

Glimpses of Merton's Abiding Frenchness in *The Geography of Lograire*

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Almost two decades ago Robert Daggy persuasively argued for 'Merton's French-ness' as 'embedded at the center of his being'.¹ Largely neglected by Merton scholars, Daggy's thesis sheds light on the ongoing influence of the French intellectual milieu on Merton's poetic development. It is obvious that, born in the French Pyrenees to Anglo-American parents and bilingual in the first years of his life, the boy was shaped by the cultural codes inscribed in both languages of his childhood: English and French.

After a few years of an American interlude, the ten year old returned to France, in due course was enrolled at Lycée Ingres at Montauban, became steeped in the study of the history and rich literary tradition of that country, and even started writing novels in French.² This in-depth experience prepared him for the challenge of reading modern languages at Cambridge, where he studied for a year, between 1933 and 1934. Merton's interest in French literature continued during his brief but eventful career as a New York intellectual between 1935 and 1941, and resurfaced in his Gethsemani years, to reach an apex in the late 1960s.

As a matter of considerable interest, while at Gethsemani Merton not only read and translated French poetry; he also wrote some. As Daggy points out, three out of the four French poems written by Merton date from the same year – 1966. These are: 'Le Secret,' 'Cable #35' from *Cables to the Ace* and 'Les Cinque Vierges'. Having withdrawn to a hermitage, 'in which the mental and physical secrets of his own being filled his thinking',³ Merton was free to mine his

deepest self in spontaneously written poetry (or anti-poetry), full of wordplay and fun.⁴ Daggy links these French-language poetic experiments with the work of French Symbolists and their 20th-century successor, surrealist René Char. Indeed, in the summer of 1966 Merton was busy reading and translating poems written by the latter and confessed to a writer friend that the experimental poetry of *Cables to the Ace* was a 'Char-ish French verse'.⁵ It is tempting to assume that exploring the surrealist images arising in dreams and other eclipsed states of consciousness, and writing mostly free-flowing, spontaneous verse from 1966 on,⁶ Merton was, to all intents and purposes, exploring his deepest, francophone self, which could only be accessed through the most intimate code of his childhood – that of the French language. As Daggy puts it, 'in his last years Merton was on "a David Copperfield sort of trip," mining his past to make his present explicable'. It is in this context that the critic relates the 'French cable [...] embedded near the center' of the autobiographical *Cables to the Ace* to Merton's French-ness 'embedded at the center of his being'.⁷ I wish to extend Daggy's observation to *Lograire*, that ultimate autobiography and poetic legacy of Thomas Merton, which, although written in English, is set in an imaginary country named after the French medieval poet and vagabond François Villon, also known as François Des Loges – a stylistic innovator, important inspiration for the French symbolist movement and, last but not least, an influence on Merton's most intimate, francophone self.

Lograire's first canto, 'South', starts with an untitled poem which begins with the question: 'Will a narrow lane save Cain?'⁸ The rest of the poem, and the major part of the whole epic, is a complex meditation on fraternal rivalry, fratricide, and the poetics of the impossible⁹ in the form of forgiveness and salvation. This theme emerges in diverse registers and combinations. The Biblical story of Abel and Cain, interwoven with references to the Paschal Lamb, provides an archetypal framework for the interpretation of slavery, colonial domination, and other types of oppression in the human

family. Parenthetically, it also serves as a correlate of a more personal story of a fraught fraternal relationship, that between Tom and his younger brother John Paul.¹⁰ The poem ends with an enigmatically affirmative statement: 'One narrow lane saved Lamb's friend Paschal Cain'.¹¹ The impossible has happened; the sinner has been pardoned; what is more surprising, however, the criminal and the victim merge in the paradoxical figure of a 'Paschal Cain'.

The pattern of recidivist criminal behaviour always followed by narrow escapes and most unlikely acts of forgiveness emerges as a basic design governing Merton's *Lograire*, the country named after the Sorbonne-educated criminal and poet. 'Before he was twenty he had committed all seven of the deadly sins much belabored by theologians of the day'¹²: this is how Austin E. Fife introduces François Villon/Des Loges (1431–1463) in his lecture. Arrested for the first time for mortally wounding a priest, Villon was forgiven by the victim and released from prison. He joined a criminal organization, wandered from place to place, was imprisoned several times for minor crimes, and sought the artistic patronage of Charles of Orleans. His love of freedom and unrestricted pleasure prevailed, though, and Villon relapsed into his old, criminal lifestyle. Having robbed a Marian shrine, he was sentenced to the gibbets and saved once again by the royal pardon. In 1462 Villon was finally to be hanged but the sentence was commuted to banishment from Paris at the very last minute. This was a narrow escape indeed and the 34-year-old poet left the city never to be heard of again. In all probability he died shortly afterward.

