

'Hiding the Ace of Freedoms': Discovering the Way(s) of Peace in Thomas Merton's *Cables to the Ace**

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'You leave behind a vision of yourself when you go,
and a new one is created along the way' – Bob Dylan¹

In one of the last of the cantos that comprise Thomas Merton's collage of prose and poetry, *Cables to the Ace* (or *Familiar Liturgies of Misunderstanding*) (1968), the poet declares: 'I am about to... / Set my mind a thousand feet high / On the ace of songs' where 'we learn by the cables of orioles'. He continues: 'I am about to build my nest / In the misdirected and unpaid express / As I walk away from this poem / Hiding the ace of freedoms'.² The picture here is of the poet as the bird who ascends the tree, his home, his shelter, his nest, his ace, by myriad pathways, seemingly directionless, but in which are hidden his access to freedom.

The metaphor Merton chooses as the central conceit in *Cables to the Ace* is one of luxurious ambiguity and enormously tensile capabilities. The cables that tether the poet to his ace are like those by which the ship's anchor is raised and lowered and/or the bundles of cables designed to carry an electric current or to transmit messages across boundless time and space. They are like the cables of the bridge that allow its suspension in mid-air with assured security. They are analogous to the cables that fasten the tightrope on which the walker crosses ever so precariously,

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1. Quoted by Bill Wyman (March 2001), *www.Salon.com/bobdylan*.

2. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* in *idem, The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 393-454 (454). Unless otherwise noted all quotations will be taken from this volume.

but eventually, to the other side. In our new century, they are a more powerful scientific and social influence than we have ever known, captivating and capturing human society and offering seemingly infinite capabilities for communication and knowledge – the worldwide web of fiber-optic ‘cables’ known as the Internet. They are also, though, the cables that bring messages of death and destruction to their readers – the teletransmitters of news, horrific and inevitable. They are the means by which governments rule and advertisers proliferate, often creating an ethos of propaganda and misinformation that accompanies their arrival. Earlier, in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton had written: ‘The double-talk of totalism and propaganda is probably not intentionally ironic. But it is so systematically dedicated to an ambiguous concept of reality that no parody could equal the macabre horror of its humor. There is nothing left but to quote [its] own words’.³ These words are a prescient perspective for a reading of *Cables to the Ace* in which Merton’s poetic voice, as it has never done previously, creates all of these possibilities (and those he could not have imagined), in its ever-widening gyres of intelligence and iconoclasm.

At the time during which *Cables to the Ace* was written, Merton was focusing more fully on creative writing, particularly poetry. In his letter of 8 October 1966, to James Laughlin of New Directions, Merton’s publisher and friend, he supposed that ‘perhaps the most living way to approach theological and philosophical problems...[is] in the form of creative writing and literary criticism’.⁴ In his Working Notebook no. 17 (which comprises personal notes from the end of 1965 to the beginning of 1966), he writes that ‘this means regarding poetry as more essentially my work (instead of an accidental pastime)’.⁵ When he makes a list of his aspirations on the following page of this journal, he says, ‘Another conviction: great importance of poetry in my life now’.⁶

Such poems as ‘Letters to Che’, ‘Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll’, ‘Secular Signs’ and, later, *The Geography of Lograire*, reflect his profound concern with social issues along with the sense of freedom granted by his spending of much more time at, and eventual permanent relocation to, his hermitage, St Mary of Carmel. His wide-ranging readings

3. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 241.

4. Letter to James Laughlin 8 October 1966, in David D. Cooper (ed.), *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 300-301.

5. Thomas Merton, Working Notebook no. 17, p. 64. All unpublished notations taken from these notebooks are used by permission of the Merton Legacy Trust. Some of the workbooks are paginated; others are not.

