

Overlooking America: 'Day Six O'Hare Telephane' and the Landscape of *Lograire*

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On Monday, May 6, 1968, Thomas Merton left Kentucky for a two-week trip to California, where he was to give a retreat to Cistercian nuns at their monastery in Whitethorn, and New Mexico, where he visited the Monastery of Christ in the Desert north of Santa Fe. It was his first journey to the West Coast, and only his fourth time on an airplane. He flew from Louisville to San Francisco by way of Chicago, and during his layover at Chicago's O'Hare Airport he

briefly noted the scene in his journal: 'O'Hare, big fish with tail fins elevated in light smog. One leaves earth. "Not seeing, he appears to see."¹ These brief jottings proved to be the starting point for 'Day Six O'Hare Telephane,' the first section of the final, West, canto of his long poem, *The Geography of Lograire*,² in which the scene at the airport and on the plane to San Francisco prompts the speaker's ironic reflections on the contemporary human, and specifically American, pilgrim-

age as trivialized, depersonalized and secularized, yet with the potential for a genuine encounter with the stranger that would reveal a shared image of the divine.

Merton had been working on *Lograire* since the previous year, and by the spring of 1968 it was substantially completed, but the West canto was a good deal shorter than the other three. The new opening section that developed from Merton's time at the airport and in the air not only contributes an additional 220 lines to the still rather brief final canto; but it also provides for a certain structural symmetry with the three earlier cantos, each of which opened with the motif of journey or pilgrimage; and it also prepares thematically and geographically for the three sections of the West canto that follow it. In its depiction of actual estrangement and potential unity of different peoples, 'Day Six' serves as the high point of the poem, not only in its subject matter but in its spiritual perception.

The poem begins with a slightly revised version of the brief journal observations of the runways and gate areas: 'Comes a big slow fish with tailfins erect in light smog/ And one other leaves earth' (ll. 1-2). Presumably the murky atmosphere of the smog and the aquarium-like large windows of the waiting area from which the speaker views the tarmac initially prompted the comparison with the fish. But might there also be a suggestion of the

Jonah story here as well—a favourite of Merton's of course³—as the passengers are about to be swallowed up, or in this instance, probably, disgorged, by the big fish—into a contemporary equivalent of Nineveh? (Though we think of Jonah being swallowed by a whale, the actual term in the Bible is 'large fish.') If this is the case, the majority of the passengers have no idea that they have any message to bring to the city—but the suggestion of a providential meaning to the human pilgrimage, of the necessity for a radical change of heart, is certainly consistent with the speaker's own perception as it unfolds during the course of the poem.

The phrasing of the second line is also suggestive: we might expect 'one other leaves the ground'—but instead we read 'leaves earth,' a slightly less familiar expression that has ambivalent connotations: it might suggest freedom, a release from the petty concerns of the earthbound state, an elevation above the terrestrial, but it could also mean losing touch with the tangible, with the concreteness of material creation, being elevated into a world of abstraction, the kind of pseudo-mysticism that Merton critiqued at the beginning of his essay *Day of a Stranger*:

The clouds are high and enormous. Through them the inevitable jet plane passes: this time probably full of passengers from Miami to Chi-

cago. What passengers? This I have no need to decide. They are out of my world, up there, busy sitting in their small, isolated, arbitrary lounge that does not even seem to be moving—the lounge that somehow unaccountably picked them up off the earth in Florida to suspend them for a while with timeless cocktails and then let them down in Illinois. The suspension of modern life in contemplation that *gets you somewhere!*⁴

In the present situation, however, the passengers are not out of his world, since he is among them, and therefore he now has 'a need to decide,' to confront this 'suspension of modern life' more directly. That is what the rest of the poem will set out to do.