His major poetic work, *Le Grand Testament*, was written in the years 1461–1462 and finished just before his disappearance. Ironically, Merton's poetic testament, *The Geography of Lograire*, was ready for publication before his own mysterious 'disappearance' in Bangkok. What is more, consisting of 20 independent poems, Villon's *Grand Testament* adopts the convention of the last will in which the author reviews his entire dissolute life, in much the same way as Merton reexamines his in *Lograire* – his complex, four-canto poetic epic. The

closing poem in the Frenchman's work, 'The Epitaph of Villon', was written in the shadow of death, before the pardon arrived. Testifying to the reprobate's trust in Christ's mercy, this epitaph is saturated with the consciousness of inevitable death. A humble prayer to God and fellow humans for forgiveness, it is also, according to Austin, 'a monument to all eternity that François Villon, the murderer and thief, had experienced the pity of human life as had few others'.¹³ This is exactly how Merton must have felt at the time of his religious conversion. In the opening lines of his classic autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the monk claims to have been 'the prisoner of [his] own violence and [his] own selfishness, in the image of the world into which [he] was born'.¹⁴ There is no doubt a fearful symmetry between the lives of Villon and Merton, the former being what the latter might have remained, had he not discovered Christ.

Both poets were born in apocalyptic times. In 1431 France was still in the throes of the Hundred Years' War, ravaged by English incursions and the Black Death of half a century before, ruined economically and licking its political wounds. It was in that year that Joan of Arc was executed for heresy and François Villon was born. Having lost his father, he was brought up and educated by a professor of canon law, Guillaume de Villon. A brilliant student, François nevertheless preferred the tavern and his profligate drinking companions to graduating from university. As for Merton, he first saw the world during the Great War, which was taking an astounding death toll and revealing the moribund condition of western civilization. Producing an entire lost generation, the memory of WWI was a trauma to be drowned in hectic pursuit of sensual appetites and desires, not infrequently culminating in criminal behaviour. The paganism and animal energy of the jazz age in America and the escalation of organized crime in the era of prohibition completed the transformation of the boy who, at 16, after his father's death, 'became the complete twentieth century man'. *The Seven Storey Mountain* continues: 'I now belonged to the world in which I lived. I became a true citizen of my own disgusting

century: the century of poison gas and atomic bombs. A man living on the doorsill of the Apocalypse, a man with veins full of poison, living in death'.¹⁵ Impressed by the cosmopolitan lifestyle of his legal guardian, a wealthy Harley Street specialist, the youth was growing in vanity and corruption. His one-year university career in Cambridge was marked by an absolute indulgence of his appetites. Years later, he was to see that period of his life as 'the crucifixion of Christ'.¹⁶ The entwined themes of sexual desire, fall, and disgrace, replayed in a variety of registers within Merton's ultimate autobiography *The Geography of Lograire* would correlate with the 'fall' of Merton's Cambridge episode, resulting in his fathering of an illegitimate child.

Apart from depicting an analogical life story, Merton's poetic testament also shares with Villon's the use of almost hermetic allusions to real people, places, and events. These allusions continue to puzzle scholars and, more worryingly, discourage readers from engaging both texts. Incorporating into their poetry an intimate knowledge of subcultures and the criminal underworld – of medieval France and the United States of America in the 1920s–1930s respectively – both poets highlight the depth of their immersion in the decadent culture of their times. Additionally, they both creatively destabilize literary conventions and delight in puns and wordplay. While the medieval poet breathed new life into the stale poetry of France, Thomas Merton adapted the avant-garde idiom to breathe new life into American verse of the 1960s.

It is clear that the poetic idiom of *Lograire* constitutes a break with the metaphysical tradition Merton followed in his more famous and more predictable early verses. Abandoning theological or religious master narratives, he now took inspiration from the structuralist revolution in linguistics and cultural studies. 'The tactic is on the whole that of an urbane structuralism', announces the author in the introduction to his epic.¹⁷ The urbane structuralism Merton attempted to adhere to as a procedural framework for *Lograire* best exemplifies his indebtedness to and an ongoing resonance with the

French poetic and intellectual tradition of his own time. Hiding his religious party card, as it were, Merton constructs his *opus magnum*, his poetic testament, on explicitly secular foundations laid out by 20th-century French structuralists such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, or Claude Lévy-Strauss.