6. Merton, Working Notebook no. 17, p. 65.

include the writings of Gandhi, Bonhoeffer, Boris Pasternak (with whom he corresponded in the now famous Cold War Letters),⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, Gabriel Marcel, William Faulkner, Dorothy Day and Flannery O'Connor. Merton's notebooks and the marginalia in his personal copies of books he was reading are a fascinating study in his genius's ability to appropriate, synthesize and recreate his own imaginative vision about this complex period of history.⁸ He read, for instance, Nietzsche's *The Birth of a Tragedy* while in St Anthony's Hospital for medical treatment in July 1965. A year later, he studied T.S. Eliot's *The Sacred Wood* at the hermitage, noting Eliot's 'objective correlative' as the strategy for expressing emotion in language—a concept that would influence his writing of *Cables* and *Lograire*.⁹ Freud, Tillich, Heidigger and Berdyaev (whom he credits with 'a good critique on subjectivity')¹⁰ are central to Merton's readings in philosophy and psychology. Added to these are his profound responses to the thought of Camus, Rilke, Sartre and Roland Barthes in the arena of literature and language. In his review of Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero*, Merton demonstrates his synthesis of Zen and structuralism, with its groundbreaking ideas about the 'language of philosophy that understands the "sign" to be "arbitrary"'.¹¹ On reading Camus, Merton offers his interpretation that the problem of *The Plague* is that it 'deprives the inhabitants of the plague-stricken town of the consolation of the past and hope in the future, forcing them to live in an impossible present'.¹² In February 1966, while reading Rilke, Merton notes that he clearly realizes that his preoccupation with Rilke is its enshrining of solitude. He was still deeply conflicted by his choice to be a solitary—a vocation that, more often than not, seemed to fly directly in the face of his profound concern for the world outside the monastery. In response to Rilke, he writes, 'it [solitude] is a central problem for me and for this age and I might as well cope with it as best I can, without illusions and without pretense—in other words humbly, doggedly, patiently, faithfully. This too is *Auftrag*'.¹³ To these numerous seminal readings,

7. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis* (ed. William H. Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994).

8. Fifty-two entries that later became cantos in *Cables to the Ace*, appear in Working Notebook no. 15 (August 1965).

9. Merton, Working Notebook no. 15 (August 1965–66).

10. George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1978), flyleaf.

11. Thomas Merton, 'Roland Barthes—Writing as Temperature', in Br. P. Hart (ed.), *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1960), pp. 140–46.

12. Thomas Merton, Working Notebook no. 14 (June 1964).

13. Merton, Working Notebook no. 17, entry for Septuagesima Sunday, 6 Feb

Merton adds the influences of Sartre's treatise on literature and existentialist thought. He is struck by Sartre's idea that when the reader engages a text,

meaning is no longer contained in the words, since it is [the reader]...who allows the signification of each of them to be understood; and the literary object, though realized through language, is never given in language. On the contrary, it [the literary object] is by nature silent and an opponent to the word.¹⁴

This idea is ultimately an instructive hermeneutical principle by which *Cables to the Ace* can be navigated. In the silent moment of ambiguity/contemplation about possible 'meanings' in the text, Sartre 'appeals to the reader to lead into objective existence the revelation that the writer has undertaken by means of language'.¹⁵ Merton calls on his readers to do just that. Significant here (and for fruitful readings of the entire corpus of Merton's poetry) is that Merton did not embrace, as have many of the postmodernist deconstructionists, the notion that there are, in essence, no ultimate meanings, no overarching metanarratives. (Bradford T. Stull, in his perspicacious discussion of the late poetry of Merton, contemplates Merton's relationship to postmodernism, on other grounds.)¹⁶ Rather, for Merton, the multiplicities and complexities of literature and its human stories are radiant with fecundity in the ways in which they ultimately lead us back to the unity and oneness of God and humanity.

During this period, Merton was publishing poems in numerous journals and magazines—*Commonweal*, *Catholic World*, *Motive*, *Poetry* and *Sewanee Review*, to name only a few. Later, he would initiate his own literary journal, *Monks Pond* (1968) (perhaps with the encouragement of Wendell Berry and Denise Levertov).¹⁷ He invited and received submissions from notables among his contemporaries—Jack Kerouac, Louis Zukofsky, Wendell Berry, Denise Levertov, and others. He was deeply involved with ideas and perspectives that would form the confluence of his enormous epic poem of social history, *The Geography of Lograire*.

Cables to the Ace presents the revolution/evolution of Merton's adoption of anti-poetry, resulting in large part from his contact with the

1966, p. 77. NB. *Auftrag* in the German refers to an assigned task, a commission bestowed on the one by the another.

14. J.P. Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism* (trans. Bernard Frechtman; New York: The Citadel Press, 1962), p. 44. (Underlined in Merton's copy of the text).

15. Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism*, p. 46.

