdrawal and isolation where one can choose *not* to participate. What we buy, wear, read, watch; how we spend time, energy, and money; most

of all, what we notice or refuse to notice, the human gift of visibility and attention: these are "votes" in Merton's ethical vocabulary. They are ways of saying "yes" or "no" to all sorts of political and economic commitments that seem, at first, to have nothing to do with an Asian war thousands of miles away. It is never just a "Buick," for Merton. In a time of war, disease, and famine—which is to say, all human time—it is blood-money in the bank. And changing that vote, running it backwards, is a profoundly ethical act.

But we need help with this refusal. The lonely "self" saying "no" at the beginning of Canto 66 is immediately swamped by a tide of votes going the other way. At the point in *Cables* when the air-conditioning is just about "right" and everything, it seems, is saying the same thing—yes, yes, yes—a "nameless rebel" emerges to burst the "bubble" and roll back the vote.[53] That rebel is Merton's most important image of limber thinking in *Cables*: a figure of fluidity and spiritual grace who comes from a watery medium below language, a place deeper than primers and poems, deeper even than Anna Livia Plurabelle, the dream river of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.[54] Below what Thoreau calls "the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance";[55] below the base undertones of the monogag and the ten-thousand talkers whose tongues are all broken—below all that, a deep-water savior pulls off a spiritual escape. That figure, it seems, is Christ. But Christ in disguise as fish or fin (*Finn*egans Wake); Christ as the culmination of Merton's many of images of water, rivers, rain, and ocean. But also Christ as "Mister Houdini," a spiritual escape artist who slips the knots of language and culture and turns off the "bloody cooler"—a phrase that also evokes the horrors of the death camps.

This scene, like many in *Cables*, evokes Merton's dread of patterning and control—a theme that emerges with great force in American writing during the 1950s and '60s: from *Catcher in the Rye* to *Catch 22*. But Merton is less fatalistic about the scope of that control than many. At times, *Cables* evokes a science fiction dystopia of human life as *wiring*: cultural stereotypes wet-ported into us by cryphones and the telefake, ad slogans playing in our heads on the "habit frequency."[56] Even the flights of birds follow scripted circuits: "We learn by the cables of orioles."[57] But there are other messages in the air, Merton shows, cables of play, intimacy, solitude, and deep memory. Just below the cultural monotone, we

can still pick up other frequencies: the nine strokes of the Gethsemani bell, the songs of birds and children, a choir of ten-thousand crickets whose tongues are not broken. And that spontaneous poetry can lead us back, as if by fragile threads, to a sacred source Merton calls the "ace of songs" and the "ace of freedoms"—a life-affirming divine oneness (an "ace") that clears the noxious head-bubbles, loosens the tricky knots of culture and language, and turns the air-conditioned nightmare all the way OFF.[58]

If this is a resurrection rather than a burial—*Finnegans Wake*—it is an Easter moment that emerges when life is nearly wrung out in *Cables*. George Kilcourse points out that the "ace" in a deck of cards is both high and low, and that if Christ is the "ace of freedoms" in *Cables*, he is the self-emptying savior "who ... identifies with the wounded and seemingly bankrupt moments of human life."[59] At just such a moment in the poem—when life is "lowdown," "At the bottom"—Merton allows us to glimpse a sudden upwelling of presence and power that picks up speed with the rapid-fire verbs—slips, pops, runs, turns—before coming to a complete, capitalized stop: OFF.[60] And then silence. The white space at the end of the stanza seems, at that moment, rinsed and charged, like the sky after a storm. When the poet tries to pick up the thread in the next canto and codify the experience into a "model" or "imperative," a theology of spiritual liberation, speech fails him and he turns away like a discouraged T.S. Eliot:

> This is how to
> This is with imperatives
> I mean models
> If you act
> Act HOW.[61]

The capitalized words of the two cantos form both halves of a dialogue: OFF, HOW. The goal of *Cables* seems clear enough: rage against the machine with every bit of love and lore you can get your hands on: nursery rhymes, bird songs, Dylan songs. Whatever fragments of mother-wit are left to rouse an America entertaining itself to death. But the exact HOW is a little tricky. Especially is this so for a culture that specializes in vacuuming up live instances of dissent and turning them into new marketing campaigns for its corporate gospel of cool. In a culture like that, the prophet/poet has to enter a place *below* language: "the silence

under their song," the place "where speech / Is trying to go." Because that's where Christ is: "lowdown," in the "deep water."[62]

And that's about all Merton will say about it. No religious doctrine emerges from the Anna Livia Plurabelle scene. There are no "imperatives / I mean models."[63] No twelve-step program for spiritual growth available in a limited time offer: "For a dollar ninety-nine you will have immortal longings here on the front porch. You will become as slim and lovely as our own hypnotic phlogiston toothpaste."[64] Merton refuses to take that bait. He leaves the meaning of the episode open and slightly off-center—*Christ as Houdini?*—in order to preserve a realm of imagination and play where Christ may not always look like "himself."