Indeed, his attempt to deploy the structuralist tactic in his new poetry was hugely influenced by Claude Lévy-Strauss, as attested by Merton's fascinating struggle with the founder of structural anthropology recorded in the pages of his working notebook. The *Cargo* Notebook attests to Merton's effort to reconcile the 'totemic thinking' of the new anthropology – with its interest in a-historical structures and relations (syntax), plus the hermeneutic of Paul Ricoeur – as well as the French philosopher's 'historic event thinking' rich in content (semantics). On 12 October 1967 Merton wonders: 'If the analogy of language gives key to understanding of parental systems, will it also give key to art, religion and *all* cultural phenomena?'¹⁸ The answer, in the form of *The Geography of Lograire*, is, to the best of my understanding, far from absolute confirmation.

Another French thinker shaping Merton's poetic imagination at the time he was working on *Lograire* was Maurice Merleau-Ponty with his theory of the corporeality of consciousness. A friend of Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévy-Strauss, and Ferdinand de Saussure, in the last stage of his career Merleau-Ponty applied their structuralist and linguistic ideas to critique the notion of a pre-reflective cogito. All thought is situational, he believed, and all thinking is embodied thinking. On the threshold of his jubilee year, Merton wrote: 'My ideas are always changing, always moving around one center, always seeing the center from somewhere else. I will always be accused of inconsistency', as he admits, not without irony, 'and will no longer be there to hear the accusation'.¹⁹ This state of perpetual becoming of a human subject seen as inextricably bound with the whole of reality and always already defined by the language s/he uses was to receive an impressive treatment in Merton's *Lograire*.

The concept of a human as an *être parlant*, or a speaking subject, is a direct borrowing from another French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, author of *The Poetics of Space*, which Merton started reading at the end of September 1967. Although he found much of the material obvious or shallow, he was impressed by Bachelard's attempt to develop a phenomenology of imagination that would, at the same time, be the 'phenomenology of language'.²⁰ The full extent of Merton's and his new poem's indebtedness to Bachelard can be glimpsed in the former's working notes dated 30 September 1967. Firstly, Merton finds Bachelard's idea of a human being as *être parlant* congenial with the logos of Christian anthropology; secondly, the Frenchman's belief that in poetry the function of the unreal (*fonction de l'irréel*) is to break the automatism of language is welcomed as 'a real discovery.' 'This is the exact point' enthuses Merton, '[a]nd just what I am grasping for in *The Geography of Lograire*.'²¹

At this point it becomes clear that Merton's major objective in *Lograire* was an attempt to escape from his accustomed writing style as no longer adequate to deal with the changed idea of himself and his world, and, as a corollary, to refresh the perception of reality by the use of defamiliarizing tactics, such as surrealism. For the latter, Merton was prepared by his familiarity with French poetry; the former was the fruit of his engagement with contemporary French criticism. It is necessary, however, to understand that there is a clear line of continuity between those two explicitly French phenomena working on the poetic imagination of the author of *Lograire*: between symbolism as a movement epitomized by the 'pure poetry' of Stéphane Mallarmé (himself an heir to the poetic tradition established by Villon) on the one hand and 20th-century criticism and theory on the other. Critic and translator Barbara Johnson goes to the heart of the matter in her note to the English-language edition of Mallarmé's poetry:

It was largely by learning the lesson of Mallarmé that critics like Roland Barthes came to speak of 'the death

of the author' in the making of literature. Rather than seeing the text as the emanation of an individual author's intentions, structuralists and deconstructors followed the paths and patterns of the linguistic signifier, paying new attention to syntax, spacing, intertextuality, sound, semantics, etymology, and even individual letters. The theoretical styles of Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and especially Jacques Lacan also owe a great deal to Mallarmé's 'critical poem'.²²

In his famous book *Writing Degree Zero*, reviewed by Merton in 1968 (at the time when he was working on *Lograire*), Roland Barthes advocated a colourless mode of writing as an escape from the tyranny of style. Inspired by Albert Camus's 'blank' writing, the critic would also find examples of a similar 'zero' style in such poets as Mallarmé. Their poetry was to Barthes a declaration of liberation from the necessity to communicate meanings and he rejoiced in their attention to the word as an object. Steve Evans, author of 'After a Fashion: Reading Roland Barthes Today,' comments:

By becoming an 'absolute object,' the supreme lexeme of modern poetry – pure paradigm shorn of all syntagmatic bonds – enters the real on its own terms; it is a thing among things, indifferent to humanity and to history (or more carefully put: irreducible to them).²³