16. Bradford T. Stull, *Religious Dialectics of Pain and Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 175 n. 14.

17. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 503.

poetry of the Chilean poet, Nicanor Parra, to whose writings he was introduced by James Laughlin, and some of whose antipoems Merton translated into English in 1967¹⁸ (eight of which appear in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*); to this, one should add the influence of Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz and Pablo Antonio Cuadra (who had visited Merton at the monastery in May 1958, and some of whose poems Merton had translated in *The Jaguar and The New Moon* [1959]), as well as numerous other Latin American poets, including Michel Grinberg, to whom Merton was introduced by Ernesto Cardenal, a Nicaraguan poet and erstwhile novice under Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani. He was particularly influenced by the Surrealist poets of South America. Thérèse Lentfoehr comments that in *Cables* this 'surrealist influence shows Merton's metaphors drift[ing] loose from their referents, with the result of a suspension of meaning'.¹⁹ I would counter that this is, in fact, the strategy by which he creates parody and irony, thus giving genesis to multiple layers of meaning in this collage of prose and poetry. From his readings in Sartre, Merton noted that,

the habit of anti-poetry...opens up the [s]ort of thing which a merely reasonable approach could not accept...Its style [is] a sequence of *non sequiturs*. An underground logic of association in conflict with the apparent demands of logical communication...-a Surrealist poem.²⁰

He goes on to realize that 'after you have read it for awhile it haunts you in your next book...you find for yourself, curious resonances that aren't really there'.²¹ This notation is valuable in that it very much describes the characteristics of the antipoetry which Merton adopted as he wrote *Cables*.

In conjunction with Merton's own literary activities during this period, he was occupied with such voices as Bob Dylan (whose recordings were sent to him by Ed Rice in the hopes of having Merton review them for *Jubilee* and to whom Merton referred, somewhat unconvincingly, as the American François Villon).²² Merton was taken with Dylan's 'Rainy Day Woman' and in notebook no. 15 (August 1965-66), he writes that 'Dylan sees life as a mosaic of unrelated [and] superficial images - clashing in a ludicrous entertainment that has its own special significance'; Merton

18. Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1979), p. 136.

19. Sister Therese Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1979), p. 74.

20. Thomas Merton, Working Notebook no. 18 (1966-67).

21. Merton, Working Notebook no. 18.

22. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 461.

goes on to claim that Dylan's music mimes 'the psychopathology of everyday life'.²³ This recognition appears in Merton's allusions to the poetics of Dylan's music, which mirrors the frenetic and fractured images which Merton picks up on:

I am an entire sensate parcel
 Of registered earth.
 Working my way through adolescence
 To swim dashing storms
 Of amusement and attend
 The copyrighted tornado
 Of sheer sound

Though metal strings
 Complain of my mind's eye
 Nine fond harmonies
 Never leave me alone...

Plate glass music
 And oracular houses
 Of earth spent calm
 Long comas of the propitious time...²⁴

Other voices of the times also captured Merton's attention. Their diversity included Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan, along with numerous 1960s poets such as Gary Snyder, Robert Lowell and Edwin Muir; to these, one must add his important correspondence with Czeslaw Milosz, as well as his extensive reading in social commentary and philosophy. Probably as a response to their influences, in a letter to Cid Corman, Merton describes *Cables* as imprecise, noisy, crude, full of vulgarity and parody, making faces and criticizing and so on...²⁵ His contact with the world outside the monastery is constant and increasing. In Working Notebook no. 16 (August 1965–November 1965), he notes that the monks are now getting newspaper pictures of space flights on the monastery bulletin board (he goes on to connect the human desire for flight with the ascension of Christ) although in the same notebook he acerbically adds that he feels trapped in the monastery because 'the abbot keeps [him] in to salve his own conscious for being out'.²⁶ But thanks to the beneficence of friends who send along numerous contemporary magazines and journals, Merton is not isolated from what he

23. Merton, Working Notebook no. 15.

24. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 447.

25. Thomas Merton, 5 September, 1966, in *idem, Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers* (ed. Christine M. Bochen; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), p. 249.

