



**DIÁLOGOS,
PUENTES,
ENCUENTROS:**

La vigencia de

*Thomas
Hector*

MARCELA MARÍA RAGGIO

Editora

Díálogos, puentes, encuentros:
la vigencia de Thomas Merton



Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad Nacional de Cuyo. Mendoza, Argentina.

<https://fyl.uncuyo.edu.ar/edifyl>

Centro Universitario - Mendoza (5500) - Casilla de Correo 345 – Provincia de Mendoza

Diseño gráfico: Clara Luz Muñiz · Asistente de maquetación: Juan Marcos Barocchi

Diseño de tapa: Macarena Saravia

Foto de Thomas Merton y firma: copyright del Thomas Merton Center en la Universidad de Bellarmine. Usadas con permiso. / Photograph of Thomas Merton and signature copyright the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University. Used with Permission*.

Diálogos, puentes, encuentros : la vigencia de Thomas Merton /
Marcela Raggio ...

[et al.] ; Editado por Marcela Raggio. - 1a ed - Mendoza :

Facultad de Filosofía y

Letras de la Universidad Nacional de Cuyo, 2024.

Libro digital, PDF

Archivo Digital: descarga

ISBN 978-950-774-426-6

1. Literatura Estadounidense. 2. Traducción. 3. Multilingüismo. I.

Raggio, Marcela, ed.

CDD 810.9

La responsabilidad por las opiniones emitidas en los artículos corresponde exclusivamente a los autores.



Se permite la reproducción de los textos siempre y cuando se cite la fuente. Esta obra está bajo una [Licencia Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/). Usted es libre de: copiar y redistribuir el material en cualquier medio o formato; adaptar, transformar y construir a partir del material citando la fuente. Bajo los siguientes términos:

Atribución —debe dar crédito de manera adecuada, brindar un enlace a la licencia, e indicar si se han realizado cambios. Puede hacerlo en cualquier forma razonable, pero no de forma tal que sugiera que usted o su uso tienen el apoyo de la licenciante. **NoComercial** —no puede hacer uso del material con propósitos comerciales. **CompartirIgual** — Si remezcla, transforma o crea a partir del material, debe distribuir su contribución bajo la misma licencia del original. No hay restricciones adicionales — No puede aplicar términos legales ni medidas tecnológicas que restrinjan legalmente a otras a hacer cualquier uso permitido por la licencia. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Este material se publica a través del SID (Sistema Integrado de Documentación), que constituye el repositorio digital de la Universidad Nacional de Cuyo (Mendoza): <http://bdigital.uncu.edu.ar>.

Nuestro repositorio digital institucional forma parte del SNRD (Sistema Nacional de Repositorios Digitales) <http://repositorios.mincyt.gov.ar/>, enmarcado en la leyes argentinas: Ley N° 25.467, Ley N° 26.899, Resolución N° 253 del 27 de diciembre de 2002 de la entonces SECRETARÍA DE CIENCIA, TECNOLOGÍA E INNOVACIÓN PRODUCTIVA, Resoluciones del MINISTERIO DE CIENCIA, TECNOLOGÍA E INNOVACIÓN PRODUCTIVA N° 545 del 10 de septiembre del 2008, N° 469 del 17 de mayo de 2011, N° 622 del 14 de septiembre de 2010 y N° 438 del 29 de junio de 2010, que en conjunto establecen y regulan el acceso abierto (libre y gratuito) a la literatura científica, fomentando su libre disponibilidad en Internet y permitiendo a cualquier usuario su lectura, descarga, copia, impresión, distribución u otro uso legal de la misma, sin barrera financiera [de cualquier tipo]. De la misma manera, los editores no tendrán derecho a cobrar por la distribución del material. La única restricción sobre la distribución y reproducción es dar al autor el control moral sobre la integridad de su trabajo y el derecho a ser adecuadamente reconocido y citado.

DIÁLOGOS,
PUENTES,
ENCUENTROS:

La vigencia de

Thomas
Nector

Marcela Raggio (editora)



UNCUYO
UNIVERSIDAD
NACIONAL DE CUYO



FACULTAD DE
FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS

edifyl

Índice

Palabras preliminares.....	7
<i>Foreword</i>	10
Parte I	
<i>Beholding Paradise: Thomas Merton's Encounter with Zen and Photography</i>	
Paul Pearson.....	17
Thomas Merton: el abismo de la soledad y la “madurez social del amor”	
Fernando Beltrán Llavador.....	29
<i>Thomas Merton: the Abyss of Solitude and the “Social Maturing of Love”</i>	
Fernando Beltrán Llavador.....	51
<i>A Close Reading of Two Merton Poems: For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943’ & ‘Grace’s House</i>	
Michael Anthony Woodward	73
El concepto de “Dao” en <i>The Way of Chuang Tzu</i> de Thomas Merton	
Tzu Ying Lee.....	87

<i>Freedom, Dialogue, and Contemplation: Thomas Merton and the New Integralism</i>	
David Golemboski	99
<i>The Role of Victoria Ocampo in Thomas Merton’s Engagement with Global Intellectuals</i>	
Mark Meade	117
<i>Madre de América: las raíces latinoamericanas de Hagia Sophia</i>	
María Helena Barrera-Agarwal.....	133
<i>Madre de América: The Latin American Roots of Hagia Sophia</i>	
María Helena Barrera-Agarwal.....	149
<i>Heart Speaks To Heart: How Merton’s ‘Apostolate of Friendship’ Continues to Inspire</i>	
Brother Paul Quenon y Judith Valente.....	163

Palabras preliminares

El 10 de diciembre de 1968 muere en Bangkok, Tailandia, Thomas Merton. A los 53 años de edad, Merton se había convertido no solamente en un monje de la orden cisterciense conocido por sus escritos místicos, sino sobre todo por su involucramiento en los movimientos por la paz contra la Guerra de Vietnam y la carrera armamentista, por su apoyo a la lucha afroamericana por los derechos civiles en Estados Unidos, por su activa participación en el diálogo ecuménico y por su apertura a distintas tradiciones culturales, religiosas y literarias, en busca de alternativas para el diálogo y la paz en el mundo.

En 2018 se llevaron a cabo en la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad Nacional de Cuyo las Primeras Jornadas en Homenaje a Thomas Merton, que pusieron foco en su figura de traductor y responsable del diálogo entre distintas tradiciones, situándonos en el Sur de Latinoamérica para leer, estudiar y acercarnos a Merton.

En 2021, en un mundo cambiado por la pandemia de covid-19, se realizó la segunda edición de las Jornadas, que se propuso abordar a Merton en cuatro facetas: poeta/traductor, místico, artista/fotógrafo e intelectual comprometido con el mundo en que vivió. Dado que la figura y la obra de Merton tienen tantas aristas y ponen de relieve tantos intereses del autor, los estudios mertonianos pueden abordarse desde una multiplicidad de perspectivas, que han quedado plasmadas en estas páginas. El presente libro reúne parte de los trabajos presentados en las Segundas Jornadas en Homenaje a Thomas Merton, donde los autores abordaron al escritor y místico trapense desde diversos puntos de vista, y en diálogo con otros intelectuales, artistas y religiosos de su época.

Si repasamos los títulos de cada capítulo que compone este volumen, predominan las preposiciones *con* y *entre*, y la conjunción *y*. Es que en el legado de Merton se tienden puentes constantemente, *entre* lenguas, religiones, países, personas, modos de comunicación y artes.

Es en ese espíritu de encuentro que en septiembre de 2021 nos reunimos desde seis países (Argentina, Brasil, Ecuador, Estados Unidos, España y Reino Unido), y en tres idiomas diferentes (español, portugués e inglés),

buscando que el plurilingüismo y las zonas horarias múltiples en que se desarrollaron las Jornadas pusieran en juego el espíritu mertoniano, su esencia variada, curiosa, entusiasta por escuchar y conocer al Otro.

Conviene hacer dos aclaraciones sobre el contenido de este libro. En primer término, acerca del modo en que se han agrupado los capítulos. La Primera Parte reúne los trabajos vinculados con el misticismo de Merton, que dadas las características polifacéticas de nuestro autor, se abre a su vez en su interés por la fotografía, en “Beholding Paradise”, donde Paul Pearson presenta la fotografía zen de Merton. En esta Parte se incluye también “Abismo de soledad”, escrito por Fernando Beltrán Llavador, quien estudia la aparente paradoja mertoniana de la soledad como elemento vital para la transformación social. La poesía es inseparable de la mística en Merton, como lo demuestran dos capítulos más: “A Close Reading of Two Merton Poems”, de Michael Woodward y “El concepto de Dao en *The Way of Chuang Tzu*”, por Tzu Ying Lee. El estudio de Lee pone de manifiesto otro rasgo de Merton, su interés genuino por otras lenguas, culturas y tradiciones religiosas.

La Segunda Parte del libro fluye desde esa apreciación de la diversidad en relación con el misticismo, hacia otras áreas en las que Merton también se comprometió con sus semejantes. David Golemboski escribe sobre las implicancias sociales y políticas del pensamiento de Merton en “Freedom, Dialogue, and Contemplation: Thomas Merton and the New Integralism”. Mark Meade describe el intercambio epistolar con la fundadora de la revista argentina *Sur* en “The Role of Victoria Ocampo in Thomas Merton’s Engagement with Global Intellectuals” y María Barrera Agarwal ahonda en los vínculos de Merton con los latinoamericanos en “Madre de América: las raíces latinoamericanas de *Hagia Sophia*”. Cierra el libro “Heart Speaks To Heart: How Merton’s ‘Apostolate of Friendship’ Continues to Inspire”, de Judith Valente y el Hno. Paul Quenon, quienes traen hasta nuestros días la casi olvidada costumbre del intercambio epistolar como base de la amistad, tal como lo fuera para el propio Thomas Merton.

En síntesis, el hilo narrativo que pretendemos dar a la organización del libro gira en torno al diálogo que se expande desde el Merton místico, poeta, fotógrafo contemplativo, corresponsal, e interlocutor en el diálogo ecuménico e intercultural.

Esto nos lleva al segundo punto que queremos destacar. Las Jornadas de las que surgió el libro se llevaron a cabo en Argentina, con participación de especialistas de seis países y dos continentes. Las Jornadas se desarrollaron simultáneamente en tres idiomas, de los cuales se recogieron trabajos en dos de ellos (español e inglés) para este volumen. Por sus orígenes nacionales, por su experticia en ambas lenguas, o por su ámbito laboral, algunos de los autores han preferido que sus trabajos aparezcan solo en inglés, solo en español, o en ambos. Cabe destacar que los capítulos que aparecen en forma bilingüe son obra de sus propios autores en los dos idiomas. No ha habido para el libro ninguna traducción encargada a terceros.

Es esa pluralidad de lenguas, en un encuentro (tanto el de las Jornadas como el de estas páginas) donde cada persona habla en la lengua que siente más cercana, la que vemos como un eco de la actitud de Thomas Merton hacia los idiomas. Si bien la experticia de Merton en varias lenguas era bastante limitada o inexistente, en todo caso no puede negarse su interés por otros idiomas, por sus culturas, y sobre todo su esfuerzo por comunicarse con los demás en las lenguas de cada uno, según sus posibilidades. Mantener los capítulos en el idioma en que se presentaron los trabajos originales en las Jornadas, o presentar en algunos casos, si sus autoras y autores así lo decidieron, en español y en inglés, son maneras de comprender una pequeñísima parte de la complejidad lingüística de las Américas, la herencia de los idiomas europeos, el diálogo entre el Norte y el Sur, entre América y Europa, y entre América y Asia. El libro, con su diversidad lingüística evidente, se vuelve metáfora del diálogo mertoniano, del encuentro fructífero, de salir a buscar al otro y querer encontrarlo, leerlo, comprenderlo, tender puentes y formar una comunidad de aprendizaje.

