

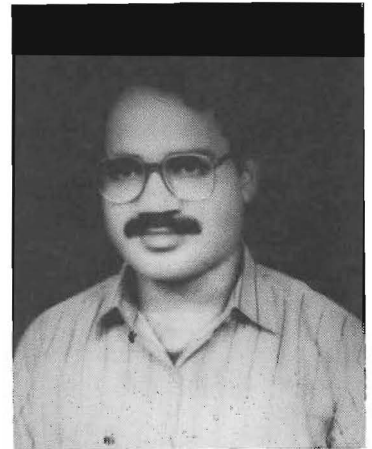
# THOMAS MERTON'S THE GEOGRAPHY OF LOGRAIRE: A POEM OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

by **Guru Charan Behara**

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*The Geography of Lograire* is the most complex and most intricately designed of all the poems of Thomas Merton. It is a loose alternation of prose and poetry, whose content is derived from many times, many cultures — the primitivism, occultism, mysticism of Africa and Asia, including raw quotations from the poet's reading of history and anthropology. It reads like a journal, sometimes like notes for an anthropological or sociological study, at other times like a poetic reflection. Though the poem is surrealistically structured to convey what Merton calls "the first opening up of the dreams," the sections of the poem are vividly grounded in particular locales. It is in fact a "wide angle mosaic of poems and dreams" in which he has mixed "what is [his] own personal experience with what is almost everybody else's" (p. 1). His viewpoint takes on multiple forms embodying the anguished reactions of the primitive tribes against the suppression of their myths by the Western people. With its fragments form, disjointed syntax, multiple allusions and combination of sense and apparent nonsense, the poem seeks to convey the poet's own sense of the confusion, the violence and the alienation of modern humans and, at the same time, the search for alternative value systems in the primitive myths.

*The Geography of Lograire* depicts the poet's mental excursions into those geographical zones which impress him more with their sense of the past than with that of the present. It is an exploration of the interior territory of the mind whose points and zones correspond to those locales and zones of the outer world where primitive myths flourished. It then turns out to be an exploration, in terms of the geographical details, of the memory of humankind encapsulated in the individual memory of the poet. The racial unconscious is plotted by the geographical motif. This is perhaps why Victor A. Kramer calls the poem an inner cartograph" (*Thomas Merton: Monk and Artist*, p. 135.) And such blending of geographical and psychological variables by Merton to express his unified vision of life prompts me to term the poem "a poem of psychotherapy." The title, as explained by Sister Therese Lentfoehr in a note appended to the poem, shows how the poet's individual and collective memories are embodied in geographical space. The title alludes to the French poet, Francois Villon, whose real name was Francois Des Loges. "Loges," from which Merton seems to have created his own country of "Lograire," refers to the little huts and cabins used by French woodcutters or foresters, with whom Merton could be associated as the head forester of the Trappist community and, more importantly, as the inhabitant of a hermitage in the woods. It further alludes to the original cabin or "loges" in the forest of Saint Germaine that had been replaced by a Catholic church. This allusion




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provides ironical perspective to the poem as the poet himself belongs to a Catholic order, part of the Christian tradition which he accuses of ruthlessly suppressing the primitive myths. The very name “Lograire” also sounds like a mythical Welsh kingdom which could stand for all the suppressed myths whose geography the poet seeks to map out. “Lograire” could possibly have been coined by fusing “logogram” and “logos,” suggesting a search for a new universal order based on the recognition of the worth of the suppressed cults. All these literal, typological, symbolical and mythological significances realized at the multiple levels of the poem constitute the poet’s outer and inner geographical exploration.