In the remaining nineteen lines of the opening section, the impression is given of a constant bombardment of sensual stimuli, not only the continual process of planes taking off and landing, but the frenetic movement of various ground vehicles, compared to insects, beneath the giant planes—at times whimsically, as when a gasoline truck is described as 'A long beetle called Shell' (l. 10)—but in the main suggestive of an inhuman, thoughtless level of activity. The various fragmentary details seem to have little relationship to each other, though there are glimpses of connections

that should be made but seldom are, as when the lines 'And two others drink coffee/Out of yellow paper cups' (ll. 16-17) are immediately followed by 'Big Salvador not cooled off yet/From sky silver' (ll. 18-19)—the phrase 'cooled off yet,' which could be applied to the coffee, the juxtaposition of 'yellow paper cups' and 'sky silver,' and the name of the plane itself is a subtle reminder that El Salvador is the source of much of the coffee that Americans drink, with no awareness of how it connects them with people in another part of the world, poor people who make possible their customary routines. The section ends with a reference to a plane so large it's compared to a hotel, taking off and becoming 'Charles' Wain' (l. 21), an archaic term for the constellation of the Big Dipper—which of course points to the North Star and thereby provides direction on a journey; 'wain' means 'wagon' and the Charles in question is Charlemagne, so the implication is that by following in the wake of Charlemagne's chariot one is led in the right path—the imperial power of the medieval West as a model for the present. The speaker's own 'take' on such a suggestion comes in the line that immediately follows: 'The wise man who has acquired mental vacuity is not concerned with contemplation or its absence' (ll. 23-24). This is the first of seven short passages punctuating the poem that are taken from the *Ashtavakra*

Gita,⁵ a Hindu work that Merton had been reading since mid-April and considered to be 'very much what I have been needing,'⁶ and that he intended to use as a resource for his conferences for the Trappistines in California.⁷ The 'mental vacuity' of the quotation is 'sunnyata,' the absolute emptiness that is beyond distinctions and definitions, beyond dualistic categories, an openness and non-possessiveness that refuses to regard even contemplation as an object to be sought. In its simplicity and calm, the statement stands in contrast to the scene of frenzied activity that surrounds it in the airport, yet does not judge or condemn—certainly the unrelenting agitation of the senses with sights and sounds epitomizes the absence of contemplation, but the wise man is able, the statement suggests, to maintain serenity even in the midst of such busyness, which resumes immediately for another forty lines before the words of the Hindu sage are heard once again. In the intervening second movement of the poem, the ground crews 'Racing alone across asphalt sound' (l. 32) are said to 'Ride our fables' (l. 30), to represent the collective illusion of self-importance represented by speed and rugged individualism. Another plane takes off: 'Big Panam leaves earth/Gets Tax Man started into death' (ll. 39-40). The figure of Tax Man (borrowed from the Beatles) headed toward death suggests not only the usual linking of

death and taxes as inevitable, but the use of tax money in 1968 to fund the Vietnam War. Awareness of American militarism had begun as early as line four with the appearance of 'Thirtynine generals' in the airport, and grows stronger throughout the poem. Now 'big United Doppelganger slides very close/Seeking the armed savers' (ll. 48-49)—apparently the plane taking passengers to the West Coast comes very close to the terminal window as if searching for the generals; 'It points at us all and it is named:/"PHILIP"' (ll. 50-51). The reference seems to be an ironic parody of the scene in Acts 8 where the deacon Philip encounters the Ethiopian eunuch and identifies Jesus as Isaiah's suffering servant, but here the 'armed savers' have displaced the crucified Saviour. The section ends with the stewardesses ushering passengers onto the plane as though it were some elaborate seduction ritual: 'Hello say the mignonnes/You can go to bed/You can go to the gorgeous/Community period and' (ll. 62-65)—but the empty phrases are cut short by a second quotation from the *Ashtavakra Gita*: 'Though appearing to act he does not engage in action' (l. 66).⁸ As the first passage focused on contemplation, so this one complements it by considering action, and once again undermines superficial attitudes. In the midst of so much commotion, it articulates the equivalent of the Taoist doctrine of wu-wei, the non-action or non-ado