Marcela Raggio
Diciembre, 2022

Foreword

On December 10th, 1968, Thomas Merton passed away in Thailand. At 53, Merton was not only a Cistercian monk known for his mystic writings; he had become involved in the peace movement against the Vietnam war and armamentism, he supported the Civil Rights Movement, and participated actively in the ecumenical movement, opening up to various religious, cultural and literary traditions, searching for dialogue and peace in the world.

The First Argentine Thomas Merton Conference was held at Cuyo National University in Mendoza, Argentina, in 2018. Positioning ourselves in the south of the Americas, we read, studied, and approached Thomas Merton, focusing on his translator facet, who wished for understanding among different traditions.

Three years later, in 2021, the world had changed after the covid-19 pandemic. The Second Argentine Thomas Merton Conference expanded its scope and aimed at focusing on four of Merton's facets: poet/translator, mystic, artist/photographer, and intellectual involved in the issues of his day. The various aspects and interests of Merton's personality are reflected on the following pages. This book includes works presented at the 2021 Conference, in which authors approached the writer and mystic from several perspectives, in an active dialogue with other intellectuals, artists and religious leaders of the 1960s.

Among the titles of the contributions to this volume, prepositions such as *with* and *between*, and the conjunction *and* predominate. This is because in Merton's legacy, bridges are constantly being built *among/between* religions, countries, people, arts and ways of communicating.

That spirit led scholars from six countries (Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, The United States, Spain, and the United Kingdom) to gather speaking three languages (Spanish, Portuguese, and English), in different time zones, putting at play the Merton's spirit, curious, enthusiastic and respectful of the Other.

There are two aspects of this book that need to be clarified. The first concerns the way in which chapters have been grouped. Part One includes works related to Merton's mysticism which, considering his multifaceted personality, is connected in turn to photography in "Beholding Paradise", where Paul Pearson writes about Merton's Zen photography. This Part also includes Fernando Beltrán Llavador's "Abismo de soledad/Abys of Solitude", a study of the apparently paradoxical consideration of solitude as vital to social transformation in Merton's thought. Poetry is inseparable from mysticism, as shown by Michael Woodward in "A Close Reading of Two Merton Poems", and by Tzu Ying Lee in "El concepto de Dao en *The Way of Chuang Tzu*". Lee's chapter focuses also on Merton's interest in other languages, cultures and religious traditions.

Part Two of the book flows from the appreciation of diversity in relation to mysticism towards other areas in which Merton also showed his engagement with humanity. David Golemboski writes about the social and political implications of Merton's thought in "Freedom, Dialogue, and Contemplation: Thomas Merton and the New Integralism". Mark Meade describes the epistolary exchange between Thomas Merton and Victoria Ocampo in "The Role of Victoria Ocampo in Thomas Merton's Engagement with Global Intellectuals"; and María Barrera Agarwal deepens the study of Merton's connection to Latin Americans in "Madre de América: las raíces latinoamericanas de *Hagia Sophia*". The last chapter, "Heart Speaks To Heart: How Merton's 'Apostolate of Friendship' Continues to Inspire", by Judith Valente and Br. Paul Quenon, recovers the forgotten art of letter-writing as the basis of friendship, just as it was for Thomas Merton himself.

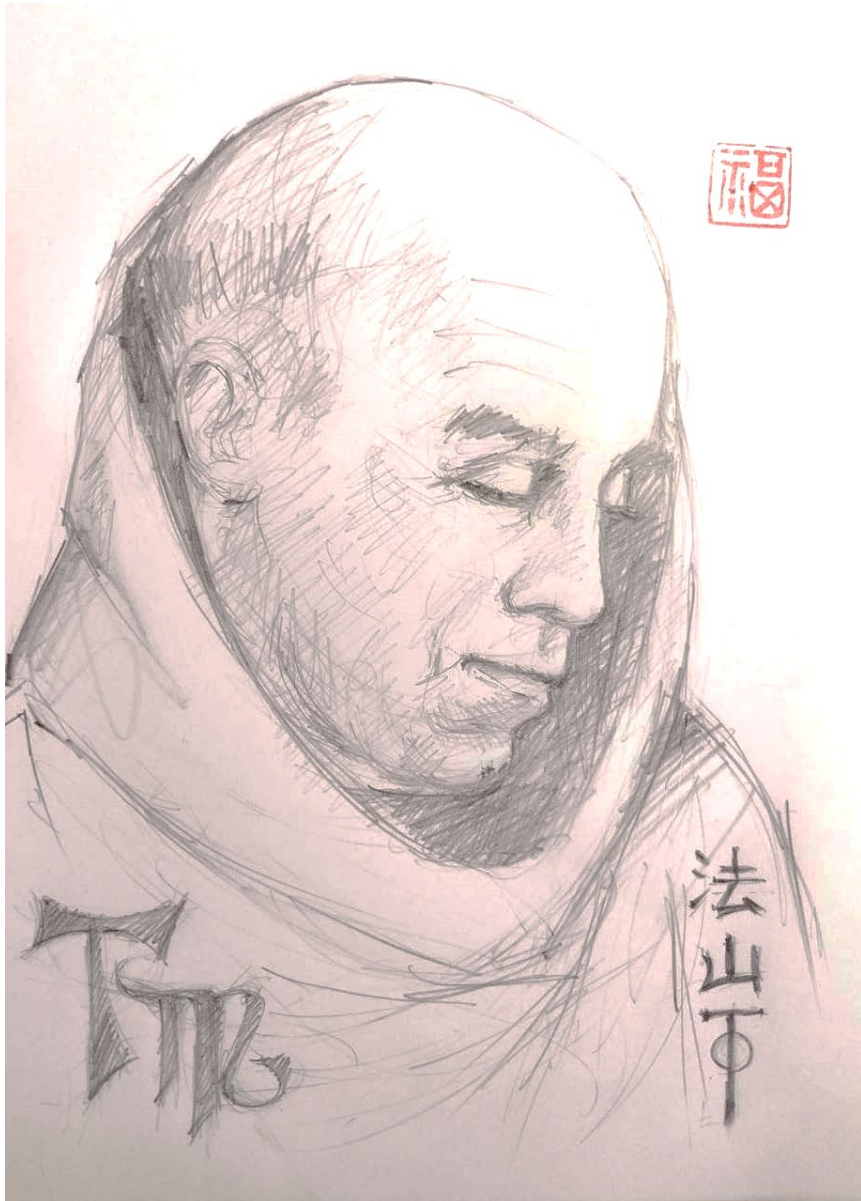
To sum up, the narrative thread we have thought for this book is related to the idea of dialogue which stems from Merton the mystic, poet, contemplative photographer, correspondent and participant in ecumenical and cross-cultural dialogue.

This brings us to the second aspect we would like to highlight. The Conference was hosted in Argentina, with participants from six different countries in two continents. The Conference was held simultaneously in three languages, two of which (Spanish and English) are recovered on these pages. Based on their national and linguistic origin, and or their expertise on one or both languages, and or their working places, some

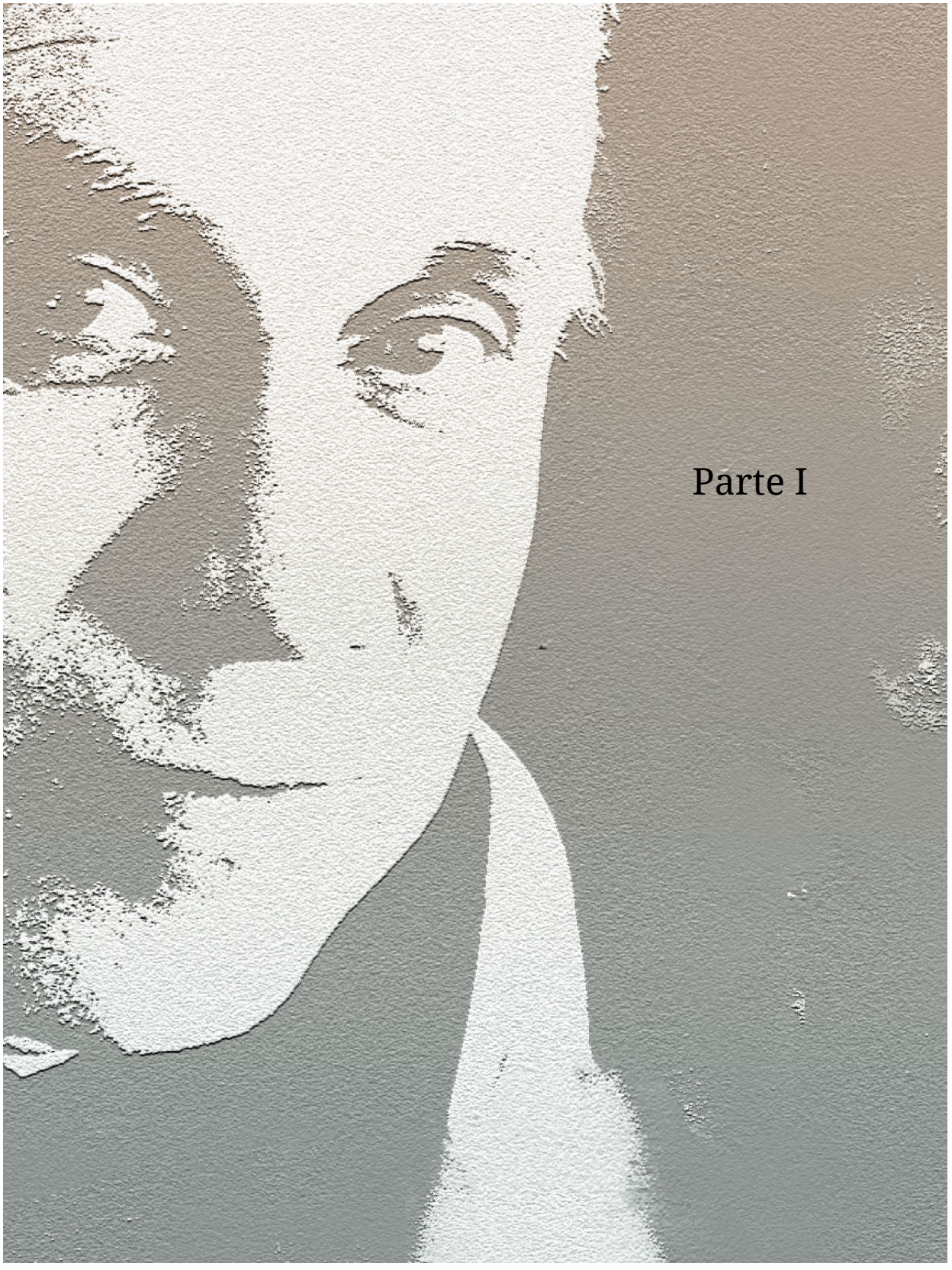
authors have preferred that their contributions appear in Spanish, in English, or in both. Chapters which are published bilingually are the work of their own authors in the two languages. No third translator prepared the versions for this volume.