The poem is structured on a compass motif. South to north, east to west not only invoke the memory of ancient navigation and suggest a sense of journey, but also chart out the epic scale in which the poem is conceived. The prologue serves to present the framework, outline the major themes, and set the tone of the poem. It opens with allusions to Wales and England and the poet’s personal Celtic origins:

Should Wales dark Wales slow ways sea coaltar  
 Green tar sea stronghold in Wales my grand  
 Dark my Wales land father it was green  
 With all harps played over and bells. (p. 3)

Disruption in conventional syntactical order is akin to the stream of consciousness technique of another Celtic writer, James Joyce. The poem representing the poet’s immersion in the myth-dreams of other peoples naturally needs relatively loose lines free from logical order and grammatical control. On an objective level, this also projects the poet’s vision of the disjointed life of society. It demands from the reader some intellectual exercise turning them into active participants in the journey through the labyrinth of history and myth. The pieces, when put together, build Wales as a land darkened by the hard sea voyages of the past, by slavery (the Tarhead captain), by slag heaps and exploitation. The idea of quest suggested by allusions to Arthurian legend is continued by reference to Odysseus: “Hold Captain home to Ithaca” (p. 5). The moral and metaphysical quest of the mythical, medieval captains is set in contrast with the materialistic search of present day captains for land and gold. When the former aims at love of mankind, the latter results in suppression of primitive tribes, and thus it is “the same struggle of love and death” that informs the whole poem. “The Cain/Abel” motif implicit in the old world sea captains is intensified in the depiction of fratricidal civil war:

Pain and Abel lay down red designs  
 Civil is slain brother sacred wall wood pine  
 Sacred black brother is beaten to wall. (p. 5)

The pun on Cain and pain indicates fratricide as the source of the pain of humankind. Significantly, the woodthrush’s song, which along with the “green,” “harps,” “bells” of mythical Wales symbolize natural harmony and joy, forms the background against which all the disorder and violence is depicted. Here, the woodthrush, known as a “hermit bird” or a “prophetic bird,” suggests Merton himself, a hermit of prophetic vision. In the last couplet, Merton suggests, through pharmaceutical symbol (R for Rx), a religious cure through love of Christ for the disease of modern society:

Sign Redeemer’s “R”  
 Buys Mars his last war. (p. 6)

Among the places in “South,” the first canto, are Kentucky (site of Merton’s monastery), Florida, Africa, Mexico, and Central America. Allusion to Cain introduces the theme of violence and fratricidal strife. A ghastly picture of Kentucky is presented through disjointed images and vignettes of violence, racial tension and militarism, combined with materialism. LAMB ADMITS TIES TO CAIN refers to the violent imposition of Christianity on tribes and the pent up anger of blacks against the white raiders. The second movement of the canto speaks of the way to Louisville and concludes with “a ghost dancer walks in a black hat through the

gates of horn” (p. 14). The ghost dance movement that originated among Native Americans near Walter Lake in Nevada anticipated a time when Indian dead would return and white people would die or disappear. The poem contains a number of such instances of tribal neurosis, probably stimulated by extreme deprivation and dislocation. References to “the millennium” not only express the suppressed collective unconscious, but support the poem’s emerging vision of a new age. The third movement HYMNS TO LOGRAIRE is a collection of hymns celebrating the new world of the poet’s dream. This is immediately followed by a critique on the mechanization of life in the modern age in MIAMI YOU ARE ABOUT TO BE SURPRISED. The poet describes himself as a “gourmet with a mouthful of seaweed” who warns against the interference of the machine in the private affairs of humans, “to register your secret desires/ which are never secret and always foolish” (p. 18).

TWO MORALITIES is about the ways in which primitive people form their own moralities through confrontation with death. THONGA LAMENT (Africa) tells about the belief of the Thonga, an African Bantu tribe, in ancestor spirits:

Look the blue oxen  
 Came down from the altars  
 To our cavern O Fathers. (p. 19)

HARE’S MESSAGE (Hottentot) is about the Nagama tribe’s belief that a hare sent by the Moon God to tell humans that “they shall rise again as I also rise after each dying” changed message and told the Nagama: “you must die . . . just as I do” (p. 20). Invocation of the spirit for the wellbeing of the living and belief in the possibility of rising “after each Dying” “enact the participation of the living and the dead” (p. 2). Likewise, the “woe doctor” in SOUTH VII who was apparently a Zulu prophet and healer could transform himself into a medium and use dreaming as a channel of communication. The final geographical point of South is Yucatan, locale of CHILAM BALAM and DZULES. Much of the material is taken from *The Book of Jaguar Priest: A Translation of the Book of Chilam Balam of Tizinin* which is the Mayan version of the conquest. It is about the Mayan priests who destroy themselves because of the injuries done to their people (p. 33).