Recognizing Barthes as 'one of the most articulate and important literary critics writing today in any language',²⁴ the French Lycée-trained Merton unmistakably identified the revolutionary character of Barthes' structuralist theory to subvert the accepted categories of reading and writing. At the time when Merton's own style was becoming almost routinely conventional, he made attempts to break free from the self-fabricated image of an articulate spiritual author

who knew how to save the world and adopted the much humbler pose of a scribe within a 'writerly' text which foregrounds the linguistic sign and the endless play of substitution of linguistic signifiers. A randomly chosen fragment of *Lograire* illustrates the procedure. The second poem in the 'South' canto begins:

Road of red wood racer eats field. Green breakaway go cars light lanes. A robber lends the money. Aluminum gates grand open. Riverchange alongside lights. Mist downstairs. Riverhouse brown: green riverrace. Mist down stairs. Mist lights. The getaway!²⁵

This fragment's hypnotizing rhythm, the absence of any clear 'message', and the migration of words from one syntactic category to another illustrate how it is language, rather than the author, that speaks in this passage. Additionally, in its playful punning on the word river ('riverchange', 'riverhouse', 'riverrace'), the passage evokes the beginning of one of the most famous works of 20th-century literature: James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*: 'riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs'.²⁶ Naturally, this evocation is not accidental, for Merton's *Lograire* is heavily indebted to *Finnegans Wake*. More to the point, however, in the 1960s Parisian critics and philosophers were using Joyce as an illustration of the emerging theory of the subject and the (semiotic) text. Rather than explicate the 'unreadable' chapters of his experimental works as traditional literary scholarship would do, they followed the rifts, ruptures, and aporias within Joycean writing, unwove the strands of the textual fabric, and attended to the ways the semiotic text decentered the subject and deconstructed representation. Rediscovering Samuel Beckett's insightful remark that Joyce's writing was 'not about something' but '*that something itself*',²⁷ Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Aubert, André

Topia – to name but a few – attended to its materiality, its rhetoric and stylistic shifts, its self-referentiality and unmasterable multiplicity. This is precisely what Merton is interested in in the more hermetic parts of *Lograire* (e.g. in ‘Queen’s Tunnel’).

This brief overview would be incomplete without a mention of yet another name. In May 1967 Merton writes: ‘Finished Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* – a really remarkable book. Not sure that I have got more than a tenth of it. The material itself very rich, and his own handling of it subtle and masterly’.²⁸ In a conference to novices he was giving the same year Merton enthused that it was ‘one of the most important books I’ve read this year.’²⁹ Published in 1961 and translated into English in 1965, *Madness and Civilization* established Michel Foucault’s reputation among the French intellectuals, mostly associated with the structuralist label, who came to prominence in the 1960s. Foucault’s study is an early articulation of the archaeology of knowledge as a method of writing history, and it examines the historical transformations of the concept of madness since the Renaissance (when mad persons were believed to be divinely inspired), through the Classical Age (madness considered as unreason and divorce from nature), to the modern epoch (madness as illness in need of psychiatric treatment). Foucault attributes this change of the term’s meaning to different unconscious assumptions, which he calls *epistemes* or discursive formations, governing the production of knowledge in a given epoch. Affected by an epoch’s dominant *episteme*, human sciences express ‘ethical and political commitments of a particular society’³⁰ rather than the timeless, objective truths they claim to be formulating. Dismantling the myth of scientific objectivity, Foucault simultaneously reclaims the dimension of the irrational in a range of human practices and displaces the primacy of the subject of transcendental philosophy.

Moreover, Foucault’s first book, the book Merton was so impressed by, already contains an outline of the French intellectual’s life-long preoccupation with such themes as the modern surveillance society which disciplines and ‘normalizes’ the deviant, and the operations of

power. In the 1960s Foucault was famous for his announcement of the ‘death of man’, which he linked to the death of God first proclaimed by Nietzsche in 1882. Since 1966, the publication of *Les Mots et les Choses* (the English translation, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, came out in 1970), Foucault started devoting more space to language and the critique of representation. Imagining a conversation between Nietzsche, who famously denounced the pretence of language to represent truth,³¹ and the poet Stéphane Mallarmé with his interest in the sound of words rather than their meanings, Foucault writes:

To the Nietzschean question: ‘Who is speaking?’, Mallarmé replies ... by saying that what is speaking is, in its solitude, in its fragile vibration, in its nothingness, the word itself – not the meaning of the word, but its enigmatic and precarious being’.³²