This bilingualism manifests a gathering (both at the Conference, and on these pages) where each person speaks in the language they feel closest to, in what we perceive as an echo of Merton's attitude towards languages. Even if Merton's expertise in some languages was limited, he nevertheless showed his interest in and his effort for communicating and understanding other languages and cultures. Keeping the chapters in this volume in the language(s) their authors intended them to be or presenting them in a bilingual version of they so desired, is a way of grasping a tiny bit of the rich diversity and linguistic complexity of the Americas, the European and Native heritage, the dialogue between North and South, Americas and Europe, Americas and Asia. This book, with its evident linguistic diversity, becomes a metaphor of Mertonian dialogue, of a fruitful getting together to reach others, wanting to meet them, to read them, to understand them and in so doing, to build bridges that foster a sense of community.

Marcela Raggio
December, 2022



Salinas, E. (2021). *Meditatio pauperis in solitudine*. Obra original del autor para esta publicación.



Parte I

Beholding Paradise: Thomas Merton's Encounter with Zen and Photography

Paul Pearson

Bellarmino University
Thomas Merton Center
United States of America
mpearson@bellarmine.edu

Thomas Merton's stunning photographs of the statues of the Buddha at Polonnaruwa, Ceylon, (now Sri Lanka) are probably the images that spring immediately to mind for many people when they initially consider the Zen photography of Thomas Merton. Certainly those photographs, along with the journal entry Merton made on that visit, have entered into the realm of the classic vignettes from the Merton corpus:

I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed [...] the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle [...] Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. (Merton, 1975: 233-235)

Stunning though they are, they are not the photographs I had in mind in contemplating Merton's Zen photography.

There is no denying Thomas Merton had a good eye for the photographs he took on his travels in 1968, but they are images more of his physical journey than his interior journey. A journey which, as he remarked in a circular letter from this time, was the real journey (Merton, 1989: 118). Though some images, especially from his time in Asia, do express this interior journey as Merton tried to capture visually, through the eye of his camera, certain places —and people— that had a profound effect on him.

In Zen Thomas Merton discovered an approach to life, a world view he found missing in Catholicism and monasticism in the middle of the twentieth century prior to the Second Vatican Council, but which, he felt, belonged to the Christian tradition. Zen's experiential approach to contemplation and world —affirming spirituality appealed to Merton and he also found similar approaches in some of the great Christian mystics, in particular Meister Eckhart—. Zen provided Merton with a terminology to describe both his experience of God and of contemplation. Zen writings on enlightenment also complimented Merton's thinking on the true self.

In the sixties, as Merton's interest in photography developed, he began to refer to what he called "Zen photography" —a term you can now frequently find in photography books or on the worldwide web— but Thomas Merton was one of the first, if not the very first to coin that phrase, and I have not been able to find any references to it earlier than those made by Merton. So in this paper I want to explore Merton's growing interest in photography, and to tease out what he meant by the term Zen photography.

Before moving on to look at Thomas Merton's photography I think it is important to remember that from his earliest days he grew up in an artistic environment, surrounded by both his father's art and, without doubt, the artistic circle of friends within which Owen and Ruth most certainly moved.

"Love Affair with Camera": Thomas Merton, Photographer

Thomas Merton showed little interest in photography until the final years of his life. From the late fifties onwards Merton's interest in photography was encouraged by a series of eminent North American photographers he would meet, most notably Shirley Burden, Sibylle Akers, John Howard Griffin, Ralph Eugene Meatyard and his Columbia classmate Ed Rice. And each of them would also leave us a remarkable photographic record of Merton.

It is a little unclear when Merton began taking photographs himself at the Abbey of Gethsemani. The earliest reference I am aware of was on October 10th, 1961, when Merton records having taken "half a roll of Kodacolor at the hermitage" and in his journal entry wonders to himself

“what earthly reason is there for taking color photographs? ...or any photographs at all”. (Merton, 1996b: 169)¹

Certainly, by January 1962 Merton records taking photographs at Pleasant Hill, the Shaker village close to Gethsemani, finding there “some marvelous subjects”: Marvelous, silent, vast spaces around the old buildings. Cold, pure light, and some grand trees... How the blank side of a frame house can be so completely beautiful I cannot imagine. A completely miraculous achievement of forms. (Merton, 1996: 194)

Merton’s description of the buildings he was photographing at Pleasant Hill provides a good starting point for understanding his attraction to photography and his concept of Zen photography—insights which go beyond the surface of the frame house and trees, and uncover within them “an inner radiance of Being”. As Merton’s study of the Shakers developed, he wrote in lecture notes that, The simplicity and austerity demanded by their way of life enabled an unconscious spiritual purity to manifest itself in full clarity. Shaker handicrafts are then a real *epiphany of logoi*. Characterized by *spiritual* light. (Merton, s/f)

This understanding of their handicrafts, their art, would occur a number of times in articles Merton would publish from his manuscript “Art and Worship” writing, for example, that “the quality of sacred art [...] depends[s] on the reality and authenticity of the experience which is its source” (Merton, 1975 b: 82-85)². The same is true, I would suggest, in many of Merton’s photographs where ordinary objects could portray an extraordinary, unexpected beauty, reflecting a deep encounter between the artist or photographer, and their subject—a Zen-like awareness, also reminiscent of the inscape of Hopkins or the inseeing of Rilke— seeing

¹ Though, as is so often the way with Merton, he immediately goes on to provide one possible answer writing “to send pictures to Loretto and to the Carmelites” as “Mother Luke cannot come to the place and see it herself. From a certain point of view it is reasonable and charitable. Yet from that viewpoint every folly becomes reasonable”. (Merton, 1996b: 169)

² Similarly in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* he would write: The beautiful is “an epiphany of the Absolute and formless Void which is God. It is an embodiment of the Absolute mediated through the personality of the artist, or perhaps better his ‘spirit’ and his contemplative experience”. (Merton, 1968: 90)

what Edward Weston would call “the quintessence of the thing itself”. (Cravens, 1988: 84)

Certainly by September 1964 Merton had regular access to a camera and records in his personal journal:

Brother Ephrem has fitted me out with a camera (Kodak Instamatic) to help take pictures for a book Dom James wants done. So far I have been photographing a fascinating old cedar root I have on the porch. I am not sure what this baby can do. The lens does not look like much-but it changes the film by itself and sets the aperture, etc. Very nice. (Merton, 1997: 147)

Just two days later Merton continues, in an entry where he refers to “Zen photography” for the first time:

After dinner I was distracted by the dream camera, and instead of seriously reading the Zen anthology I got from the Louisville Library, kept seeing curious things to shoot, especially a mad window in the old tool room of the woodshed. The whole place is full of fantastic and strange subjects a mine of Zen photography. After that the dream camera suddenly misbehaved. (Merton, 1997: 147)

And Merton records that the back of the camera would not lock shut. It is repaired and two days later he writes again, “Camera back. Love affair with camera. Darling camera, so glad to have you back! [...] It will I think be a bright day again today” (Merton, 1997: 149).

In his journals Merton records occasional access to a variety of cameras belonging to his visitors. Merton took this photograph using Naomi Burton Stone’s Nikon and it is one of the few photographs to which Merton ever gave a title —two in fact— calling it in one place “The Sky Hook” and elsewhere “The Only Known Photograph of God”. In 1967, he sent a copy of this photograph to Jim Forest writing in his letter:

In return I am sending you a photograph of a supernatural event such as (of course) occurs around here at every moment and even more frequently than that. In between the moments. You have to duck all the time to keep from being brained by a supernatural event. (Merton, 1985a: 304)

In August 1967 Merton refers in passing to taking some pictures of roots, this time with a Rolleiflex. Then, just a few months later in January 1968, Merton fell and thought he might have broken the Rolleiflex so that the back was letting in light. He immediately wrote to John Howard Griffin to take up an offer Griffin had made to loan Merton a camera. In his letter Merton describes the kind of camera he would need —the specifications he outlines point to Merton’s own vision of photography—. He writes:

Obviously I am not covering the Kentucky Derby etc. But I do like a chance at fast funny out of the way stuff too. The possibility of it in case. But as I see it I am going to be on roots, sides of barns, tall weeds, mudpuddles, and junkpiles until Kingdom come. A built-in exposure meter might be a help. (Merton, 1989: 140)

In response Griffin loaned Merton a Canon F-X which he described as “fabulous” and “a joy to work with”. Once again Merton applies the term “Zen” to the camera writing:

The camera is the most eager and helpful of beings, all full of happy suggestions: ‘Try this! Do it that way!’ Reminding me of things I have overlooked, and cooperating in the creation of new worlds. So simply. This is a Zen camera. (Merton, 1989: 141)

So, what does Merton mean by Zen photography?

The author Anthony Padovano once called Merton’s poetry “the barometer of his soul” (Padovano, 1984: 136) as often subsequent major changes in his prose would be anticipated in his poetry. One change evident in Merton’s poetry over the course of the fifties is the emergence of what Therese Lentfoehr would call Merton’s Zen-mystical poetry. These Zen-mystical poems would anticipate Merton’s writings on Zen and his interfaith dialogue that were to follow in the sixties. Also, these Zen-mystical poems would anticipate significant changes in Merton’s artistic output as he began exploring Zen calligraphy, primitive printing techniques, brush drawings he would call “graffiti” and then, in the early sixties, his discovery of photography.

We can see the roots of this flowering of Zen-mystical poetry over the course of Merton’s monastic life. As he put down roots at Gethsemani, he

began to notice the world around him in a new way, truly appreciating the natural world and giving us, especially in his personal journals, numerous, highly detailed observations of the nature that surrounded him.

As he came to see the goodness of creation Merton came to experience what the Church Fathers would call natural contemplation, *theoria physike* —the intuition of the Divine through the reflection of God in nature—. And he would begin to catch glimpses of paradise, what has been described in Merton's work as paradise consciousness. So, he could write in *Bread in the Wilderness* that before the fall:

Creation had been given to us as a clean window through which the light of God could shine... Sun and moon, night and day, rain, the sea, the crops, the flowering tree, all these things were transparent. They spoke not of themselves only but of God who made them. The beautiful living things ...all about us on this earth... were the windows of heaven to everyon. (Merton, 1953: 60)

For Merton that paradise hadn't been totally taken away from us, through contemplation we could still see glimpses of that cosmic dance he writes so eloquently of in the final chapter of *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

When we are alone on a starlit night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; when we see children in a moment when they are really children; when we know love in our own hearts; or when, like the Japanese poet Bashō we hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash —at such times the awakening, the turning inside out of all values, the “newness”, the emptiness and the purity of vision that make themselves evident, provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance—. (Merton, 1962: 297)

This growing celebration of creation is evident in Merton's Zen-mystical poetry, finding expression in “lines of naked simplicity and directness, using descriptive analogies” (Lentfoehr 1970: 55) that can be equated with both Zen awareness and the experience of some of the great mystics of the inexpressibleness of God. So, in his poem “O Sweet Irrational Worship” Merton could write:

I am earth, earth
My heart's love
Bursts with hay and flowers.
I am a lake of blue air
In which my own appointed place
Field and valley
Stand reflected.

I am earth, earth

Out of my grass heart
Rises the bobwhite.