This is one of the ironies of the Easter story and part of the counter-lesson of Merton's Christianity. When Merton names Christ directly in Canto 80 and allows us to witness his return to the garden, a sleepy disciple—one of many half-conscious "Bernsteins" in *Cables*—mistakes him for the moon:

> Slowly, slowly
> Comes Christ through the garden
> Speaking to the sacred trees
> Their branches bear his light
> Without harm . . .
>
> Slowly slowly
> Christ rises on the cornfields
> It is only the harvest moon
> The disciple
> Turns over in his sleep
> And murmurs:
> "My regret!"[65]

Rolling the tape back to the garden, Merton pictures Christ's appearance as a return to innocence for all the fatal children—Ginsberg's hipsters, Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, Dylan's blue-eyed son. The trees are no longer bleeding in the Easter garden, as they are in "Hard Rain." They are sacred and alive, bearing Christ's light "without harm." At least to some. To the half-conscious disciple, however, Christ's light could just as easily be "the harvest moon." Or rather "*only* the harvest moon"—as the disciple looks out at a landscape which seems to be stripped of the divine.

When Christ appears at the empty tomb in St. John's gospel, Mary Magdalene doesn't recognize him at first, mistaking him not for the moon but for the gardener—or as Merton's disciple would say, "only the gardener." When Christ calls Mary by name, however, the scene shifts for her, the tumblers drop, and she sees Christ, as if for the first time. The shift from gardener to Christ in the Easter scene evokes, for me, the puzzle pictures of childhood: stairs that seem to go up, then down, then up again. A picture of a vase that becomes a picture of two people kissing. Once you get the hang of it, you can keep sliding back and forth between the images. But you cannot force the shift. It has nothing to do with control or will power. In fact, if you seek it, Merton says, "you do not find it. If you stop seeking, it is there."[66] The pleasure of the puzzle is the jump in the image—the sudden "it is there"—when the picture changes from one thing to another. But to experience the shift, we have to "misunderstand" the vase—the subtitle of *Cables* is "familiar liturgies of misunderstanding"—in the same way Mary must misunderstand the gardener and the sleepy disciple must misunderstand the harvest moon. Such thinking is *familiar*, because we do it all the time, seeing and re-seeing a hundred times a day. It is a *liturgy* because such limberness is sacred, a ludicrous gospel of playfulness and surprise. "No man can see God," Eckhart says, "except . . . through folly."[67]

This, ultimately, is the blessing of *Cables* and Merton's prayer for a quietly desperate world: more play, more folly, more of what he calls the "inventions of unprecedented laughter" [68]—the good deep belly laugh we get when the tumblers shift and the headbubbles clear and we see, for a moment, the stairs ascending or the lovers kissing or the face of Christ in disguise.[69]

Notes

1. Belden Lane, "Merton's Hermitage: Bachelard, Domestic Space, and Spiritual Transformation," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 4: 2 (Fall 2004), p. 125. For other accounts of creative and spiritual play in Merton, see Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 460; and Belden Lane, "Merton as Zen Clown," *Theology Today*: 46: 3 (October 1989), pp. 256-68. For Merton's reflections on how Trappist discipline and liturgy constitute forms of sacred play, see *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*, ed. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 29.

2. Quoted in Lane, "Zen Clown," p. 264.

3. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace: Or, Familiar Liturgies of Misunderstanding* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 28.

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

5. Bob Kaufman, *Cranial Guitar* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1996), p. 82.

6. For an analysis of the influence of the Beat Generation writers on *Cables*, see Claire Hoertz Badaracco, "The Influence of 'Beat' Generation Poetry on the Work of Thomas Merton," *The Merton Annual* 15 (2002), pp. 121-35.

