

# Reinterpreting *Cables To The Ace* for the Twenty-first Century

Roger Gregg

*Earlier this year Roger Gregg, lecturer at The Gaiety School of Acting in Dublin, Ireland, produced a ground-breaking CD based on Thomas Merton's poetry, Cables to the Ace. The music and sound designs are by Roger Gregg and the voices are those of the Gaiety School of Acting's graduating class of 2011. The poetry was used by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation. Roger was invited to write something of his experience for the Merton Journal.*

**F**or nearly the past decade I have been teaching a course in 'Acting in Audio' at the Gaiety School of Acting in Dublin, Ireland. The Gaiety School is Ireland's national theatre school training acting students full time for careers in theatre. I also produce radio dramas as well as compose, produce and perform

music and sound-designs for stage productions. I cannot claim to be any kind of literary critic, an expert on Merton, or even privately any kind of religious person.

I first encountered Merton in 1980 when a grad student studying Social Theory. I was at that time delving through the major thinkers

of the Frankfurt School. It was through following references to Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* that I reached Thomas Merton. I was particularly engaged by Merton's thinking on social and cultural issues, non-violence, tolerance of other traditions, and his critique on the use of language and imagery in advertising, the media and so forth. Most especially appealing to me was his later poetry found in *Cables To The Ace*. I was attracted to its free-flowing, surreal satires of popular culture, advertising and the media. I discovered a better understanding of Merton's intentions about *Cables* in his discussion of the 'anti-poet' and 'anti-poetry' in *The Asian Journal*. Here Merton writes:

Marcuse has shown how mass culture tends to be anti-culture – to stifle creative work by the sheer volume of what is "produced," or reproduced. In which case, poetry, for example, must start with an awareness of this contradiction and use it – as anti-poetry – which freely draws on the material of superabundant nonsense at its disposal. One no longer has to parody, it is enough to quote – and feed back quotations into the mass consumption of pseudoculture.<sup>1</sup>

This notion of drawing upon and feeding back the 'superabundant

nonsense' and thereby creating a 'static' helping to expose the nonsense of the mass culture/media so struck me at the time that I typed out this passage and slipped it into my copy of his *Collected Poems*. Later in *The Asian Journal* Merton sets out to describe the role of the anti-poet:

The antipoet 'suggests' a tertiary meaning which is *not* 'creative' and 'original' but a deliberate ironic feedback of cliché, a further referential meaning, alluding, by its tone, banality, etc., to a *customary and abused context*, that of an impoverished and routine sensibility, and of the 'mass-mind', the stereotyped creation of quantitative preordained response by 'mass-culture'.<sup>2</sup>

What Merton left out or didn't make clear here was that like its precedent, parody, much of this new, ironically intended, anti-poetry resulted in wonderfully surreal and stinging cultural satire. In other words a great deal of it was off-the-wall and entertainingly funny. I don't wish to suggest that every one of the *Cables* is an 'anti-poem' intended with humour. A great many of them are moments of serious reflection as if shining through in the precious gaps of silence.

Usually as part of my annual teaching course at the Gaiety School, I had written a radio play

especially tailored for the class. However this last year I decided to do something different and create a spoken word/music 'concept album' using Merton's *Cables To The Ace*. *Cables* provided ideal material since I felt that most should be done in the style of a commercial voiceover parodying the kinds of presentations we hear in advertising, television, and, radio programming. Moreover the sound-design of the audio production could also be presented in a way that lampooned the din of the media's 'superabundance' to quote Merton's phrase.

However the main reason I selected these poems was my conviction that *Cables*, though written in the late 1960s, were addressing very significant contemporary cultural concerns. In this sense they are visionary. Merton was writing at a time when 'mass anti-culture' with its 'superabundant nonsense' reached out through a handful of AM radio stations and through just three American National TV networks. Forty or so years later, the 'sheer volume of what is produced' and the 'nonsense' has leapt forward exponentially. There are a plethora of cable television packages apparently offering more and more 'choice', digital radio presenting every radio station on the planet, the internet, iphones, ipads, texting, Twittering – all the media information/entertainment gadgets which supposedly enhance our lives. The result is a stultifying ca-

cophonous din bombarding ever shortening attention spans with ever briefer sound-bites, whilst at the same time presenting complex realities with simplistic graphics trimmed with cynically orchestrated flashes of 'eye-candy'. And almost this entire din is produced with commercial or persuasive motives. A result of this bombardment is a spiritual and psychological malaise with fewer individuals finding any moments for silence and for the clarity of reflection that silence can bring. In light of this, Merton, the stinging 'anti-poet' satirist found in *Cables To The Ace*, is even more relevant in today's digital age.

The production of the compact disc was able to proceed thanks to Dr. Paul M. Pearson at the Merton Archive Center and through the kindness of New Directions Publishing. We secured the rights to record the album, then produced a limited run of CDs and have published several of the *Cables* on YouTube. The cast of actors whose voices are heard on the album range in age from 21 to 31 and come from Ireland, the UK, the United States, Australia and Poland. The music and soundscapes are original and created especially for each *Cable* selected. Just 27 of the *Cables* are included on the CD; ten of these are presented on YouTube, which can be found by searching for 'Thomas Merton Cables To The Ace'.

A limited number of CDs are still available by contacting the Gaiety

Roger Gregg

School of Acting via our website,  
[www.gaiety.school.com](http://www.gaiety.school.com).

Finally I wish to stress that this production presents *just an* interpretation, it doesn't claim to be *the* interpretation. To quote Merton's description of Chuang Tzu, we hope that these interpretations in sound will help to win new readers for, 'a thinker who is subtle, funny, provocative, and not easy to get at.'<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), p.118.
2. *ibid.*, p.286.
3. Thomas Merton, A Note To The Reader in *The Way Of Chuang Tzu*, (Boston and London: Shambhala Press, 1992), p.xii.