Out of my nameless weeds
His foolish worship. (Merton, 1977: 344-345)

And in poems such as "In Silence", "Night-Flowering Cactus", "Song for Nobody", and "Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing" Merton, in the words of Lentfoehr, captures in "image and symbol the ineffable experience of God" (Lentfoehr, 1970: 63). A brief quote from one of those poems will have to suffice to illustrate this:

A yellow flower
(Light and spirit)
Sings by itself
For nobody. (Merton, 1977: 337)

Photography too gave Merton a way of evoking that Zen-consciousness he was reaching out towards in these Zen-mystical poems. Paraphrasing a quotation of Merton's about Louis Zukofsky's "paradise ear" we can read instead this insight into Merton's photography:

All really valid photography (photographs that are fully alive, and assert their reality by their power to generate imaginative life) are a kind of recovery of paradise. [...] so that he who sees [...] recognizes that here is a new start, a new creation" —paradise—. (Merton, 1985b: 128)

One definition of Zen suggests that its purpose is to make us wonder and to answer that wondering with the deepest expression of our own nature. A spring-cleaning of the mind to sharpen our perception, and to transform our vision so that we learn to see the extraordinary in the ordinary, what the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh would call “the miracle of mindfulness”. Learning to appreciate the present moment, to appreciate what is right in front of us, rather than always having our mind on results or on the next thing we have to do, as Pascal reminds us, “the present is never our goal”. The art of photography demands such awareness, such mindfulness from the photographer, as the creative moment is brief, just a fraction of a second. Merton’s friend, the poet Ron Seitz, recalls that Merton said to him at one point when they were out together photographing that he needed to “stop looking” and to “start seeing” —looking implies you already have something in mind, whereas seeing is “being open and receptive to what comes to the eye; your vision total and not targeted—”. (Seitz, 1993: 133-134)

Instead of looking for God in the spectacular sunset, the breathtaking view or in a sacred space, or in some preconceived way, we have to stop and see God in the ordinary, everyday things of our life, we have to learn to see God in the present moment. The mindfulness to see in this way allows us to discover the hidden wholeness, the spark of God in creation. And Merton’s Zen photographs can help us to learn to see, to find the Divine exactly where we are. To see, as Merton says in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, that “a tree gives glory to God by being a tree” —or, we could add, a root by being a root, a paint can by being a paint can—. Zen photography helps us to open our eyes; it calls out from us “the importance, the urgency of seeing, fully aware, experiencing what is *here*... what is given by God and yet so frequently hidden by society” (Merton, 1996b: 123); it unveils the “unspeakable secret” Merton writes about in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*: “...paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open. The sword is taken away, but we do not know it... ‘Wisdom’, cries the dawn deacon, but we do not attend”. (Merton, 1966a: 118)

In Merton’s final talk as novice master in August 1965 he expressed this insight in words reminiscent of the quote I used from *Bread in the Wilderness*, written over twelve years earlier, saying: “things become transparent. They are no longer opaque and they no longer hide God. The

thing that we have to face is that life is as simple as this. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time". Roots, sides of barns and whiskey distilleries, windows and doorways, tall weeds and paint cans, were all transparent for Merton and God was shining through them all, just as Merton encountered his fellow citizens at the corner of Fourth and Walnut all "shining like the sun".

Conclusion

In *A Hidden Wholeness* Griffin describes a little Merton's vision of photography, getting right to the heart of Merton's photographic genius, to its simplicity, like the Zen masters and the desert mothers and fathers Merton so admired:

His vision was more often attracted to the movement of wheat in the wind, the textures of snow, paint-spattered cans, stone, crocuses blossoming through weeds —or again, the woods in all their hours, from the first fog of morning, though noonday stillness, to evening quiet—.

In his photography, he focused on the images of his contemplation, as they were and not as he wanted them to be. He took his camera on his walks and, with his special way of seeing, photographed what moved or excited him —whatsoever responded to that inner orientation—.

His concept of aesthetic beauty differed from that of most men. Most would pass by dead tree roots in search of a rose. Merton photographed the dead tree root or the texture of wood or whatever crossed his path. In these works, he photographed the natural, unarranged, unpossessed objects of his contemplation, seeking not to alter their life but to preserve it in his emulsions.

In a certain sense, then, these photographs do not need to be studied, they need to be contemplated if they are to carry their full impact. (Griffin, 1970: 49-50)

From these comments by Griffin, by tracing Merton's development as a photographer, and through looking at Merton's photographs, it is clear that Thomas Merton used his camera as a contemplative instrument, and

he photographed the things he contemplated. Through his photography, as with his writing, he breaks through the debris which so frequently obscures our vision of the world around us. The simplicity, the directness, the transparency of Merton's photographs allows God to shine through. In these photographs we can see Merton's utter awakeness to the "isness" of reality. In contemplating Merton's Zen photographs, we can learn how to SEE, we can learn how to go "beyond the shadow and the disguise" to the reality that is immediately in front of us, and to discover what Merton calls the "cosmic dance which [...] beats in our very blood". (Merton, 1961: 297)

Thomas Merton's words and photographs invite us to break through the media hype, the techno-babble, and the torrent of words and images we are constantly bombarded with, and to deepen our awareness of that inner radiance of being, that consciousness of paradise within each and every one of us, to breakthrough to that image of God in which we were all created.

Merton's photographs serve as question marks, asking us to pause and to reflect on what we are seeing; asking us to pay attention to the ordinary realities that constitute our day, to try and live totally in the moment, as Thomas Merton himself had learnt to do.

And this is the Thomas Merton we see standing before the giant carved statues of the Buddha at Polonnaruwa, Merton living totally in the moment. That moment of "inner clearness" and clarity grew out of his contemplative awareness cultivated over the course of his monastic life, a spiritual integration that made him open to that experience, and allowed him to see, to truly see, through his contemplative eye, that:

The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no "mystery". All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya —everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination—. (Merton, 1975a: 235)

Truly a high point of Merton's spiritual and artistic experience: "I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual

validity running together in one aesthetic illumination” (Merton, 1975a: 236).

References

- Cravens, H. (1988). *Edward Weston. Aperture Masters of Photography*. Trade Paperback.
- Griffin, J. H. (1970). *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Lentfoehr, T. (1979). *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton*. New Directions.
- Merton, T. (s/f). *Ascetical and Mystical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Mysticism (From the Apostolic Fathers to the Council of Trent)*. Mimeographed copy of lectures given at the Abbey of Gethsemani in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University.
- Merton, T. (1953). *Bread in the Wilderness*. New Directions.
- Merton, T. (1962). *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New Directions.
- Merton, T. (1968). *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. New Directions.
- Merton, T. (1966). *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Doubleday.
- Merton, T. (Winter 1975). “Sacred and Profane”. *Stained Glass*, 69: 82-85.
- Merton, T. (1975). The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton. In Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (Eds.). New Directions.
- Merton, T. (1977). *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*. New Directions.
- Merton, T. (1988). *Solitude: Breaking the Heart*. Credence Cassettes, AA2099: side A.
- Merton, T. (1985a). *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*. In William H. Shannon (Ed.). Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- Merton, T. (1985b). *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*. In Patrick Hart (Ed.). New Directions.
- Merton, T. (1989). *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*. Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- Merton, T. (1996a). *A Year with Thomas Merton: Daily Meditations from his Journals*. Harperone.
- Merton, T. (1996b). *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*. HarperCollins.
- Merton, T. (1997). *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*. HarperCollins.
- Padovano, A. (1984). *The Human Journey. Thomas Merton: Symbol of a Century*. Image Books.
- Seitz, R. (1993). *Song For Nobody: A Memory Vision of Thomas Merton*. Triumph Books.

Thomas Merton: el abismo de la soledad y la “madurez social del amor”

Fernando Beltrán Llavador

Universidad de Salamanca
España
dfob@usal.es

“Caverna”, “útero”, “celda”, “desierto”, “yermo”, “abismo”, “oscuridad”, “vacío”, “pobreza”, “indigencia”, “nada”. Esa constelación de imágenes en el ensayo de Thomas Merton “Notas para una filosofía de la soledad” sugiere condiciones de ausencia, negación y despojamiento que, paradójicamente, sostienen su visión para una agenda de transformación social profundamente esperanzada y constructiva. Y si bien Gerard Manley Hopkins, uno de los poetas más influyentes en su juventud, dibujó en nuestra naturaleza una mente poblada de montañas y temibles abismos escarpados, en otro lugar afirma con la misma convicción poética que somos cuidados más allá de toda medida, pues del mismo modo en que “nos envuelve el aire / también así nos circunda la misericordia” (Hopkins, 168-169; 154-155). Si, al decir de Christine M. Bochen, en efecto, “la misericordia urde la trama de la vida y la visión de Merton” (Bochen, 2001: 3) para Christopher Pramuk su obra es consonante con el descubrimiento fundamental de que la misericordia revela, en el Evangelio, “el corazón humano-divino de la realidad”. (Pramuk, 2009: 266)

Merton redactó su escrito sobre la soledad en diferentes fases debido a que una versión ampliada de la primera, originalmente publicada en francés en 1955, no fue aprobada por los censores de la orden (Shannon, 129-133). En el mismo, comienza reconociendo que todos los seres humanos son, en realidad, solitarios, y menciona el caso, extramuros de

la institución monástica, de Thoreau o Emily Dickinson. (Merton, 1962: 165-191)

Consciente de que no podemos vivir al margen de la sociedad, al final de su vida Merton defiende abiertamente un tipo de marginalidad deliberadamente escogida, pues, en sus palabras:

El oficio del monje, o de la persona marginal, la persona que medita o el poeta, es ir más allá de la muerte, incluso en esta vida, ir más allá de la dicotomía de vida y muerte, y ofrecer, de ese modo, un testimonio de vida. (Merton, 2000: 268)

En sus notas, Merton señala desde el inicio el papel de la sociedad, que, además de protección y cuidado, proporciona a cada uno de sus miembros la oportunidad de "trascenderse en el servicio de los demás y por ello convertirse en persona" (Merton, 1962: 166). Para Merton, la persona, pues, se construye en relación, pero una relación particular que es donación, y no cualquier donación sino donación de sí, esto es, la modalidad de relación que construye comunidad. (Beltrán Llavador, 2014: 131-144)

Pese a la radicalidad de esas páginas, sus reflexiones no prescriben el aislamiento, la alienación física o el repudio de la sociedad. Antes bien, en ellas describe, para reivindicarla, una topografía de la soledad interior como una suerte de "palacio de ninguna parte", un no lugar (*u-topos*), no imposible sino en el que, por estar vacío de sí, el ser humano puede acometer la tarea "apenas comprensible, incomunicable, de abrirse camino a través de la oscuridad de su misterio, hasta que descubre que ese misterio y el misterio de Dios se confunden en una realidad que es la única realidad". (Merton, 1962: 167)

Si esa es la soledad a la que se nos convoca, la sociedad que nace de ella, mucho más allá de lo que las palabras puedan sugerir, es "Un Cuerpo" habitado por el Verbo cuyo propio lenguaje no está sujeto a la forma de las mismas, ni puede reducirse a pensamientos o a cosas, sino que es "el indecible latido de un Corazón, dentro del corazón de la propia vida" (Merton, 1962: 168). Se trata de un "Cuerpo" que, no obstante, habla, y de un Verbo que, silente, se encarna.

De una u otra forma, desde sus diarios de juventud, atravesando su prosa y su poesía, Merton usó su "mente de niño", en el sentido de Cristo

(Gradner, 2015: 3), para identificar los espejismos forjados en las entrañas de la conciencia y cristalizados en estructuras sociales y para mirar, en suma, y ver de frente al rey desnudo, como en el cuento de Hans Christian Andersen, “El traje nuevo del emperador”. (Quinn Raab, 2005: 48-59)

Amiya Chakravarty, editor del *Diario de Asia de Thomas Merton*, rememora un momento que refleja ese modo de mirar, ya sin edad, al final de su estancia en la tierra:

Un día, en Calcuta, lo encontré de pie a la salida de nuestro hotel; sólo dijo: ‘Lo estoy mirando todo’. Y eso es lo que estaba haciendo —un inmenso e incesante trasiego de coches, de carros y de mendigos, además de la diaria multitud de trabajadores por las calles [...]—. Todo, para él, incluso las cosas dolorosas y erradas, formaba parte de una plenitud creciente. Pocas personas se han opuesto al mal —a las guerras y a la violencia— de manera tan abierta y consistente, pero la hondura de su conciencia imprimía a su lucha contra las mismas una cualidad curativa que era a la vez una fuerza espiritual y transformadora. A lo largo de su vida desafió la separación racial, la tiranía religiosa y la injusticia económica, e hizo suya la causa de las minorías y de las mayorías sufrientes (Chakravarty, 1983: 171-172).

