The Solitude of Lograire

By **William Koch**

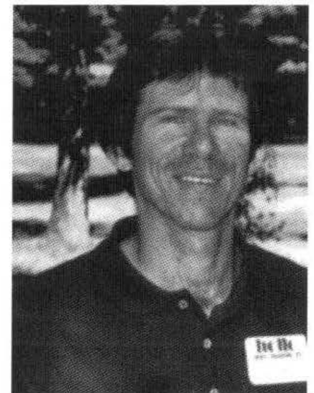
Thomas Merton's essay "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude"[1] and his long poem *The Geography of Lograire*,[2] though published nine years apart, complement each other in remarkable ways. I would even suggest that the impact and meaning of *Lograire* is illuminated by the insights of "A Philosophy of Solitude," and that the person who follows solitude and its demands achieves the remarkable empathy for other cultures and value systems that Merton reveals in *The Geography of Lograire*.

In "A Philosophy of Solitude," Merton stresses that central to solitude is one's liberation from societal fictions and slogans. This involves an inner liberation. By disengaging oneself from the usual rock and roll of business and pleasure, one is able to face the possibility that life is meaningless, that the things society says are valuable are without worth. When we reach this stage of solitude, we don't reject society, Merton notes, but we transcend society. We don't distance ourselves from people as we journey into the darkness of solitude but, as Merton emphasizes several times, we find ourselves at one with all humanity. Merton writes that the solitary questions the ways of man "in order to attain to union on a higher and more spiritual level . . . [H]e attains to the basic, invisible, mysterious unity which makes all men 'One Man' in Christ's Church beyond and in spite of natural social groups which, by their special myths and slogans, keep man in a state of division" (*DQ* 182).

Solitude is the fundamental human condition, Merton points out, and as bleak as that may sound, he finds that solitude doesn't lead to alienation, but to solidarity. As Merton so eloquently states, solitude is "the foundation of a deep, pure and gentle sympathy with all other men" (*DQ* 188-89).

Certainly Merton lived out this magnificent sympathy towards people and their cultures in the time that remained to him after writing "A Philosophy of Solitude." He put into practice the lessons of that important essay, especially the hard lesson that solitude is not a spiritual luxury, but a responsiblity of the spiritually mature. A person enters solitude not for the intensification of pleasure in the self, but to embrace the hidden, metaphysical agony which has its origins in the tragic divisions of the world.

Furthermore, if one seeks solitude to escape life, Merton warns, one will be tortured by the God who seeks to bring mercy to life and to make those in solitude merciful people. Solitaries do not seek "the desert" to escape life's bitterness and mean-



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inglessness, but "to heal in yourself the wounds of the entire world" (*DQ* 194).

The Geography of Lograire is so intriguing because it seems to be a conscious poetic expression of several insights of "A Philosophy of Solitude." *The Geography of Lograire* emerged from a man made merciful by solitude, by a man who wanted to heal within himself the wounds of the world. *The Geography of Lograire* is a difficult work to understand, but, as the reader wrestles with it, lives with it, its secrets, its humanity, its sorrow and gentleness, and its solitude opens up and one enters its "metaphysical agony."

The remarkable thing about *The Geography of Lograire* is that in its very first line we are dramatically drawn into its solitude: "Long note one wood thrush hear him low in waste pine places" (*CP* 459). We are called to step away from the daily grind and reflect on a canvas of human life larger than one's little world.

In this case, the profound American tragedy of racism is at the heart of the Prologue. The opening lines continue:

> Slow doors all ways of ables open late
> Tarhead unshaven the captain signals
> Should they wait?
> Down wind and down rain and down mist the passenger (*CP* 459).

The passenger, of course, is the African slave, and we are brought into an ever deeper, tragic solitude. Much of the Prologue is an extended meditation, almost a soliloquy, by the poet, in the solitude of the woods as he relives his own past and the lives of his ancestors who may have been involved in slave trade. Not only that, but we are brought to that "metaphysical agony" that is at the heart of the solitary's meditation.

> Desire desire O sign of ire
> O Ira Dei
> Wrath late will run a rush under the
> Funnel come snow or deadly sign
> Design of ire rather I'd dare it not dare
> It not the ire run late . . . (*CP* 461).