26. Thomas Merton, Working Notebook no. 16, p. 53.

wishes to read. His notes include the circulation copies of *Life* and *Playboy* (although he specifically asked Ping Ferry not to send *Playboy* to him, wryly commenting that he was not 'strong enough').²⁷ More seriously, Merton writes,

I have not faced technological society and the crises of maladjusted man in a culture which develops too fast for him... My task is to come to terms completely with the world which I love and of which I am a part, because this is the world redeemed by Christ... That is why I am here [at Gethsemani] and must stay here.²⁸

In the June 1964 issue of *Realités*, he read, with amazement, that computers could read 12000 words a minute; that theologians at the Vatican had asked a computer if God existed and it had replied, 'Now He does'.²⁹ Later, in the delectably satiric *Cables 8*, Merton's speaker relates his attempt to engage a computer in spiritual dialogue:

Write a prayer to a computer? But first of all you have to find out how It thinks. Does It dig prayer? More important still, does It dig me?... How does one begin: 'O Thou great unalarmed and humorless electric sense...'?³⁰

In the antipoetry that ultimately forms the 88 Cantos of *Cables to the Ace*, Merton's poetic voice synthesizes the forces of his multi-faceted consciousness – ranging from the quiet romanticism and piety of the earlier poems to the eclecticism of *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963), which had integrated his longtime concern with social unrest and his experience of Zen. Merton's burning world 'consumes prophets and dilettantes alike'.³¹ He passionately claims that 'all the asceticism of [his] life as a hermit centers on...real awakens'.³² During this period, when Merton is conflicted about the amount he is writing in comparison with the solitude he says he desires, he chastises himself for his 'verbalizing' and, in frustration, remarks that '[p]erhaps the Zen way is better – (silence until the whole thing breaks and then there is one enigmatic word for all of it)'.³³ But, of course, his relation with Zen went much deeper than this. He had been mentored by John C.H. Wu in the sayings of Chuang Tzu (which he paraphrased in English and referred to as one

27. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 460.

28. Merton, Working Notebook no. 16, p. 53.

29. Merton, Working Notebook no. 14.

30. Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 399-400.

31. Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*, p. 133.

32. Merton, Working Notebook no. 17, p. 78.

33. Merton, Working Notebook no. 16, p. 13.

of his 'necessary' books, in the Rilkean sense).³⁴ And interestingly, Daisetz Suzuki (Japanese Zen Master) eventually assigned to Merton the somewhat dubious claim of being the one Westerner who understood Zen better than any other.³⁵ Suzuki and Merton had found substantial commonality in their interreligious dialogue. Merton had engaged some of the East's connections with his own understanding of Western mysticism and wrote of Suzuki that he had 'transposed Zen into the authentic terms of Western mystical traditions that were most akin to it'.³⁶ Although Merton had been experimenting with concrete poetry in his diaries as far back as 1949, when he wrote *Cables* he seems, as Thérèse Lentfoehr claims, to have 'pulled all its focus into a Zen mystical dimension...'³⁷

The innovative modes of antipoetry that Merton adopts often dissuade his readers from venturing further but, in fact, there is a myriad of *Cables* which can support such a venture. Indeed, the poetic voice in *Cables to the Ace* deploys a tonality beyond satire and parody that results in expression which is often terse and subversive. It is anticipated by the poet's announcement in the 'Prologue' that 'the poet...has changed his address and his poetics are on vacation'.³⁸ This was, Merton explained in a letter to Robert Lax, his plan 'to create an atmosphere in which the parts of the poem were suspended in 'midair' between true and false... an everlasting *pons asinorum* (bridge of access)'.³⁹ But Merton's rebellion against, even defiance of, lyrical tones and forms was not experimental or experiential in the same way as the beat or antipoets of his age, even though Merton was influenced and fascinated by them. His purposes, as usual, framed in the context of his spiritual journey, were iconoclastic and prophetic. He attacks cherished beliefs and the icons of a material culture but he does so in order to open them into the wholeness of the Hidden Ground of Love.⁴⁰ Ross Labrie explains it well when he says that Merton created possibilities for 'fresh...experience' and 'original idiom' with his antipoetry, which was 'a campaign against the debasement of language'.⁴¹

34. Merton, Working Notebook no. 16, p. 59.

35. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 309.

36. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 63.

37. Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence*, p. 63.

38. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 395.

39. Letter to Robert Lax, 4 November 1966, quoted in Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*, p. 138.

40. Thomas Merton, letter to Amiya Chakravarty, 13 April 1967, in *idem, The Hidden Ground of Love* (ed. William H. Shannon; New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovitch, 1985), p.115.