Con esa mirada, a la vez solitaria y solidaria, Merton asumió la doble pero indivisa tarea de orar y obrar en el mundo, para concebir (es decir, imaginar y gestar) lo que el educador Paulo Freire denominó “lo inédito viable”, pues “las viejas respuestas no bastan”. Y lo hizo, como expresión de su personalidad multifacética, tratando de discernir lo real frente a lo falso en su propio yo; desvelando las ficciones y engaños en la génesis de toda suerte de violencias simbólicas y reales y en la configuración de comportamientos convencionales, eso que el sociólogo Pierre Bourdieu definió como *habitus* (Hernández; Beltrán; Marrero, 2003: 819-888), adoptando el concepto original de Santo Tomás de Aquino; lo hizo también denunciando el conformismo o la complacencia incluso en la esfera religiosa; rechazando las abstracciones cuando se usan para blanquear acciones inhumanas en situaciones y conflictos concretos; haciendo del perdón y la misericordia imperativos de justicia; asumiendo contradicciones y otorgando un significado profundo, mucho más allá del sentido común, a las paradojas existenciales. Por eso, para Merton,

claramente, y aunque necesaria, "la soledad no es separación". (Merton, 2003, Capítulo 8)

En su infancia, Merton ya había conocido, en soledad y en sociedad, distintas modalidades de alienación. La escuela de caridad y el silencio elegido de su profesión monástica le permitieron descubrir que otra vivencia interior y otra *con-vivencia* genuina son posibles.

Fruto de ese aprendizaje, con su obra, prolífica y poliédrica, "desafió las certezas de su tiempo y abrió horizontes nuevos" (Discurso del Papa Francisco en el Capitolio, EE. UU., 2015). Tras adoptar la ciudadanía norteamericana, Merton denunció con verbo profético la discriminación racial, la intervención del gigante americano en Vietnam y el uso mortífero de la fuerza nuclear. Mediante su palabra y desde su ermita rompió barreras, tendió puentes, y convocó a contemplativos, artistas y activistas para explorar juntos, con pasión y con compasión, las raíces espirituales de la protesta y las razones últimas para la esperanza. Ilustraré sus esfuerzos para cimentar y alentar esa "paciente arquitectura de la paz"¹ desde el abismo de la soledad hacia la madurez social del amor, con dos ejemplos procedentes del diálogo interreligioso, del que fue pionero², extraídos del encuentro entre el budismo zen y la fe cristiana.

Merton vio que la "chispa divina", descrita por el Maestro Eckhart (c. 1260-1328) como "la razón más alta" o "el entendimiento iluminado" (Petisco, 2019: 398) residía, en latencia solícita, en toda persona, sin excepción; no sólo eso, sino que es ese ascua o semilla de luz lo que nos singulariza al tiempo que nos unifica.

De ahí su intuición profunda de que la llamada a ser *monos*, uno (con Dios, con los semejantes y con uno mismo) no puede quedar enclaustrada, aun cuando sean necesarios espacios en los que, con una dedicación

¹ La imagen está tomada de la oración por la paz que Merton escribió para la Cámara de los Representantes de los Estados Unidos y fue leída el miércoles de la Semana Santa de 1962. Véase Beltrán Llavador 2005: 27-47.

² Lo específico de su contribución y su papel pionero en las esferas (diálogo y comunión) interreligiosa, intermonástica e intercontemplativa han sido objeto de estudio por parte de Jaechan Anselmo Park (2019).

particularmente intensa que quizás alcance un compromiso sacramental, se cultive y se avive esa llama para que su fuego prenda en todos.

Al propio tiempo hay que decir que Merton ya se había percatado de que, si bien ese anhelo es universalmente compartido porque es constitutivo del ser humano, la sociedad está plagada de formas de “distracción masiva”, expresiones de lo que Pascal denominó *divertissement*, una “diversión sistemática” (Merton, 1962: 165) que puede desviar nuestra atención de la Luz verdadera y hacernos divertirnos hasta morir, siguiendo el gráfico símil de Neil Postman en su libro de título homónimo. (Postman, 1991)

En su juventud, Merton reconoció la articulación de sus propios dilemas personales y las contradicciones de su entorno en el ensayo *Fines y Medios* de Aldous Huxley, que llegaría a desempeñar un papel crucial en su propia conversión. Para Merton, si todavía hoy resulta escandalosa la figura de Jesucristo es precisamente debido a su integridad y a la coherencia suma entre sus palabras, sus hechos y su ser, pues proclamándose Camino, Verdad y Vida, no mostró doblez ni fisura alguna entre su acción compasiva y su visión misericordiosa.

Remontándose a las fuentes de su tradición y tendiendo puentes con Oriente, que otros tras él cruzarían en ambas direcciones, Merton enseñó a superar falsas dicotomías entre cuerpo y cosmos, amor y sabiduría, *caritas* y *karuna*, *gnosis* y *ágape*, iluminación y profecía. (Pieris, 1988: 16)

En otro ejemplo magistral de consistencia máxima entre los fines y los medios, San Juan de la Cruz nos avisa, en una lógica que desafía todo cálculo: “Donde no hay amor, pon amor y sacarás amor” (Juan de la Cruz, 1960: 1322). En el centro mismo de la comprensión cristiana de uno mismo y del otro como “persona”, que se hace sujeto precisamente por el amor, se encuentra la relación trinitaria. Es ese rasgo singular en el que Merton encontró un lugar de encuentro con representantes de otras tradiciones religiosas en su sincero y común empeño por la paz.

A ese respecto, me referiré brevemente, a modo de ilustración, al descubrimiento de Merton en la experiencia de “vacío” de Hui-neng (el Sexto Patriarca del ch'an o zen de China) de una “sorprendente estructura trinitaria” (Merton, 2001: 49), lo que para él inevitablemente entrañaba una plenitud en el amor.

En sus "Notas para una filosofía de la soledad", Merton ya había señalado que "la vocación de la soledad no es la vocación al cálido sueño narcisista de una religión particular. Es la vocación de estar *plenamente despierto*" (Merton, 1962: 171), una aspiración compartida, con diferentes énfasis, por budistas y cristianos.

Descubrir una entraña trinitaria en la vivencia del Vacío tiene enormes implicaciones, lo que comienza a elaborar en el ensayo *Místicos y Maestros Zen*, lleno de hondas y originalísimas intuiciones luminosas en las que, si bien de manera incidental, Merton señala con perspicacia que en la traducción al inglés vertida por D. T. Suzuki de los textos de Hui-neng, "Suzuki pensaba obviamente en Eckhart" (Merton, 2001: 28), a quien el propio Merton también recurrirá en su diálogo con Suzuki.

Poco más adelante, Merton subraya que el doctor Suzuki, en tanto que divulgador autorizado de la tradición Rinzai del Zen, en el encuentro que tuvo con él en Nueva York, el 17 de junio de 1964, le admitió abiertamente que lo más importante de todo "es el amor" (Merton, 2001: 41). Merton recoge en su diario: "El aspecto en el que más insistió, tanto en el cristianismo como en el budismo, es el amor, por encima incluso de la iluminación" (Merton; Suzuki, 1988: 83).

La preocupación recurrente de Merton por la misericordia, la pureza de corazón y la consecución de la paz a la luz de las bienaventuranzas, que Merton considera "aspectos del amor" (Merton, 1968: 14-29), sostiene el alcance vasto e incisivo de su mensaje.

Refiriéndose a las bienaventuranzas, a la vez fruto y resultado del amor —su premisa y su promesa— en una conferencia sobre el escrito de San Juan de la Cruz en torno a las condiciones del pájaro solitario, la profesora de la Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca Asunción Escribano señala lo siguiente:

...su mera pronunciación conlleva su realización; igual que todas sus promesas, las bienaventuranzas en boca de Cristo se concretan y se realizan al ser pronunciadas por proceder de Quien emanan [...]. Se hacen al ser dichas y abarcan no sólo al futuro sino que anudan los tiempos [...]. A ese aire pone su pico el pájaro solitario. Lo novedoso de [las] palabras de Jesús frente a las de cualquier otro [...], por más poder y autoridad moral que tenga, es que esta

realización abarca todas las formas del lenguaje, incluso —algo inédito en cualquier otra palabra que no proceda de él— afecta a los imperativos, que en el anuncio cristiano no obligan a nadie sino que ofrecen en libertad lo que en ellos se formula: ‘Levántate, toma tu camilla y vuelve a casa’, [...] ‘Sígueme’ [...] ‘Lázaro, sal afuera’ [...]. Todo el discurso de Jesús posee ese rasgo: no dice las cosas, sino que las hace cumplirse. Así, cuando Jesús se dirige a sus discípulos y les traslada el mensaje: ‘vosotros sois la sal de la Tierra’ no los está describiendo sino que los convierte en libertad [...]. Al [ser humano] le es delegada por derivación esa cualidad de hacer real lo nombrado cuando ha hecho de la palabra de Dios carne en su vida y cuando ha llegado a comulgar en su cuerpo esa Palabra. (Escribano, 2021)

El interés de Merton por la renovación monástica, por el diálogo interreligioso y por los problemas sociales y medioambientales, es su respuesta personal a ese imperativo que es una invitación a la libertad de una forma de vida presidida por la caridad, el desprendimiento y la humildad. Las bienaventuranzas nos recuerdan que, cuando se nos pronuncia para el mundo, nuestro mismo “suelo del nacimiento es el paraíso”. (Merton, 2005: 191)

Somos, afirma Merton, el nuevo paraíso de Dios, en el que “se yergue Cristo, el Árbol de la Vida” (Merton, 1998: 123), horizonte de la contemplación y raíz de la acción compasiva.

Los discípulos de Cristo están doblemente urgidos hoy a percibir el Reino en medio “de este tiempo histórico y revolucionario de crisis” (Merton, 1971: 180) y a “ser signos e instrumentos de la compasión divina”, viendo y sirviendo a Cristo en, y siendo Cristo para los abandonados y desposeídos. (O’Connell, 2002: 502)

Ahora bien, si las bienaventuranzas ofrecen una forma de ver el mundo a través de los ojos de Cristo, llenos de misericordia, y entrañan un modo de vivir acorde con tal mirada, el despertar de Buda al vacío —esto es, la pureza transparente y cualidad prístina—, de todo cuanto existe, alumbró un óctuple sendero de liberación a partir de su compasión por todos los seres que sufren.

Poco antes de morir, Merton se refirió a su experiencia de despertar en Asia en términos del todo afines a la sensibilidad budista: "todo es vacío y todo es compasión" (Merton, 2000: 235). Por otro lado, esta descansaba en su reconocimiento de la esencia de la vida monástica como una determinación a ocuparse de una completa transformación interior o, en las palabras de Casiano³, la necesidad de que cada observancia monástica estuviera al servicio de la pureza de corazón. (Merton, 2000: 340)

A propósito de esta modalidad de "visión" con el ojo de un corazón puro, vacío de obstrucciones y henchido, antes bien, de misericordia, Bonnie Thurston explica de forma oportuna que en la antigüedad se consideraba que el ojo operaba como una lámpara que proyectaba su luz interna sobre los objetos que, sólo de esa manera, podían ser vistos. El ojo, así pues, refleja y es a la vez reflejo del corazón. Si el corazón está limpio y despejado como un cielo claro y luminoso, sin nubes que lo cubran, el ojo es "uno", esto es, sin doblez, "simple" y "sincero", a tal punto que proyecta la luz ecuánime del cielo, que habita en el ápice del alma, sobre la tierra.