that is actually supreme activity because it allows the energy of the universe to spontaneously act through oneself, and so presents an alternative to the way of self-assertion visible in the passengers filing onto the plane: 'Derby Dad' (l. 70), who has evidently backed the winning horse at the Kentucky Derby, run two days earlier; 'Big Mafia' (l. 72), a figure familiar from the earlier 'Queens Tunnel' section of the 'North' canto,⁹ who 'sits with mainlining blonde'; and 'Regular Bounder Marlo' [Mario?] (l. 73). This brief section ends with a public address announcement, 'Mr. Kelsey/You are now wanted/In ticket country' (ll. 77-79), in which the distortion of the ticket counter into 'ticket country' makes the statement 'You are now wanted' take on threatening overtones. Again a line from the *Ashtavakra Gita* breaks into the scene; at the very time when the plane is about to take off and the journey is about to begin we hear: 'It is not distant and it is not the object of attainment' (l. 80).¹⁰ 'It' is *moksha*, liberation, enlightenment, which the *Gita* suggests is already present within oneself and simply needs to be recognized and accepted. Yet the journey west is presented as a paradigm of conscious striving—even the order of takeoff is perceived in terms of competition and superiority: 'Our glide has won' (l. 87). The pilots are envisioned in mythic terms as conquering natural forces like the legendary Pecos Bill riding the cy-

clone: 'Our giant vocal captains are taking off/Whooping and plunging like world police/On distant outside funnels' (ll. 89-91); the phrase 'world police' suggests that a similar attitude motivates military actions in Southeast Asia, while the domestic consequences of this obsession with subjugating nature are seen on the landscape below, not only in the artificial order imposed on the environment, 'abstract/Whorls wide sandpits water-shapes/Forms and prints and grids' (ll. 100-102), but in the pollution, the ecological havoc, wrought by human domination: 'Invent a name for a town/Any town/"Sewage Town"' (ll. 103-105). As the first half of the poem comes to a conclusion, May 6 is identified with 'day six' (l. 106), the day on which God completes the process of creation in Genesis by making humans in the divine image; it is described as 'A day of memory' (l. 107), a day to recall above all that humans were to be God's agents in caring for creation, and to recognize how far short they have fallen in carrying out that responsibility.

Yet at the very center of the poem, again in the words of the *Ashtavakra Gita*, an alternative vision, a declaration of true human identity and vocation, is luminously unveiled: '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?' (ll.

108-10).¹¹ That is, conscious of one's union with God and aware that a separate autonomous existence is an illusion, how should one act, or more fundamentally, who should one be? In response, the speaker has a vision of possible human solidarity prompted by the sight of wheat fields far below: 'hosts of (soon) Christ-Wheat/Self-bread which could also be/Squares of Buddha-Rice/Or Square Maize about those pyramids' (ll. 115-18). This deeply sacramental vision of shared communion between East and West, North and South leads to identification with all the victims of injustice past and present: 'I am one same burned Indian/Purple of my rivers is the same shed blood/All is flooded/All is my Vietnam charred' (ll. 122-25). This is, literally and figuratively, the high point not only of 'Day Six' but of *The Geography of Lograire* as a whole. It is an expression of profound compassion, of sharing the experience of all humanity, making the suffering of others one's own as Christ himself identified with human brokenness and healed it by taking it upon himself.

But neither *Lograire* as a whole nor 'Day Six' concludes here. Again quoting from the *Ashtavakra Gita*, the speaker suggests that it is easier to deny the pain and ugliness of the world as it is—to 'leave earth'—than to identify with it: 'He who sees reality in the universe may try to negate it' (l. 128).¹² One might be tempted to 'Deride the false tile

field floor/Of the great Illinois bathroom/Lettered all over/With busy-signals' (ll. 130-33)—a reference to the graffiti-covered rest room walls in the airport—including much-dialed telephone numbers that provide the only reference to the portmanteau word 'telephane' in the poem's title, which evidently combines 'telephone' with 'cellophane'—a reference to transparency which is certainly ambiguous in the context. The other temptation is more subtle: to ignore the suffering and respond to other cultures only on an aesthetic level, to reduce communion to gastronomy, observing 'The veined paddies or pastries/The burned trays of the Ming prairie' (ll. 135-36)—identification with the burned Indian is trivialized into concern for overdone baked goods, and genuine unity is reduced to a superficial cultural uniformity, as Ming porcelain is located on the banks of the Mississippi.