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

In *Cables to the Ace*, Merton's alternatives to poetic conventions and subversions of cultural norms offer us rich allusions that convey his consciousness of a Ground of Being in which human beings can share their experience rather than devolving into the folly and pessimism of 'the imago, the absurd spectro, the mask over their own emptiness'.⁴²

This assumption of folly and pessimism is the almost inevitable result of the abuses and debasements which attend the fracturing of language from intention and context. Monica Weis concludes that Merton's writings in this period are a form of cartography 'pointing to the core virtues, or habits of being, that we need in order to discover our true identity and set the direction of our lives'; she further explains that these habits are characterized by a sense of place (which for Merton had become the hermitage), religious wisdom (now affirmed in Merton's renewed monasticism, post-romantic friendship with M.), and innocence (which Weiss defines as 'reassurance that one is *in* the right'),⁴³ (not necessarily *right*) (emphasis mine).

This is further demonstrated by Merton's ecumenism and openness to traditions of mysticism and monasticism in other religions. George Kilcourse Jr, reminds us that Merton's final years demonstrate the convergence of his efforts at Western monastic renewal and dialogue with Asian spiritual traditions.⁴⁴ In *Cables to the Ace*, this convergence is melded with pre- and non-Christian mythology and allusion. Among the many references and entrances given to Catholic liturgy, saints and mystics, Merton includes quotations from and allusions to Greek mythology, Plato, Shakespeare's Caliban and Dogen, and so on. In addition, the working notebooks that supported Merton's writing of *Cables* contain numerous quotations gathered from his eclectic readings in Chuang Tzu, the myths of Atlas, Blake, Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* and its Ulysses' myth, T.S. Eliot, and the New Testament, along with American Pop culture, technological exposés and nuclear physics.

In order to clarify further the context of Merton's writing of *Cables to the Ace*, it is crucial to situate it in some of his other experiences—intellectual, social and spiritual. The 1960s had spawned social unrest of phenomenal proportions in America, resulting in the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and the Kennedys. At this time Merton became active in the Catholic Peace Fellowship and was in regular

42. Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, p. 292.

43. Monica Weis, 'Ishi Means Man: Book Reviews that Critique Society', *The Merton Seasonal* 24.4 (1999), pp. 9-13. (11, 13).

44. George Kilcourse, Jr, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1993), p. 10.

contact with the Berrigan brothers; he received visits at the hermitage from Joan Baez (who, with her husband Ira Perl, had founded the Institute for Non-Violence); he was conducting an intense correspondence with Rosemary Radford Ruether regarding feminism and his positions on theological and social issues; meanwhile, Chuang Tzu's teachings had taught Merton how to fast and how to hear with his whole being, in the Eastern way. (He concludes that the West has technology without wisdom while the East has wisdom without technology⁴⁵—a theme central to his writing of *The Geography of Lograire*.) Merton registers his commonality with Tao. He has a profound encounter with Thich Nhat Hanh, who comes to Gethsemani to see Merton in May of 1966—a visit which results in the famous ecumenical essay, 'Nhat Hanh Is my Brother'. To these experiences Merton responds with a series of essays and reviews on social and cultural issues, particularly focused on marginalized and oppressed peoples, caught in the violence of the decline of modern Western culture.⁴⁶

His passionate focus on the debasement of language as a corollary of this decline forms the platform for his antipoetry. He will not allow his use of poetic form and structure to be sucked into the vortex of spiritual and cultural degradation, as he observes it. His response is to explode poetic conventions into a language which finds its intentionality in non-violent solutions to exploitations of every kind. He asserts in his incisive essay, 'Ghandi and the One-Eyed Giant', that 'violence is essentially wordless', falling into the chasm between thought and communication (the abyss between one's 'true self' and one's 'false self').⁴⁷ In this chasm foment the chaos of history, language and culture, which are in decline; their realities are subsumed by technocracy and commerce with their attendant colonizing and totalizing forces of consumerism and aggrandizement. These forces evacuate human autonomy and freedom from the societies that they invade. The incumbent dilemma is satirized throughout the images and tones in *Cables*, particularly impressively in Cable 50:

Give me a cunning dollar that tells me no lie
 Better informed
 Truth-telling twenties
 And fifties that understand

45. Thomas Merton, 'Gandhi and the One-eyed Giant', in *idem*, *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 1.

46. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1964); *idem*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).

47. Merton, 'Gandhi and the One-eyed Giant', p. 6.

I want to carry
 Cracking new money
 That knows and loves me
 And is my intimate all-looking doctor
 Old costly whiteheaded
 Family friend
 I want my money
 To know me like whiskey
 I want it to forgive
 Past present and future
 Make me numb
 And advertise
 My buzzing feedbacking
 Business-making mind

 O give me a cunning dollar
 That tells me the right time
 It will make me president and sport...