En la Escritura, añade, "Dios mora en la luz y da luz" (Thurston, 2006: 53). Así, cuando la religiosa canadiense Elaine MacInnes, miembro de la orden católica de Las Misioneras de Nuestra Señora y maestra zen, preguntó a su propio maestro budista lo que creía que habría de ser la oración para los cristianos, este le respondió sin la menor vacilación: "Lo mismo que para los budistas. La oración es luz haciendo asiento en la luz". (McInnes, 1996: xviii)

El Nuevo Testamento gira enteramente en torno al dinamismo de una forma de "ver" y "obrar" desde el interior. Por eso, "cuando 'miramos' de manera apropiada, vemos las necesidades de quienes tenemos alrededor y nos disponemos a darles respuesta" (Thurston, 2006: 54). En otras palabras, la luz en la luz irradia luz en forma de "misericordia en la misericordia dentro de la misericordia" (Merton, 2007: 405).

Por lo que respecta al vacío, en tanto que fuente de compasión, la honda intuición de Merton de que el vacío tiene una estructura trinitaria ha sido

³ Fragmentos de lo que sigue, una contextualización de las enseñanzas de Casiano, y un desarrollo diferente, aunque complementario al tema de esta conferencia, se encuentran en Fernando Beltrán Llavador (2014): 133-148.

objeto de aproximaciones diversas por parte de representantes comprometidos de las tradiciones budista y cristiana. En el encuentro interreligioso, desde la perspectiva cristiana, la creación ha sido concebida como el vaciamiento o *kénosis* del Padre, la santificación como *kénosis* del Espíritu Santo, y la redención como *kénosis* del Hijo. Mediante el Espíritu Santo podemos participar de la *kénosis* redentora de Cristo con una triple repercusión: para nuestra propia transformación interior (*metanoia*); para el cambio estructural de las relaciones sociales, y para la divinización del cosmos.

Eso, que pudiera parecer muy abstracto o nebuloso, se encarna de forma existencial cada vez que reconocemos y nos hacemos cargo de Jesús abandonado en quienquiera sufra a nuestro alrededor, los “menospreciados” de entre nuestros hermanos y hermanas (Mateo, 25:40) hambrientos y sedientos, pobres, enfermos, prisioneros, emigrantes, perseguidos. Bajo esa luz, se han encontrado concomitancias entre la “pureza de corazón” subrayada por Merton, de la que brota la acción misericordiosa —vivir para y amar al prójimo y *bodhicitta*, el corazón de la iluminación—. Jesús abandonado encarna la *kénosis* redentora de Dios, la unidad en la que el cielo (la Trinidad) y la tierra se encuentran.

Si, para Donald W. Mitchell (1991), lo anterior define “la vocación de la Iglesia como siervo sufriente” (77) para Masao Abe el vaciamiento del yo libera a la persona y le permite vivir plenamente, de forma compasiva, orientada a aliviar el sufrimiento del mundo (Henry; Swearer, 1989: 20-30). En ese sentido, el vacío ha de entenderse antes como verbo que como nombre, como proceso mejor que como estado, lo que hace justicia a “su función dinámica y creativa” (Cobb; Ives, 1990: 144). Eso se aproxima a la comprensión de que somos, metafóricamente, parte de un baile trinitario (Greshake, 2002: 29), lo que en lenguaje teológico se conoce como *pericóresis*, y es del todo afín a la invitación de Merton a unirnos a esa danza universal (Merton, 2003).

En la sección tercera, dedicada a la pobreza espiritual, de “Notas para una filosofía de la soledad”, Merton define ese “yo profundo” como “el mismo Cristo” y afirma que, a menos que alguien se vacíe y entre en soledad, no podrá hacer entrega de sí en amor. (Merton, 1962: 191)

Para el profesor Gisbert Greshake, “desde la perspectiva que mira hacia el Dios trinitario, el yo tiene que ampliarse mediante el él y el tú,

convirtiéndose así en un *nosotros*. Esto puede acontecer si la fórmula primordial no es 'yo pienso' sino 'yo creo en el amor'" (Greshake, 2001: 312). Esa visión no solo obliga a una revisión a fondo de los presupuestos epistemológicos de la modernidad respecto a la comprensión del individuo como ser pensante, sino que proporciona elementos hermenéuticos para una nueva comprensión de las culturas, las religiones y las sociedades. De hecho, el mandamiento del amor se traduce en un singular aprecio de lo específico y único de toda alteridad en sus propios términos. Diferencia y unidad, pues, ya no se excluyen mutuamente sino que son principios coexistentes y dinámicos, y ello no en una "esencia" divina ajena al orden de la creación sino en el seno de toda realidad. De forma similar, Raimon Panikkar se aproxima a la Trinidad como una experiencia humana primordial, el núcleo mismo de la realidad cuyo misterio nos atraviesa, y que él define como "cosmoteándrico", un neologismo que abraza al cosmos, a Dios y al ser humano. (Pannikar, 1998: 99)

Quisiera a continuación abundar en la indisoluble relación entre la experiencia de la soledad y la proyección social del amor en Merton usando como un segundo ejemplo otro escrito suyo sobre el zen, todavía poco conocido entre el público hispanohablante, y que tuve ocasión de traducir hace unos años para una escuela de practicantes de zen mayoritariamente católicos, a partir del sendero que abrió el misionero jesuita Enomiya-Lassalle, a quien Merton se proponía visitar durante su estancia en Asia. Me parece importante comenzar señalando una de las conclusiones de Joseph Quinn Raab en su importante volumen sobre el diálogo que Merton sostuvo con el Doctor D. T. Suzuki. Raab pone el acento en que, pese a la creciente comprensión mutua entre ambos, para Merton resulta imprescindible que a la iluminación interior acompañe la profecía que encarna Quien bendice a los perseguidos, sana a los enfermos, libera a los presos y traduce la luz del Espíritu en actos de amor (Quinn Raab, 2021: 122-123). Incidentalmente, en otra traducción posterior que realicé de un volumen sobre el budismo después del patriarcado, su autora, Rita M. Gross (2004), defendía igualmente, esta vez desde la atalaya del budismo vajrayana, la importancia de incorporar la fuerza de la voz profética de inspiración judeocristiana a la sabiduría propia del despertar budista, para que la liberación "interior" no quedara

alienada de las liberaciones de toda suerte de opresiones concretas en el decurso de la historia⁴.

En adelante, pues, seguiré un segundo ensayo tardío de Merton, esta vez no sobre el Sexto Patriarca, sino sobre su sucesor, Shen-hui (Merton, 2005: 9-21). Aunque, debido a su novedad entre el público hispanohablante utilizaré algunas citas extensas en su literalidad, a la vez prescindiré, de manera injusta pero inevitable, de otros comentarios y matices importantes que el propio Merton introduce en su escrito para destacar tan solo algunos aspectos relevantes al tema de la soledad y la sociedad en Thomas Merton, a los que he dedicado alguna atención mayor en otros lugares. (Beltrán Llavador, 2020)

En efecto, como señaló el Hermano Patrick Hart, quien ejerciera como secretario de Merton en su orden, en 1988 se “desenterró” un manuscrito inédito al que se hace referencia en las cartas de Thomas Merton al estudioso Richard S.Y. Chi, donde se menciona el proyecto para una introducción a la traducción de Shen-hui que el Dr. Chi tenía en proyecto realizar (ZI 3). En la primera carta, fechada el 26 de diciembre de 1967, Merton escribió al Dr. Chi diciendo que estaba leyendo su “excelente manuscrito de Shen-hui [...] con auténtico deleite”. (Merton, 1985: 121-125)

Shen-hui, el Séptimo Patriarca, fue una figura de importancia decisiva, no inferior a la de su maestro, aunque no tan conocida, en el desarrollo ulterior del budismo ch’an, el zen de China⁵.

Tras recibir la introducción de Merton a los escritos de Shen-hui traducidos por el Dr. Chi, este contestó a Merton el 23 de abril de 1968: “Su introducción es realmente una obra maestra. Es la primera vez que veo algo escrito por una persona que no es de origen chino con una comprensión tan honda del Ch’an” (Merton, 1988: 4). La última carta de la correspondencia entre Merton y el Dr. Chi fue escrita por Merton el 21 de noviembre de 1968, desde Darjeeling, en India, menos de tres semanas antes de su muerte en Bangkok, y en ella expresa su deseo de que envíen copia del libro al Dalai Lama y a otras personas que había conocido.

⁴ Véase también: <https://www.society-buddhist-christian-studies.org/>

⁵ Para un contexto autorizado de su papel en la historia del budismo zen véase Dumoulin (1994).

Merton comienza precisando que, para Shen-hui, *dhyana* (meditación) y *prajna* (penetración contemplativa o sabiduría) no quedaban confinados a los momentos de silencio y quietud en postura sedente en el bosque o en la sala de meditación sino que su enseñanza ya era, de por sí, *dhyana* y *prajna* en una sola unidad (Merton, 1988: 6). Y añade que la especificidad única de un enfoque asiático se fundamenta en las intuiciones que surgen del vacío y del *wu-wei* (no-acción) (Merton, 1988: 8). Y sigue diciendo:

Lo que hace de él alguien extraordinario es que su acción era al mismo tiempo su Ch'an o su 'contemplación' (aunque esa palabra simplemente no sirve aquí). El impacto de su acción, de su predicación y de su enseñanza se debía no a su fortaleza o a la aplicación de su fuerza de voluntad (y mucho menos a su voluntad de poder) sino a una ausencia de voluntad propia investida de una eficacia completa y lúcida. (Merton, 1988: 8)

Así pues, Merton añade:

La enseñanza de Shen-hui no es que la mente *tiene que* vaciarse, sino que, para empezar, su naturaleza ya es vacía y lo que la 'llena' es la base de la volición o el ansia que el Budismo llama *avidya*, la ignorancia que se quiere a sí misma como un yo que quiere. Querer que la mente sea vacía es llenarla con una base de contenido volitivo y por tanto equivale a querer que no esté vacía. ¿Qué hacer, pues? (Merton, 1988: 10)

Esa pregunta, formulada de diferentes formas, era una preocupación de Merton, y su deriva —a la vez religiosa y social— se hacía patente en las notas que recoge el 5 de noviembre de 1968 en su diario, en Asia, donde anticipa que abordar la dialéctica budista, que estaba estudiando en ese momento, y la 'alienación' podría ser un buen tema para su conferencia de Bangkok. Y señalaba que tanto el marxismo como el budismo mantienen que un egocentrismo fundamental, "mirar por el propio yo", con sus posibles implicaciones económicas, podría conducir a posturas antitéticas, aunque en los dos casos dogmáticas, sobre el yo, bien para afirmar que es eterno bien para negar su existencia. Merton defiende una postura de cierta libertad respecto a la determinación de factores económicos y sociales pero también la necesidad de una conciencia crítica con la que experimentar el 'yo' de forma dinámica, en un continuo de

causaciones e interrelaciones diversas, algunas de ellas económicas. De otro modo, “la noción del ‘yo’ comporta la noción de ‘lo mío’. Soy ‘mi propiedad’, esto es, lo que me constituye es precisamente lo que me separa de lo que ‘no es yo’, y así quedo constituido por lo que es mío, de ‘nadie más’” (Merton, 2000: 117). Esa es una visión solipsista, no solitaria; egoísta, no solidaria. En la práctica equivale a lo que el politólogo y economista canadiense MacPherson definió como “individualismo posesivo”, al postular que desde el siglo XVII el individuo se define en Occidente como el “propietario de su propia persona y de sus capacidades, por las cuales nada debe a la sociedad”. (MacPherson, 1970: 275)