The two final quotations from the *Ashtavakra Gita* follow in short order: the statement, 'His actions in this world are appearances only' (l. 139),¹³ that is, are not ways of establishing his own autonomous reality, prompts a brief notice of how easily the appearance of a city below is veiled by clouds, a reminder of the contingency of earthly activity. 'Not seeing, he appears to see' (l. 149)¹⁴ actually refers to the wise man, who recognizes that the apophatic way of not seeing, of darkness, transcends the empirical

evidence of the senses to reach a deeper level of reality, though in the context it could also refer conversely to those who think they see reality but really are blind to all but what the speaker had earlier termed 'the murky/Surface of profit' (ll. 98-99). Representing this level is a black man, 'a race-leader or power passenger' (l. 153) (i.e. a black power advocate) who gets into arguments with other passengers while standing in line 'Outside the highest toilet in the world' (l. 165); he is 'one among many/Who will have his way' (ll. 159-60). Thus the earlier vision of unity is confronted with the actuality of conflict and hostility, and the speaker observes that 'We are All High Police Thors/Holding our own weapons' (ll. 169-70) and ironically alludes both to the dissonance between their alienation and their destination, the 'Franciscan West' (l. 173) named after the little poor man who called himself the brother of all creatures, and between their estrangement and the name of their airline: the slogan of 'friendly skies' is transmuted into 'United in indifferent skies/Where nobody needs any anger' (ll. 175-76). He then plays variations on the line from the *Gita*: 'Not seeing he is thought to be over Sioux Falls/Getting hungry' (ll. 177-78)—the earlier vision of communion is reduced to a desire for lunch, and the name of the unseen city below might, but for most certainly doesn't, recall the fate of the 'same

burned Indian' named earlier. 'Not seeing he is thought to see/. . . The family combination shelter and fun/Room where all is possible' (ll. 179, 181-82)—a bomb shelter that serves in the interim as a rec' room, masking the threat of nuclear incineration and certainly not prompting an awareness of 'Vietnam charred' at the present moment. Here is failure to see, to perceive the true dimensions of the present crisis.

Much of the final segment of the poem is given over to the observations of that archetypal voyager, the legendary Sinbad, who now materializes among the passengers and flirts 'With playboy accents' with the stewardesses, 'As if he meant it all in fun' (ll. 185, 187); just returned 'from Arab voices' (l. 188), he comes with reassurances that third-world cities are just 'Waiting to catch our baseball' (l. 194), ostensible symbol of American culture but, dropped from an airplane on the landscape below, having much more ominous connotations. His final words warn against 'Les vagues barbares de l'est' (l. 200)—the barbarian hordes from the East, who need to be sedated by 'Dr. Farges' and 'his syringe' (l. 202) so that true Americanism, represented by the Mount Rushmore monument now passing far below, can prevail. The carved faces are described as 'four Walt Whitmans/Who once entrusted the nation to rafts' (ll. 206-207)—advocates of the American myth-

dream of comradeship represented not only by Whitman but by the vision of Jim and Huck, black and white, floating down the Mississippi in imagined harmony far different from current unrest. In contrast to this bland vision the presidents are conceived as mumbling 'stone ideas' (l. 209), as if under ether, about a 'mildly toxic invention [which] can harm none/But the enemy' (ll. 213-14), a slight modification of what was evidently a newspaper headline Merton quoted in his journal in connection with the death of thousands of sheep in Utah due to nerve gas from an army testing ground: 'New secret poison gas harms no one but the enemy.'¹⁵ So much for the 'Merveilles! Secrets!' (l. 215) revealed at the quintessential American shrine. It remains only for the speaker to comment that if there is any unity to be experienced on the plane it is as 'a unanimous supermarket of beliefs' (l. 217) where one simply picks and chooses whatever spiritual 'product' is most attractive—perhaps whatever is provided with the most elaborate 'cellophane' packaging—and where the 'one only motto' (l. 218) is a vapid and potentially dangerous eclecticism, a value system where nothing is truly valued more than anything else: 'WHY NOT TRY EVERYTHING?' (l. 220). With this extremely problematic advice, this parody of a genuine sympathetic engagement with other cultures, 'Day Six' comes to a close.