In other words, it is language itself that speaks.³³

Merton did not, in all probability, manage to read *The Order of Things*, but he will have got the wind of those ideas from *Madness and Civilization* and his other readings in Foucault³⁴ and other structuralists. Above all, however, he knew his French symbolist and surrealist poets. When in 1966 he struggled with René Char’s poetry’s ‘lack of an essential dimension, a central core a real ground’, he tellingly qualified that remark in a truly postmodern manner by admitting, realistically: ‘we are no longer in the age of Cathedrals’.³⁵ Indeed, postmodernism as an epoch in cultural history is marked by distrust of overarching systems and towering intellectual constructions laying arrogant claims to completeness. John D. Caputo sums up this changed epistemological framework in the following rhetorical question: ‘are not the postmodernists following the lead of God, who in deconstructing the tower [of Babel] clearly favors a multiplicity

of languages, frameworks, paradigms, perspective, angles?³⁶ Merton's *Lograire* reflects this multiplicity with a vengeance.

Notes

1. Robert Daggy, 'HurlyBurly Secrets: A Reflection on Thomas Merton's French Poems', *The Merton Seasonal*, Vol. 21, 2, Summer 1996, p.23.
2. See Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), p.33.
3. *ibid.*, p.23.
4. The remaining poem, 'Je Crois en l'Amour', had been published in Merton's 1949 book of poetry *Tears of Blind Lions*. The title derives from the words of the French novelist Léon Bloy and highlights the difficulty of articulating the religious experience. The epigram opening the collection of Merton's poetry reads: 'When those who love God try to talk about him, their words are blind lions looking for springs in the desert'. The entire poetry collection was dedicated to Bloy's and Merton's friend, the French Neo-Scholastic philosopher Jacques Maritain.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. Christine Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993, p.250.
6. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968) and *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969).
7. 'HurlyBurly Secrets: A Reflection on Thomas Merton's French Poems', p.23.
8. *The Geography of Lograire*, p.9.
9. I borrow this concept from John D. Caputo, who argues that it is the poetics of the impossible that rules God's Kingdom. In contrast to the strong force of theology, the poetics of the impossible, best illustrated by the Sermon on the Mount, 'poses the possibility of something life-transforming'. John Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), p.104.
10. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton recollects with poignancy the five-year-old John Paul who wanted desperately to join Tom's 'adult' games and was chased away with stones. Merton calls this refusal of disinterested love 'the pattern and prototype of all sin.' Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Garden City, 1951), p.23.
11. *The Geography of Lograire*, p.11.
12. Austin E. Fife, *The Life and Poetry of Francois Villon* (USU Faculty Honor Lectures. Paper 20. 1967 [http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/honor_lectures/20]), p.7.
13. *ibid.*, p.31.
14. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.3.
15. *ibid.*, p.81.
16. *ibid.*, p.121.
17. *The Geography of Lograire*, p.2.
18. Thomas Merton, *Cargo*. Working Notebook 30, September–November 1967, Archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Kentucky.
19. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 5, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), p.67.
20. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol 6, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), p.295.
21. *Cargo*. Working Notebook 30, p.16.
22. Barbara Johnson, 'Translator's Note' to Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.301.
23. Steve Evans, 'After a Fashion: Reading Roland Barthes Today', in *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, February/March 2000, pp.9–12 [Third Factory, Notes to Poetry 2009, thirdfactory.net, online. Date of Access: 10 September 2010].
24. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1985), p.140.
25. *The Geography of Lograire*, p.12.
26. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939) [finwake.com, online. Date of access: 25 June 2014].
27. Samuel Beckett, 'Dante ... Bruno.Vico ... Joyce', in *Our Examination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (Paris: Shakespeare & Co, 1929). Quoted in *Post-structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French*, eds Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.6.
28. *Learning to Love*, p.238.
29. Thomas Merton, 'Madness and Civilization by Michel Foucault,' Tape 214-Tr-08, 1967/05/19. Archival materials, Bellarmine University, Kentucky.
30. Gary Gutting, 'Michel Foucault,' in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2013 edn, ed. Edward N. Zalta [plato.stanford.edu online. Accessed: 25 June 2014].
31. 'Truth is a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation and decoration ... ; truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors which have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigour.' Frederic Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense', in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*,

- eds Ronald Spiers and Raymond Geuss, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.146.
32. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London & New York: Rutledge, 2004), p.333.
33. Foucault is repeating the famous claim made before him by Lacan and Heidegger that 'language speaks man'.
34. We know that in 1968 he read two articles by Foucault published in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain. Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 7, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco:HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), p.133, ftn. 1.
35. *Learning to Love*, p.144.
36. John D. Caputo, *Philosophy and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), p.50.

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