En su ensayo sobre Shen-hui Merton observa que, si bien el sucesor de Hui-neng predicó la enseñanza budista acerca de la moralidad, la meditación y la sabiduría (*sila, dhyana, prajna*) lo hizo de un modo que evitaba ver en ellas logros, consecuciones, metas exteriores, posesiones o conquistas del propio ego, asociadas al “defecto arraigado del quietismo voluntarista” (Merton, 1988:13), lo que, asumido por un contingente de miles de monjes entregados con empeño a ese tipo de concentración, podía ser un instrumento eficaz para mantener un estado de cosas socialmente autoritario y conservador. (Merton, 1988: 13)

Pues bien, la profesora Charlotte Radler (2010) reconoce algo muy similar en la denuncia de Eckhart a la denominada “espiritualidad mercantilista” (en los Sermones 1 a 16b) (Eckhart, 1983). Así, en el Sermón I, predica:

Mirad, el hombre que no piensa en sí mismo ni en ninguna otra cosa sino sólo en Dios y en su honra, este hombre es libre y desasido del mercantilismo en todas sus obras y no busca lo suyo, así como Dios es libre y desasido en todas sus obras y no busca lo suyo. (Eckhart, 1983: 262)

Y en el Sermón V a:

¿Qué es mi vida? Lo que desde dentro es movido por sí mismo. Aquello que es movido desde fuera, no vive. Si vivimos, pues, con Él, debemos cooperar también con Él desde dentro, de modo que no obremos desde fuera, sino que hemos de ser movidos por aquello que nos hace vivir: es decir: por “Él”... [pero] no debéis

insistir en ningún modo, porque Dios no es en absoluto ni esto ni aquello. (Eckhart, 1983: 300-301)

Y ahora, regresemos al escrito de Merton sobre Shen-hui, donde leemos:

Como Shen-hui dijo [...]: 'Si un ave voladora permanece inmóvil en un punto del cielo inevitablemente caerá a la tierra. Del mismo modo, cuando uno practica la "mente que no mora" y sin embargo mora en algo, no podrá ser emancipado'. Eso nos lleva al verdadero meollo. Si *dhyana*, *prajna* y *sila* son una, y si no son sino la vida misma, entonces lo que hay que hacer es no detener la vida, como ese pájaro que detiene su vuelo en medio del aire. [...] En lugar de ser como pájaros con el proyecto absurdo de quedarnos quietos en medio del aire para alcanzar *prajna* de ese modo, uno habría de seguir volando dándose cuenta de que *prajna*, *dhyana* y *sila* no son sino el mismo vuelo. La misma vida es todas ellas. [...] La vida vivida sin apego es en sí meditación e iluminación. Uno no medita para vivir, o vive para meditar, uno vive meditando y medita viviendo, y ambas cosas no son algo separado. (Merton, 1988: 143)

El tono y el contenido de esas palabras resultan de nuevo cercanos a esas otras de Eckhart:

Si alguien durante mil años preguntara a la vida: '¿Por qué vives?' [...], ésta, si fuera capaz de contestar no diría sino: 'Vivo porque vivo'. Esto se debe a que la vida vive de su propio fondo y brota de lo suyo, por ello vive sin porqué justamente porque vive para sí misma. Si alguien preguntara entonces a un hombre veraz, uno que obra desde su propio fondo: '¿Por qué obras tus obras?' [...] él, si contestara bien, no diría sino: 'Obro porque obro'. (Eckhart, 1983:308)

De manera clarividente, en la entrada sobre el no dualismo que William H. Shannon escribió para el *Diccionario de Thomas Merton*, recoge mucho de todo lo anterior de manera sencilla como sigue:

Merton comprendió que no se trata de convencerse a uno mismo de que hay que salir de la dualidad ni de razonar el camino por el que uno entra en la unidad; en lugar de eso, uno tiene que tomarse un tiempo para abrirse a la experiencia: la experiencia de

la unidad con Dios y, en Dios, la unidad con todo lo que existe.
(Shannon, 2015: 381)

Y es que a Merton le preocupaba ante todo el hecho de que reconocer en esa “fatal división en el pensamiento occidental” el fundamento de su obsesión “por la voluntad, la consecución de logros, la producción, la auto-afirmación y el poder [...]”. (Merton, 1988: 15)

En una suerte de “consonancia de voces” que atraviesa tiempos y lugares y cuya reverberación llega hasta el presente, podemos escuchar a Hui-neng predicando acerca del perfume de la sabiduría y a San Bernardo acerca del perfume de la compasión, y percibir en ambos un aire de familia.

En el Sutra del Estrado, Hui-neng se dirige así a su audiencia:

El incienso o perfume de la sabiduría [...] significa que nuestro espíritu se ha liberado de todos los obstáculos y que, constantemente y con sabiduría, practicamos la introspección de nuestra propia naturaleza, y que nos abstenemos de realizar... malas acciones, que realizamos [...] buenas acciones, no nos apegamos a sus frutos; [y] que somos respetuosos hacia nuestros superiores, [y] compasivos hacia nuestros inferiores [y] hacia los desheredados y los pobres. (Hui-neng, 1985: 64)

Por su parte, San Bernardo predica:

Feliz tú ...si tu alma [queda] empapada por el rocío de la misericordia, henchida de compasión hasta reventar tus entrañas, hecha toda para todos, [...] al encuentro de los demás para socorrerlos inmediatamente en toda circunstancia, y en una palabra, muerta a ti misma y viva para todos. Tú posees en verdad, feliz, este [...] perfume, el mejor, tus manos destilan su embriagadora suavidad. Las contrariedades no desvanecerán su aroma ni lo consumirá el hervor de la presunción. (1987: 180-183)

La percepción de la realidad de Shen-hui, Eckhart, San Bernardo y Merton, su “contemplación” y su “acción”, imbuidas de sabiduría y misericordia, siguen teniendo implicaciones concretas en los órdenes social, político y económico. (Radler, 2008: 245)

En su prefacio a la edición vietnamita de *Los hombres no son islas*, Merton hace un comentario en el que, donde entonces se refería a Vietnam, hoy me gustaría que leyéramos Afganistán, o cualquier otra zona de conflicto en nuestro planeta:

Las condiciones de nuestro mundo son simplemente una expresión externa de nuestros propios pensamientos y deseos. Los infortunios de Vietnam hoy se deben a que la guerra expresa no meramente los pensamientos y deseos de los habitantes de Vietnam sino, por desgracia, la confusión interna de los hombres de otras naciones en lugares distintos de la tierra. La enfermedad de la tierra entera ha entrado ahora en erupción en Vietnam. Pero quizás sea allí también donde esa enfermedad pueda sanar [...]. (Merton, 2015: 175)

Sabernos parte de una realidad entrelazada y reconocernos seres de relación supone dar primacía a la compasión, desde cierta soledad imprescindible para no cosificar a los otros, pero orientada hacia ellos pues sólo con los otros podemos ser un *nos-otros* que refleja y que celebra, en lo concreto, la realidad trinitaria. De lo contrario, incluso los empeños más nobles de "autorrealización" y algunas técnicas bienintencionadas, y sin duda "eficaces", de *mindfulness* pueden convertirse en expresiones sutiles de narcisismo, a caballo entre una espiritualidad alienada, por reforzar un individualismo que busca convertirse en propietario de esa llama de amor que sólo está viva cuando se comparte, y un mercantilismo espiritual al servicio de un capitalismo inhumano que sirve para "pacificar" las conciencias críticas que se indignan y se niegan a asumir como "normal" y como "norma" la existencia de injusticias estructurales.

En su última etapa, Merton reivindicaba las calles como lugares de celebración; no solo sitios de resistencia sino espacios de creación y recreación:

Con su oro han arruinado nuestras vidas. Pero nosotros, con amor, las haremos arder y transformaremos las ruinas de nuestra existencia otra vez en oro. Y en esta ocasión el oro tendrá auténtico valor [...], el valor infinito de la identidad humana encendido en un corazón que confía en el amor [...]. Este es el

comienzo de la transformación. ¡Un día podremos verlo! (Merton, 1997: 79)

En suma, la interdependencia, la justicia y la celebración, una ciencia laudatoria que canta lo creado y crea lo que canta, van de la mano. La mente tiene montañas, precipicios escarpados, pero cuando nos sumergimos y atravesamos el abismo de la soledad, somos vastos, contenemos multitudes. En *Conjeturas de un espectador culpable*, Merton escribe:

[...] cuanto más capaz soy de afirmar a otros, de decirles 'sí' en mí mismo, de descubrirles a ellos en mí mismo, y a mí mismo en ellos, tanto más real soy. Soy plenamente real si mi corazón dice *sí a todos*. (Merton, 2011: 176)

La representación de la Trinidad de la religiosa Dominica Caritas Müller expresa de manera sencilla y eficaz la enseñanza de maestros de Vida y peregrinos del Espíritu como Meister Eckhart, Hui-neng y su sucesor Shen-hui, San Juan de la Cruz, San Bernardo y el propio Merton, una enseñanza que se hace eco de tres rasgos, o rayos, de Dios, tres manifestaciones del Vacío:

Gracia, que significa a un tiempo gratitud, pues somos creados a imagen de Dios, y gratuidad: la médula misma de nuestra libertad interior, que nada puede comprar pues no es objeto alguno y, por eso, no es susceptible de adquisición. Alentada por el Espíritu que nace instante a instante en nuestro interior, insufla vida y creatividad a nuestra acción en el mundo.

Celebración, fruto de la sabiduría, que además de alabanza constituye la mayor forma de poder, la capacidad de conocer como somos conocidos, de crear y recrear, sanando y unificando, desde una Luz y Vida sin medida que nos es dada en el tiempo, pero que nos libera de su atadura, pues fuimos amados antes incluso de la creación.

Y justicia, nuestra filiación primera y última, el sello indeleble de nuestra dignidad cuya mayor expresión, a la vez humana y divina, es la misericordia, una "madurez social del amor [que] supone, al mismo tiempo, el desarrollo de una cierta soledad interior" (Merton, 1962: 206), y que, encarnada e incardinada en los claustros y calles, desiertos y jardines del mundo, está llamada a actuar de forma tan

comprometida como entrañable por estar realmente entrañada en el corazón de la realidad.

