



The Geography of Lograire: Long poem

Thomas Merton

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Thomas Merton's final testament as a poet is his most ambitious long work and a remarkable poetic achievement.

It was completed in the summer of 1968, a few months before he set out from Our Lady of Gethsemani monastery in Kentucky on the Asian journey from which he did not return. The text is as he left it. It lacks that final editing that he would have done in proof, but it is substantially a completed, self-contained work. Lograire, as with William Carlos Williams's Paterson, is first of all a country of the imagination, but it is also a person—Merton himself—for its "geography" is the map, the inner choreography, of his mind. The charting in the poem is his search for self-location: where, and even how, does a man find himself in the geography of all men? Sections of personal experience are set against passages re-imagined from anthropological and historical texts, material that Merton chose for its character of myth to illustrate the general experience of mankind. The myths of Lograire form a mosaic of African legends, Mixtecart motifs and Mayan religious customs, the pantheism of the fanatical Ranters in 17th-century England, the records of an early arctic expedition and of Ibn Battuta, the 14th-century Arab traveler, the Cargo Cults of Melanesia and the Ghost Dances of the American Indians. "A poet," Merton wrote in his prefatory note to Lograire, "spends his life attempting to build or to dream the world in which he lives. But more than that he realizes that this world is at once his and everybody's. It grows out of a common participation which is nevertheless recorded in authentically personal images. I have without scruple mixed what is my own experience with what is almost everybody else's." Many modern poets have used history and myth in their work; what sets *The Geography of Lograire* apart is the invention of Merton's method—his process for elevating fact to the level of myth. It is a complex technique of fractured syntax, multiple meanings; the distortion of dream, irony and parody.

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