 And I want my money
 To write my business letters
 Early every day.

He goes on, in a sardonic anthropomorphism, to characterize human life in a technocracy:

Each ant has his appointed task
 One to study strategy
 And one to teach it
 One to cool the frigidaire
 And one to heat it.

 Each ant has his appointed round
 In the technical circuit
 All the way to high
 One to make it and the other to break it...

 Each ant has his appointed strategy to heat
 To fuse and to fire at the enemy
 And cool it down again to ninety-nine
 In the right order –
 But sometimes with the wrong apparatus.⁴⁸

Cable 48 (subtitled 'Newscast') gives us an iconic illumination of the text of *Cables* which can assist our attempts to locate the convergence of Merton's poetics with his subversion of the language of poetry – his manifesto against the distortions of language in culture and the media. It

48. Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 429-31.

is here where Merton seems to turn language in on itself, seemingly obfuscating its intentions. These nine stanzas of reportage present the reader with a stunning disjunction of form and content, creating a vacuum of disquieting silence in the intellectual and emotional resonance of the words. This silent disjunction is subsumed by satire and, at times, sardonic wit:

...All-important Washington drolls
 Continue today the burning of forbidden customs
 Printed joys are rapidly un-deciphered
 As from the final page remain
 No more than the perfumes
 And military shadows
 President says the affair must now warn
 All the star-secret homespuns and undecided face-makers

Today's top announcement is a frozen society
 Publicizing a new sherbet of matrimonial midways
 And free family lore all over the front pages...⁴⁹

One must trek far beyond the words themselves and their conventional uses in order to locate their intention. Indeed, the complexities of meaning in the antipoetic statements Merton adopts are present in the self-reflexive ironies present in the intentions, not the disguises of the utterances. The disturbance and anxiety that result from this seemingly meaningless juxtaposition of phrases and images subverts the expectation of the reader/listener, leaving behind a seemingly unrequited desire for interpretation. The disjunction of form and content is complex and frustrating, requiring its audience to enter this silencing of meaning and humbly, if unwillingly, accept its incumbent disorientation. From such reconnaissance ensues the recognition of the debasements of language by the dominant powers in the culture with their all too often sinister motivations – for Merton, the perpetrators are government and the mass media in their drive to commerce. But here, the ephemeral but real silences in cognition and emotion engendered in the poem's audience demand a fresh commitment from the reader with every new approach, bidding us to contemplation. The difficulty, of course, is that our modern lives are

so cluttered with words that we no longer know how to handle silence...
 Our life is poured out in useless words, we...never hear anything...never
 become anything, and in the end, because we have said everything before
 we had anything to say, we [are] speechless.⁵⁰

49. Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 427-28.

50. Thomas Merton, letter to Amiya Chakravarty, 13 April 1967, in *idem, The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 115.

As the reader recoils from the disorienting moment, this 'newscast' purveys the witty and sarcastic humour that its speaker employs. The poem's imagery takes on the warped effects of a hall of mirrors in which one knows that there is a reality but cannot detect it anywhere in the distortions that the mirrors reflect. There is, at once, the grotesque and the humoresque:

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...

Today a small general open space
 Was found lodged in the immediate shadow
 Of the heavenly pole. It was occupied
 Early in the week by Russian force teams...⁵¹

The reader's response motivates a desire for understanding, a return to the language of meaning, but the seeming vacuity of the text has now subverted that possibility. In this canto, Merton's speaker demands reflection about a culture and society that are in peril when language is no longer associated with authenticity and reality.

In an incisive study of a culture's loss of myth (or in postmodern terms, the deconstruction of the metanarrative), Mircea Eliade offers observations that Merton read and studied and which very well might have helped to impel his writing of *Cables*: 'that it is of the greatest importance to rediscover a whole[ness]... which is concealed in the most ordinary, everyday life of contemporary man; it will depend upon himself whether he can work his way back to the source and rediscover the profound meanings of all these faded images and damaged myths'.⁵² In her early thesis on *Cables to the Ace*, Gail Ramshaw gives entrance to some of the complexities of the work with the premise that 'the chaos of amnesia is challenged by the power of the voice of myth'.⁵³ In the silent, even contemplative pause elicited by the poet's words and images, is rendered the longing for wholeness and integrity that, for Merton, is the

51. Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 427.

52. Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols in Religious Symbolism* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961), p. 128. Merton underlined this passage in his reading of the text.

53. Gail Ramshaw, 'The Pattern in Thomas Merton's *Cables to the Ace*', *The Merton Annual* 10 (1968), pp. 235-46.

call to humanity and unity. It is the moment to recognize one's Ground of Being as at one with peace and compassion. In *Cables*, one can see demonstrated the irony which shocks its audience into the recognition of its peril, in the manner of Jesus' parables.⁵⁴ In the instinct that follows, one engages the poet's intentions which decry the violence which erupts when language and its speakers' intentions devolve into misunderstanding and fragmentation, propaganda and war.

Merton resonated profound dismay with what he was reading about the disintegration, decentering of the relationship between 'sign' and 'signifier' in the culture's use of language. Although he did not employ the term, we recognize Merton's understanding of what would become the 'postmodern' bent in literary theory, when he noted the words of Karl Jaspers:

In the cultural chaos that now exists, anything can be said, but only in such a way that it signifies nothing. The vagueness of the meaning of words... the renunciation of that true significance which first enables mind to enter into touch with mind, has made an essential mutual understanding impossible. When language is used without true significance, it loses its purpose as a means of communication and becomes an end in itself.⁵⁵

As readers engage *Cables to the Ace*, they instinctively proffer the mind substitutes for words and images in order to bring 'sense' to what seems to be 'nonsense'; in this process, the contravention of meaning in these verses becomes clear. Merton is at play with words in this vivid expression of the vulnerability of language, but not in the manner of the postmodern game of deconstruction. Rather, his pose is grounded in the certainty that language, like all aspects of being, is fundamentally incarnational; though it often takes on the limitations and vulnerability of its forms. In the end, it is its speakers and hearers who manipulate language without regard for its relationship to truth and reality, creating the suspicious hermeneutic common to postmodernity and concluding that irony is the only outcome for language. If we fail the moments of meaning, Merton would claim that 'we will not find our 'true selves' because the play of the images that make up the sign systems that constitute our culture evolves from [this] disassociation of ourselves from others'.⁵⁶ Merton paid special attention to Karl Jaspers' theory that 'when we misuse language, we generate a myriad of significances that constitute the sound and fury of our lives. But in such, there is no Being. No God.

54. Kilcourse, Jr, *Ace of Freedoms*, p. 158.

55. Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), pp. 127-28.

56. Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* (New York: State University Press, 1998), p. 133.

No silence. [No possibility for *satori*, *dharma*, *prajna*.] Only dissonance, tropes, and complex systems of irony'.⁵⁷ In the silent reprise that accompanies this recognition, cable 48 summons its audience to respond with intention and commitment to heal the wounds by which words, in their debased form, betray humanity and truth. The awakening moment of contemplation that results in the attentive reader of *Cables to the Ace* produces a Zen-like recognition of Merton's poetic purposes. One seeks not to understand the words but to recognize their profound misuse.

Only in the intuitive understanding, beyond the words one reads and hears, can meanings be deployed. At such moments, in the luxuries of the absence of sound and noise, intuitions become clearheadedness, awakens, knowingness and beingness. In these precious, hidden and fragmented intuitions of wisdom lie transcendence and wholeness – the 'non-violent alternative' in which language is emptied of the violence which explodes between thought and communication. In this desert devoid of easy answers to its riddles, in this solitude, space and emptiness, seemingly unavailable to decoding, is the way of peace.

It is fitting that in Cable 86, near the end of the *Cables* (which were to be continued/'pourrait être continue'), Merton calls on the fourteenth-century apophatic mystics Eckhart and Ruysbroeck whose perspectives and experience inform Merton's engagement of a kind of *via negativa*. In his *Cables*, there is much of darkness and negativity, illuminant only when misunderstanding and false promises are radiated by 'the true word of Eternity'⁵⁸ and the 'shadow of God which enlightens our inward wilderness'.⁵⁹ Even in the ethos created by the distortions and implosions of the dichotomy of language and intentionality, the light and shadows are reversed and light shines from the luminiferous images to which the poet's language alludes. In retrospect, one sees that it is the later cable 80 that provides a glossarial context for the panoramic and dramatic force of *Cables to the Ace* (indeed, Merton himself claimed that the *Cables* could be read backwards or forwards with similar effect);⁶⁰ this being so, they demonstrate their elasticity and reflexivity in relation to time and space, giving them, as a whole, an attribute of transcendence:

Slowly slowly
Comes Christ through the garden
Speaking to the sacred trees
Their branches bear his light without harm

57. Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, p. 128.