The solitary person wrestles with the great chasm between what is and what ought to be. He or she understands anger, whether the wrath of God or the justified human anger over the sin of Cain.

The Prologue draws us into the Solitude of Lograire, an austere desert of human hurt and tragedy. Early in the "South" Canto, the first section of the work after the Prologue, we meet a solitary who has emerged from the ashes of oppression. He appears at the end of the prose-poem that begins "Roar of red wood racer eats field" (*CP* 468), in which the images are a reversal of the Prologue's first, quiet line. This poem is an ironic ode to Western technology - it is full of images of speed and noise. Everything is surface and glitter. Then, we come to the last section:

> Through Knox at nightfall. Armycrater boys face
> down on the wet table. The grey mistrivers of night. Night-
> fall lights up houses. Redgrain music beat down houseflats.
> A ghost dancer walks in a black hat through gates of horn (*CP* 470).

"Armycrater boys," an image used earlier in the poem, refers to American soldiers killed in Vietnam. Merton frames the poem with this image to suggest that our materialistic society cannot escape the reality of death, even though we do everything we can to avoid it. The ghost dancer was someone who faced death, for his culture was near extinction. The ghost dance (which will be the focus of the third section of the final, "West," Canto) involved a ritual dance that produced visions of dead relatives and hopes that they would return to restore the old life.

The ghost dancer points the way for Americans to cope with death. The leaders of the ghost dance had taken responsibility for their own inner life, when cultural supports had weakened. In the same way, Americans must find inner resources to cope with the mystery of life and death. As Merton put it in his essay on solitude, each person must work his way through the darkness of his own mystery to find his or her true self in God. The ghost dancer, arriving at the end of an ironic paean to technology, gestures to us to abandon material things as a source of personal identity, and to enter into the "gates of horn," to enter into ourselves and our dreams, in order to find self-realization and fulfillment.

The image of the ghost dancer hovers over the rest of *Lograire*, and we meet manifestations of this solitary in other cultures. For instance, in the section on Central and Mixtec Americans ("South" X), we meet the priest of the Yucutan who faced the end of his culture through internal forces. A familiar, valued way of life was on the brink of destruction and they sought reassurance that their values were not illusions:

> Prayer in the cavern
> For the last time
> Pitch dark well
> Stopping at the altars
> Blind fingers explore the faces
> Of rock signs
> Figures cut in the wall
> Spell: "Justice exists"
> "Heaven exists"
> And the prophet Chilam answers
> *Hix binac hix mac*
> (Maybe yes maybe no) (*CP* 489).

"[T]he life of solitude is a life of love without consolation," Merton writes in "A Philosophy of Solitude" (*DQ* 203). Elsewhere in the essay he says, "The solitary may well beat his head against a wall of doubt. That may be the full extent of his contemplation" (*DQ* 202).

Certainly Merton did not agree with the priests' response to their dire situation - suicide. Neverthe rless, in their willingness to face the very roots of their existence, Merton found fellow solitaries.

In the experience of the Ranters, we find people who had looked deeply into their souls and arrived at a radical, mystical truth. Merton recognized them as solitairies in the complete commitment they made to their insight. The true solitary, Merton states, is "bound to sweat blood in anquish, in order to be loyal to God, to the Mystical Christ, and to humanity as a whole, rather than to the idol which is offered to him, for his homage, by a particular group. He must

renounce the blessing of every convenient illusion that absolves him from responsibility when he is untrue to his deepest self and to his inmost truth - the image of God in his own soul" (*DQ* 183).

Jacob Bauthemly - an "Abominable Ranter" - uttered these unorthodox views:

> "O God what shall I say thou art when thou cans't not be named
> For if I say I see thee it is nothing but thy seeing of thyself . . .
>
> "I find that where God dwells and is come
> And hath taken men up and rapt them up in the Spirit;
> There is a new heaven and a new earth
> And my heaven is to have my earthly and dark
> Apprehensions of God to cease
> And to live no other life than what Christ
> Spiritually lives in me . . .
>
> "Sin is the dark side of God but God is not the author of sin
> Nor does he will it. Sin being a nullity, God cannot be the author of it." (*CP* 522-23).