In Merton’s cosmography, South is immediately followed by North. This contrapuntal technique allows the qualities of each of the two geographical, cultural and psychic worlds to appear in sharp relief. In the style of Whitman, the prologue ends with the celebration of the epic journey of the multitudinous self through vast geography:

Geography.  
 I am all (here)  
 There! (p. 42)

Merton came from “North.” The long movement, QUEEN’S TUNNEL, relates memories of the tunnels of London, New York and Long Island. The tunnel stands for the encircling gloom that closes in upon human beings, a hell on earth that characterizes technological civilization. The tunnel physically resembles and recalls the “cavern” in which the Thonga invoke the spirits of their ancestors and into which the Mayan priests enter. But, in terms of significance, there is an ironic contrast between the ancient meditation which aims at transcendence and modern mechanization which implies degradation. This connects the parts of the geography and weaves the sections of the poem into a pattern. Towards the end, there is a note of hope which echoes William Blake: “There is a grain of sand in Lambeth which Satan cannot find/ While deep in the heart’s question a shameless light/ Returns no answer” (p. 62).

THE RANTERS AND THEIR PLEADS is based on and quotes from Norman Cohn’s *The Pursuit of Millennium*, a history of the Chiliastic religion of the Free Spirit. This movement flourished in one form or

another in Europe from the twelfth through the fourteenth century and revived in England in the seventeenth century. It attacked the established Church, the Bible and the clergy, and urged people to listen only to the voice of Christ within them. Merton laments that the sect was suppressed and its significance ignored. In the next section, NORTH IV "KANE RELIEF EXPEDITION," is based on Dr. James Laws's journal of Kane's expedition to rescue Sir John Franklin, lost somewhere in the Arctic. The movement is again a critique, this time on the senseless Christianization of the Eskimos. It seeks to identify Kane with Cain.

EAST is made entirely of historical and anthropological meditations with no sections that might be termed personal. The historical context for this, Merton mentions himself, is *Travels in Asia and Africa* by Ibn Battuta (p. 145). The Muslim myth dream with its prayer, ritual, mysticism and deep sense of oneness with the environment stand in strong contrast with the naked aggression of Kane and the Puritans.

The EAST section moves on to Melanesia. Merton appropriately quotes from anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. Malinowski is what Merton describes in *Hagia Sophia* as "doubly alienated," alienated from his own world and alienated from the land of strangers. The Cargo Cults of the Pacific become points of reference in the succeeding sections. Merton sums them up as reactions to the impact of European culture: "It is a way in which primitive people not only attempt by magic to obtain the goods they feel to be unjustly denied to them but also and more importantly a way of spelling out their conception of the injustice, their sense that basic human relations are being ignored and their hope of restoring the right order of things" (p. 149). The Cargo Cults were messianic, mystical, eschatological movements which tried to explain not only the primitive people's subservience to the whites in terms of their own guilt but also their attempt to transcend their fear of the whites. After the whites took over, a native of Milne Bay, possessed by a tree-spirit, warned of giant waves and told natives to throw away all goods (i.e., cargo):

Destroy houses kill all pigs  
 Withdraw inland  
 Wearing only long narrow leaves  
 "To show entire repudiation of the white man." (p. 92)

Movements EAST III-X refer to dreams, rituals and practices among Kanaka tribes. Like the Zulu prophets, the Cargo leaders tried to communicate in dreams with the spirits of their ancestors. Various rituals were observed to resurrect the dead. The natives went inland and awaited the millennium and the return of the dead: "They [the missionaries] reached the boats just in time. The dead arrived in the village with a cargo of flashlights" (p. 93). In their fantasy, they attacked the white men in order to restore social order and psychic meaning to their lives.