7. Derived in part from the Russian Formalists' concept of "defamiliarization," Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* or *V-effekt* disrupts an audience's passivity. Making the artifice of the play as high-profile as possible—through disruptive commentaries, jarring scene shifts, and sudden outbursts of song—Brecht encourages his audience to see through the illusions of the play and recover self-conscious critical distance—a goal Merton shares with Brecht. On the alienation effect in Brecht, see Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 4-5.

8. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 28.

9. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 24.

10. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 11.

11. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 7.

12. Thoreau, *Walden* , p. 7.

13. Quoted in Lane, "Zen Clown," p. 30.

14. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, pp. 51, 23.

15. Stephen John Mack, *The Pragmatic Whitman: Reimagining American Democracy* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), p. 139.

16. In his review of Roland Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero*, Merton describes the political purpose of literature this way: "[The writer] does something to society not by pushing against its structures—which are none of his business—but by changing the tune of its language and shifting the perspectives which depend on the ways words are arranged. He systematically de-mythologizes literature." Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 144. Despite the either-or phrasing, Merton intervenes in the social crises of his culture in *both* ways: "pushing against its structures" in countless works of political and social advocacy in the 1960s as well as "shifting the perspectives" through the kaleidoscopic anti-language of poems like *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*. For an analysis of how the postmodern language experiments of *Geog-*

raphy support a theology of empowerment and liberation, see Bradford T. Stull, *Religious Dialectics of Pain and Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 61-94.

17. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 13.

18. For theories of literary and cultural play that emphasize change, as Merton does, and stress the power of play to unsettle fixed or dogmatic systems of control, see Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Paladin, 1970); Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962); Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, trans. Reinhard Ulrich (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); James S. Hans, *The Play of the World* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981); and Brian Edwards, *Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998).

19. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, pp. 28-29.

20. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 28.

21. For a reference of McLuhan's influence on *Cables*, see George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1978), p. 175.

22. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, pp. 28, 6.

23. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 30.

24. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, pp. 28, 29.

25. Quoted in Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*, p. 110.

26. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 1.

27. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973), pp. 118, 178.

28. Quoted in Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*, 110.

29. Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1974), p. 22.

30. Merton, *Literary Essays*, pp. 313-14.

31. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 27. In March, 1948, just after *Figures for an Apocalypse* was published, James Laughlin sent Merton's first three collections of poetry to T. S. Eliot, hoping for a favorable review. Eliot wrote back saying that Merton composed too much and revised too little, a remark so devastating it led Merton to consider giving up poetry altogether . See Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 242. For Merton's response to the spirituality of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, see Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 314.

32. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 313.

33. Quoted in Lynn Szabo, "'Hiding the Ace of Freedoms': Discovering the Way(s) of Peace in Thomas Merton's *Cables to the Ace*," *The Merton Annual* 15 (2002), p. 107.

34. Bob Dylan, *Lyrics: 1962-2001* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), p. 59.

35. Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*, p. 136.

36. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 24.

37. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 14.

38. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 24.

39. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 2.

40. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 2.

41. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, pp. 18, 6, 7.

42. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), p. 31.

43. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 28.

44. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, pp. 6-7.

45. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, pp. 43, 1, 6. My thinking here has been influenced by Ursula LeGuin's 1986 Commencement Address at Bryn Mawr College, quoted in Jane Tompkins, "Me and My Shadow," in *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*, ed. Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 29.

46. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, pp. 24, 40.

47. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 42.

48. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five: Or, The Children's Crusade* (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1969), p. 22.

49. Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p. 72.

50. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, pp. 27, 7.

51. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 43.

52. Lane, "Merton's Hermitage," p. 133.

53. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 42.

54. Anna Livia Plurabelle is the mother-source in *Finnegans Wake*—the free-flowing matrix of all waters and a profound image of the sacred for Joyce: "In the name of Anna, the All-Maziful, the bringer of plurabilities, halloed be her eve, her singtime sung, her rills be run, unhemmed as they are uneven." James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Penguin Press, 1976), p. 104. Merton references Anna Livia Plurabelle not only in this canto but earlier in the "Mama my ocean" of the child's pre-conscious dreams and develops a similar set of associations among water, swimming, and the sacred.

55. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 88.

56. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 13.

57. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 60.

58. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, pp. 59, 60.

59. George Kilcourse, Jr., *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p. 178.

60. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 42.
61. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 42.
62. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, pp. 6, 10, 42.
63. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 42.
64. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 60.
65. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 55.
66. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 58.
67. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 28.
68. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, p. 35.

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