For these and other "abominations," Jacob was punished by being burned through the tongue. Such can be the price of fidelity to what solitude teaches one. Of course, Merton would not agree with the Ranters' libertarian practices, yet he recognized them as true solitaries. After all, their solitude did not lead to a mere narcissistic pursuit of happiness, though they enjoyed material things. Their belief in the unity of all existence in God inevitably led them to the hidden, metaphysical agony of the hermit.

Many of the images of solitude in *The Geography of Lograire* are linked to the tragedy of Lograire, as Merton grapples with the basic Cain and Abel pattern of fratricide embodied in the histories of the ghost dance, the Cargo cults, the Ranters and American racism.

The person of solitude, Merton believes, cannot help but wrestle with, or agonize over, the divisions among humanity, because solitude teaches that a profound unity exists among people. As solitude empties us of personal and social fictions we are left totally dependent on God for love and growth. Merton writes, "The vocation to solitude is . . . a vocation to silence, poverty and emptiness. But the emptiness is for the sake of fullness." Empty of self, the solitary becomes aware "of the divine mercy transforming and elevating his own emptiness and turning it into the presence of perfect love, perfect fullness" (*DQ* 192).

Lograire, though a place of great tragedy for the solitary, is also a place of self-realization. For instance, at the end of the Prologue, the poet is brought out of his reverie by another solitary, "the workless sparrow," and he sees that his musing about his past won't free him of his sense of guilt. The dark way of solitude, however, will bring him to innocence, to enlightenment. In Lograire, this is expressed in dense, poetic terms:

> Night way plain home to wear death down hard
> Ire hard down on anger heel grind home down (*CP* 402).

Anger, hate, death - the wages of the superficial self, are slowly ground out as one learns the discipline of solitude. In its place, perfect fullness, the true self, an "I" that is

"always alone," but "always universal." This "I" is "beyond division, beyond limitation, beyond selfish affirmation" (*DQ* 207).

Merton dramatizes this truth in the first section of the final, "West," Canto of *The Geography of Lograire*, "Day Six O'Hare Telephane." Interestingly, this poem contains snippets from a Hindu text concerning the nature of the Self. At the poem's center, Merton draws together the Eucharistic symbols of several religions as an expression of the unity of people he senses in his heart.

First he quotes the Hindu text:

> "Having finally recognized that the Self is Brahman and that existence and non-existence are imagined, what should such a one, free of desires, know, say or do?" (*CP* 578).

Merton offers two possibilities: "Should he look out of the windows / Seeking Self-Town?" The reader would answer, "Of course not." Then Merton writes:

> Should the dance of Shivashapes
> All over flooded prairies
> Make hosts of (soon) Christ-Wheat
> Self-bread which could also be
> Squares of Buddha-Rice
> Or Square Maize about those pyramids
> Same green
> Same brown, same square
> Same is the Ziggurat of everywhere (*CP* 579).

All human beings share the same need for the numinous, for the spiritual. The differences among religions, while not merely accidentals, should not close off human contact. In fact, Merton suggests that someone in touch with his or her true self, can witness to a profound identification with the Other. As he declares in "A Philosophy of Solitude," such a person, empty of self, finds "he has entered into a *solitude that is really shared by everyone*" (*DQ* 188). In Lograire, tough, poetic terms are again used:

> I am one same burned Indian
> Purple of my rivers is the same shed blood (*CP* 579).

Again we have a graphic example of the truth that true solitude does not lead to a complacent self-satisfaction, but generates a dynamic concern and compassion for humanity. For Merton, solitude truly was the foundation for a deep, pure and gentle sympathy with all other people. *The Geography of Lograire* is an expression of this gentle sympathy. The fact that it embodies key insights also found in "A Philosophy of Solitude" demonstrates the centrality of that essay to Merton's mature thought, and how faithful he was to God's solitude.

[1]Thomas Merton, "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude," in *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 177-207; subsequent references will be incorporated as "*DQ*" parenthetically in the text.
[2]Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (1969), in *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 455-609; subsequent references will be incorporated as "*CP*" parenthetically in the text.