58. Meister Eckhart, quoted in Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 453.

59. Ruysbroeck, quoted in Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 453.

60. Merton, letter to James Laughlin, 4 June 1967 in Cooper (ed.), *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin*, pp. 321-22.

Slowly slowly
 Comes Christ through the ruins
 Seeking the lost disciple
 A timid one
 Too literate
 To believe words...

The disciple will awaken
 When he knows history
 But slowly slowly
 The Lord of History
 Weeps into the fire.⁶¹

In this prayerful lyric, human history becomes the realm of God's kingdom. The weeping Christ brings salvation in the wake of his tears, ready to extinguish the fires of our ruin. The repetitions and falling trochées of the lines serve to harmonize the theme and tone, reflecting the ongoing work of God in Christ. Slowly but certainly, they reiterate and recover the paradox of life in death, refracting images of peace, recasting the power of language and *logos*, 'seeking the lost disciple... / Too literate / To believe words'. In this conflation of language and history, the poem's speaker confidently asserts that with Christ as the Lord of our History, we are '[n]ot to be without words in a season of effort. Not to be without a vow in the summer of harvest'. He continues with the contextualizing question: 'What have the signs promised on the lonely hill?' and then patiently points us to the illuminating admonition: 'Word and work have their measure, and so does pain. Look in your own life and see if you find it'.⁶² This is no mean or facile triumphalism. It is a knowledge born of loss, ruination, the void, the desert. From the:

[t]otal poverty of the Creator...springs everything. The waste is inexhaustible. Infinite Zero. Everything comes from this desert Nothing. But for each of us there is...a point of nothingness in the midst of being: the incomparable point not to be discovered by insight. If you seek it, you are lost. If you stop seeking, it is there. But you must not turn to it. Once you become aware of yourself as a seeker, you are lost. But if you are content to be lost you will be found without knowing it, precisely because you are lost, for you are, at last Nowhere.⁶³

In this Zen-like 'nowhereness', Merton's poetic voice captures the essence of the moment of creation before the unconscious mind can usurp

61. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 449.

62. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 450.

63. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 452.

expression. In such a timeless moment, Being takes on the manner of childlike simplicity and purity, as does the assumption of peace. The ace remains anchored, a refuge at the heart of all the noise, subterfuge and chaos. The poet 'walk[s] away from this poem / Hiding the ace of freedoms' to which are fixed all the 'cables', negative or goodly, and by which all of us may be led back to the hidden wholeness resident in God and all his created beings.

Ultimately, there is a synchronous parallel between the process that takes place in the interior/exterior life of Merton and the epiphanous temperament of his poetic voice, entirely appropriate to the monk who sought unity, integration, and most of all, transcendence of the self. This journey has intensified in the mystic's silence and solitude which engenders his embrace of active non-violence by his social conscience. In the decade prior to his death, Merton had reached far into and beyond his own humanity and spirituality to renew his explorations and his commitment to unity with humanity and God. The now famous Fourth and Walnut passage, experienced and recorded well before his antipoetic voice had matured, points us directly to such unifying, integrating moments:

In Louisville, on the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers... I have the immense joy of being human, a member of the race in which God himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. If only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.⁶⁴

This iconic epiphany provides the legend by which to decode the *Cables* which lead us to the 'freedom' hidden in their irony and paradox, belying the unity and incarnate truth in which language is grounded.

Merton's journey was characterized by his passion for both silence and peace — his 'non-violent alternative'. *Cables to the Ace* chronicles the iconoclasm and subversion of language, idea and mystic ideal which accompanied his embracing of non-violence. Ultimately, the complexity and mystery that threaten to confound the reader of Merton's penultimate epic antipoem are the same means by which he indentures his paradigm for the mystic's experience of transcendent peace. In the concluding cables, the poetic voice points us to the Christian's hope for salvation from the abyss of violence into which we are at every moment threaten-

64. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p.140.

ing to fall. From *Cables to the Ace*, Merton's dramatic and poetic icon, radiates the power of the Incarnational Word, wherein history, language, conscience and intentionality are fused and integrated, rendering wholeness and salvation.