The inadequacy of such a shallow attitude is immediately evident in the rest of the canto. 'At This Precise Moment of History'¹⁶ uses the congressional candidacy of former child star Shirley Temple, who is described first as a child sitting on President Roosevelt's knee and then, by association, as a kind of ventriloquist's dummy mouthing dangerous platitudes about the Vietnam conflict first voiced by then-Governor Ronald Reagan, to epitomize the sorry state of political discourse at a moment of supreme crisis.

From this contemporary situation the final two sections of the poem¹⁷ look back to the last major struggle of Native Americans for spiritual and cultural independence, the 'Ghost Dance' movement of the late nineteenth century, when visionaries predicted a return of the dead as a result of the ecstatic dancing of their descendants. The ensuing result was first described in terms of genuine equality: 'No distinction would exist any more between races' (#7). The final words of this section, and thus of the poem as a whole, express the disillusion of a failed movement, and once again the triumph of the dominant culture: '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' (#31).

Thus *Lograire* seems to end on a pessimistic note, an awakening from a vision of unity, justice and

equality to the harsh reality of alienation and oppression. While in one sense this is certainly accurate, as Merton refuses to conceal the victims' sufferings or palliate the oppressors' offenses, or to indulge in a facile fantasy of human progress, part of the point of the poem's structure is that it is not linear, that no point on this moral compass is uniquely privileged, that it is up to the reader to choose, not how the story is to end but how it is to continue beyond the confines of the poem: whether with 'a unanimous supermarket of beliefs' or with a genuine sharing of 'Christ-wheat,' 'Buddha rice,' 'Square Maize.' The challenge he posed remains as pertinent today as when he made it on 'day six' at O'Hare and in the air overlooking America.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals*, vol. 7: 1967-1968, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), p.94.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969) pp.119-26. For a general overview of the poem, see Patrick F. O'Connell, 'The Geography of Lograire,' in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), pp.169-74.
3. See Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), especially pp.10-11, 362; see

also the 'Freedom Song' entitled 'All the Way Down,' in Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp.669-70.

4. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), p.29.

5. *Ashtavakra Gita*, trans. Hari Prasad Shastri (1949; London: Shanti Sadan, 1961), p.37 (17.18), which reads: '... vacuity (the mind being filled with Atman alone), is not concerned ...' For a fine contemporary translation see *The Heart of Awareness: A Translation of the Ashtavakra Gita*, trans. Thomas Byrom (Boston: Shambhala, 1990). In his foreword to the latter work, J. L. Brockington points out that Ash-tavakra is a deformed seer who plays a minor role in the Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*. The *Gita* (or 'Song,' a title borrowed from the more famous *Bhagavad Gita*) is presented as a dialogue between Ashtavakra and his pupil Janaka, but in fact neither the dialogue form nor the characters themselves play a significant part in the teaching of the work, which is strongly dependent on the *advaita* (non-dualistic) philosophy of Shankara (eighth century), so that the work probably dates either from shortly after the time of Shankara or from the later revival of his teaching in the fourteenth century (pp.ix-xvi; see also Byrom's Introduction, p.xxiii).

6. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p.82.

7. *ibid.*, pp.91, 93.

8. *Ashtavakra Gita*, p.38 (17.19), which reads: 'Though appearing to act, in fact he does not engage in action.'

9. *The Geography of Lograire*, pp.43-60.

10. *Ashtavakra Gita*, p.40 (18.5), which reads: 'It is not distant, nor is it subject to attainment (being ever attained).'

11. *ibid.*, p.40 (18.8), which reads: '... finally realised that ... free from desires, ...'

12. *ibid.*, p.41 (18.15).

13. *ibid.*, p.41 (18.13).

14. *ibid.*, p.41 (18.15); this same line had been quoted by Merton in his journal entry for May 6: see n. 1 above.

15. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p.95.

16. *The Geography of Lograire*, pp.127-30.

17. *ibid.*, pp.131-37.

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