And now we are going to fix you clapcott five men  
 Will come and you will not hear them come  
 Since you are deaf  
 You will be shot and parts will be cut off  
 Parts also eaten  
 Because of which  
 Our dead shall rise  
 Black shall be white  
 Cargo shall come to Santo  
 Ancestors come home in white ship  
 From where you sent them you sonofabitch  
 With all your papers. (p. 113)

All these messianic cults, as we observe, spring from the tension between technological and primitive worlds.

The references to “Ghost Wind” and divine possession in the last movement of EAST, titled AND A FEW MORE CARGO SONGS, bring into focus the ghost dance culture mentioned in the prologue and prepare us for its celebration in the final movement of the last canto, WEST.

The subject of WEST is America, past and present, as a civilization which Merton views with deep misgivings. DAY SIX O’HARE TELEPHONE fuses various impressions and suggestions of primitive and technological worlds in a complex, surrealistic manner. DAY SIX recalls the Mayan way of recording dates. O’HARE, which obviously refers to the Chicago airport, relates to the Hare or “death.” This neatly tallies with 6 August 1945, the date of the bombing of Hiroshima. On a surface level, this movement presents a grotesque picture of the Chicago airport which, in itself, is a reflection on the sordidness, violence and divisiveness of the technological world. But, on the level of suggestion, it holds two geographical and psychic worlds in tension: the primitive idea of death as a gateway to a new life is set off against unredeemable doom in the technological world. Underlying all these contrasts and tensions are such lines as “Christ — Wheat/ . . . which could also be/ Square of Buddha. Rice/ Or Square Maize about those pyramids” (p. 123). They express the poem’s central theme of the oneness of all existence. The second movement of WEST, entitled AT THIS PRECISE MOMENT OF HISTORY, is about power struggles in history which caused endless human misery. It continues the Cain and Abel motif.

The third movement, GHOST DANCE: PROLOGUE, and the last one, GHOST DANCE, presents the cult of the ghost dance among the Sioux as similar to cults among South Africans and the Kanakas mentioned in earlier cantos. The elements that recall earlier sections are the belief in the return of the dead with the simultaneous end of the world and the importance of dreaming as a channel of communication with the spirits. That these elements exist in the Christian world is an assertion of the interconnectedness of Merton’s psychogeography. As a complicated series of interacting cults, this is the climax of the poet’s series of dream observations. But the last stanza marks a sharp departure from the climax and is almost bathetic in nature: “After a while the dreaming stopped and the dream Dance turned into a Feather Dance. It was just a fun dance. It was mostly a white man’s show” (p. 137).

The reference is obviously to the commercialization of the ghost dance that has reduced it to a mere tourist attraction. At one level, as Walter Sutton puts it (“Thomas Merton and the American Epic Tradition: The Last Poems,” *Comparative Literature* 14:1 [1973], p. 55), the poem “ends with the end of the dreaming and with a sense of the failure of civilization and its victims.” But Virginia F. Randall (“Contrapuntal Irony and Theme in Thomas Merton’s *The Geography of Lograire*,” *Renascence* 20 [1976], p. 202): “The other side of this bitter irony, the end of dreaming is the beginning of some kind of reality . . . . The poem is the dreaming, and when it is finished, becomes a part of the reality of the poet’s life and a part of the reader’s experience.” My contention here is that the ghost dance, as it is presented today in the modern world, has lost its primitive mystery and vitality and has become an artificial entertainment designed for and controlled by white persons. *The Geography of Lograire*, apparently meant to highlight the value of the suppressed cults of the primitive tribes, was shaped and designed by Merton, a white man. So it is a white man’s show, a modern day ghost dance show. Thus the poet questions his own sincerity and authenticity in pleading for the tribes. The irony of the whole poem is widened and deepened here as the perspective turns to self-questioning and self-examination. It is a pleas to all white people to search their souls.

*The Geography of Lograire* does not end with solution, but rather points towards new directions, further exploration and continuing inward journey. It becomes part of an unending journey, an attempt to answer questions which raise more questions. The psychogeography tends to move from the poem to the poet and from the poet to the reader. It remains, as Merton himself put it, “a purely tentative first draft of a longer work in progress” and “a beginning of patterns” (p. 1).