Referencias

- Isusi-Fagoaga, R. et al. (2020). "Monográfico sobre Paulo Freire en el 25 aniversario de su conferencia en Valencia y en vísperas del centenario de su nacimiento", *Creativity and Educational Innovation Review* 4:
<https://ojs.uv.es/index.php/creativity/issue/view/CEIR%2C%204%20%282020%29>
- Beltrán Llavador, F. (2022). *La encendida memoria: aproximación a Thomas Merton*. Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans.
- Beltrán Llavador, F. (2005). "Unbinding Prometheus: Thomas Merton and the 'Patient Architecture of Peace'". *Across the Rim of Chaos: Thomas Merton's Prophetic Vision*. In Angus Stuart (Ed.). The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland: 27-47.
- Beltrán Llavador, F. (2014). "Thomas Merton: a celebration of the person", *Universal vision: A Centenary Celebration of Thomas Merton*. In Fiona Gardner, Keith Griffin and Peter Ellis (Eds.). A special edition of *The Merton Journal* 21(2), 131-144.
- Beltrán Llavador, F. (2016). "Las viejas respuestas no bastan: introducción a la figura de Thomas Merton a los 100 años de su nacimiento". *Cistercium*, 266: 131-166.
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_CLm-VMWn7VtzKVRravXddPoiV_Z50yr/view
- Bergoglio, J. M. (Papa Francisco I). (24 de septiembre de 2015). *Discurso en el Capitolio de los Estados Unidos*. Washington D.C. Estados Unidos.
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html
- San Bernardo (1987). "Sermones sobre el Cantar de los Cantares: Sermón 12, El tercer perfume que es la compasión". *Obras completas. Sermones sobre el Cantar de los Cantares. Vol. V*. Edición bilingüe latín-español. BAC.
- Bochen, C. (2001). "Mercy within Mercy within Mercy". Presidential Address-ITMS Seventh General Meeting. *The Merton Seasonal*, 26: 3-8.
- Chakravarty, A. (1983). "Epilogue". In *Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Process*. Donald Grayston and Michael W. Higgins (Eds.). Griffin House: 171-172.
- Cobb, J.; Ives, C. (Eds.). (1990). *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*. Orbis.
- De la Cruz, J. (1950). "Carta a la M. M^a de la Encarnación". En: *Vida*. BAC.
- Dumoulin, H. (1994). *Zen Buddhism: A History (Vol. 1: India and China)*. MacMillan-Simon & Schuster.
- Eckhart, M. (1983). *Obras alemanas. Tratados y Sermones*. En Ilse M. de Brugger Edhasa (Ed.).

- Escribano, A. (4 de marzo de 2021). *El pájaro solitario. Itinerario creyente: de la duda al testimonio*. [Conferencia]. Salamanca, España.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xuuyf2YSfAQ&t=10s> (min. 28 a 32).
- Gardner, F. (2015). *The Only Mind Worth Having: Thomas Merton and the Child Mind*. Cascade Books.
- Greshake, G. (2002). *Creer en el Dios uno y trino: una clave para entenderlo*. Sal Terrae.
- Gross, R. (1993). *El budismo después del patriarcado: Historia, análisis y reconstrucción feminista del budismo* (F. Beltrán Llavador, Trad). Trotta.
- Henry, P.; Swearer, D. (1989). *For the Sake of the World: The Spirit of Buddhist and Christian Monasticism*. Fortress Press.
- Hernández, F.; Beltrán, J; Marrero, A. (2003). *Teorías sobre sociedad y educación*. Tirant lo Blanc.
- Hopkins, G. M. (1988). *Poemas completos*, [edición bilingüe]. M. Linares Megías (Ed.). Universidad de Deusto-Mensajero.
- Hui-neng (1985). *Vida y Enseñanza de Hui-neng, Sexto Patriarca Zen*. Luis Cárcamo.
- MacInnes, E. (1996). *Light sitting in Light. A Christian experience in Zen*. HarperCollins.
- MacPherson, C. B. (1970). *La teoría política del individualismo posesivo*. Fontanella.
- Merton, T. (1960). "Notes for a philosophy of solitude". *Disputed Questions*. Farrar. Straus and Cudahy.
- Merton, T. (1962). "Notas para una filosofía de la soledad". En *Cuestiones Discutidas*. Sudamericana.
- Merton, T. (1968). *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Merton, T. (1971). *Contemplation in a World of Action*. Doubleday.
- Merton, T. (1985). *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience*. W. H. Shannon (Ed.). Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Merton, T.; Suzuki, D. T. (1988). *Encounter*. R. E. Daggy (Ed.). Larkspur Press.
- Merton, T. (1988). "The Zen Insight of Shen-hui". *The Merton Annual*, 1: 3-14.
- Merton, T. (1997). *Amar y Vivir*. Oniro.
- Merton, T. (1997). *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*. *Journals, Vol. 5: 1963-1965*. R. E. Daggy (Ed.). HarperCollins.
- Merton, T. (1998). *El hombre nuevo*. Lumen.
- Merton, T. (2000). *Diario de Asia*. Trotta.
- Merton, T. (2001). *Místicos y Maestros Zen*. Lumen.

- Merton, T. (2003). *Nuevas semillas de contemplación*. Sal Terrae.
- Merton, T. (2005). *In the Dark Before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*. L. R. Szabo (Ed.). New Directions.
- Merton, T. (2007). *El signo de Jonás. Diarios (1946-1952)*. Desclée de Brouwer.
- Merton, T. (2011). *Conjeturas de un espectador culpable*. Sal Terrae.
- Merton, T. (2015). *La voz secreta: Reflexiones sobre mi obra en Oriente y Occidente*. Sal Terrae.
- Mitchell, D. (1991). *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity*. Paulist Press.
- Panikkar, R. (1998). *La Trinidad: Una experiencia humana primordial*. Siruela.
- Park, J. A. (2019). *Thomas Merton's Encounter with Buddhism and Beyond. His Interreligious Dialogue, Inter-Monastic Exchanges, and Their Legacy*. Liturgical Press.
- Petisco, S. (2019). "Das Seelenfünklein: Meister Eckhart o la metáfora de la chispa divina". *Anuario Jurídico y Económico Escurialense*, LII: 395-416.
- Pieris, P. (1988). *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*. Orbis.
- Polkinghorne, J. (Ed.). (2013). *La trinidad y un mundo entrelazado: Relacionalidad en las ciencias físicas y en la teología*. Verbo Divino.
- Postman, N. (1991). *Divertirse hasta morir: El discurso público en la era del show business*. Ediciones de la Tempestad.
- Pramuk, C. (2009). *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*. Liturgical Press 2009).
- Quinn Raab, J. (2005). "A Naked Emperor at the Rim of Chaos: The War on Terror and the Crisis of Language". *Across the Rim of Chaos: Thomas Merton's Prophetic Vision*. A. Stuart (Ed.). In The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland: 48-59.
- Quinn Raab, J. (2021). *New Horizons: Seeds of a Theology of Religious Pluralism in Thomas Merton's Dialogue with D. T. Suzuki*. Pickwick Publications.
- Radler, C. (2010). *Living Without A Why: Meister Eckhart's Mysticism* [CD lectures]. Now You Know Media.
- Radler, C. (2018). "And so the Prajñā Eye Sees a Wide, Impregnable Country: Communal Spirituality in Meister Eckhart, Thomas Merton, Margaret Farelly, and Mahayan Buddhism". In *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 38: 231-251.
- Shannon, W. (2015). "Cuestiones Discutidas". En W. H. Shannon, C. M. Bochen y P. F. O'Connell, *Diccionario de Thomas Merton*. Ed. Mensajero.
- Shannon, W. (2015) "No dualismo". En W. H. Shannon, C. M. Bochen y P. F. O'Connell, *Diccionario de Thomas Merton*. Ed. Mensajero.
- Thurston, B. (2006). *Religious Vows, the Sermon on the Mount and Christian Living*. Liturgical Press.



Sor Caritas Müller de Cazis (2018). *La Trinidad de la Misericordia*. Fuente: Foto de Edwin Javier Rodríguez Acosta, *La espiritualidad lasallista y la escultura "Trinidad de la Misericordia"* (Tesis de Grado), Guatemala de la Asunción: Universidad Rafael Landívar, 2018, 16.

Thomas Merton: the Abyss of Solitude and the “Social Maturing of Love”

Fernando Beltrán Llavador

University of Salamanca
Spain
fdob@usal.es

“Cavern”, “womb”, “cell”, “desert”, “wilderness”, “abyss”, “darkness”, “emptiness”, “poverty”, “indigence”, “no ‘thing’”. This constellation of images in Thomas Merton’s essay “Notes for a philosophy of solitude” suggests conditions of absence, negation and dispossession that, paradoxically, sustain his vision for a profoundly hopeful and constructive agenda of social transformation. And while Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of the most influential poets of his youth, portrayed the nature of our mind as containing mountains and frightful cliffs of fall, elsewhere he asserted with the same poetic conviction that we are cared for beyond measure, for “we are wound / with mercy round and round / as if with air” (Hopkins, 1988: 168-169; 154-155). In the words of Christine M. Bochen, indeed, “Mercy was a thread woven into the very fabric of Merton’s life and theological vision” (Bochen, 2001: 3) and, for Christopher Pramuk, Merton’s work is consonant with the fundamental discovery that mercy reveals to be, in the Gospel, “the divine-human heart of reality”. (Pramuk, 2009: 266)

Merton’s notes on solitude went through different stages because an expanded version of the first manuscript, originally published in French as *Dans le desert de Dieu* in 1955, did not receive the approval of the censors of the order (Shannon, 2002: 113-116; 114-115). In its present form, he begins by acknowledging that all human beings are, in fact, solitary, and mentions the case, “remote from cloistered life”, of Thoreau and Emily Dickinson. (Merton, 1960: 177)

Aware that we cannot live on the margins of society, at the end of his life Merton openly defends a type of marginality deliberately chosen, for:

The office of the monk or the marginal person, the meditative person or the poet is to go beyond death even in this life, to go beyond the dichotomy of life and death and to be, therefore, a witness to life. (Merton, 1973: 306)

In his notes on solitude, Merton points out the role of society, which, in addition to providing protection and care, "gives each individual the chance to transcend himself in the service of others and thus to become a person" (Merton, 1960: 178). For Merton, the person, then, is constructed in relationship, a particular relationship that is donation; not just a *given* but a *giving*, the giving on of one's own self, that is, the modality of relation that builds community¹.

Despite the radical nature of these pages, Merton's reflections do not prescribe isolation, physical alienation or the repudiation of society. On the contrary, he both describes and vindicates a topography of inner solitude that is "a secret country" (about which we learn from María Helena Barrera-Agarwal) or a "palace of nowhere", that is, a non-place (*u-topos*), not because it is impossible to reach or because it does not exist but rather because in it, empty of a false identity, the person "takes upon himself the lonely, barely comprehensible task of working his way through the darkness of his own mystery until he discovers that his mystery and the mystery of God merge into one reality, which is the only reality". (Merton, 1960: 180)

If that is the solitude to which we are called, the society that emerges from it, far beyond what words might suggest, is united in "One Body", inhabited by the Word, whose own language is not subject to their form, nor can it be reduced to thoughts or things, but becomes "the unspeakable beating of a Heart within the heart of one's life" (Merton, 1988: 180). It is "One Body" that utters the world into being and a Word that, in silence, pronounces our flesh. It is both the Word and the world in our bloodstream.

¹ See Fernando Beltrán Llavador, "Thomas Merton: a celebration of the person", *Universal vision: A Centenary Celebration of Thomas Merton*. Fiona Gardner, Keith Griffin and Peter Ellis (Eds.). A special edition of *The Merton Journal* (2014), 21(2), 131-144.

Behind many Merton's writings we find a "child mind", in the sense of Christ, (Gardner, 2015: 3)² with which he identified illusions deeply ingrained in our consciousness and crystallized in social structures, and faced the emperor only to see and name his nakedness, as in Hans Christian Andersen's tale, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, a simile used by Merton in "a kletter to an innocent bystander", which was published in Spanish in *Sur* by Victoria Ocampo in 1959 (Merton; Ocampo, 2010)³.

Amiya Chakravarty, editor of *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, describes a moment that reflects this way of looking and seeing, beyond the shadow and the disguise, at the end of his stay on earth:

One day, in Calcutta, I found him standing in front of our hotel; he simply said, 'I am looking at everything'. And he meant just that —an immense and ceaseless procession of cars—, rickshaws and beggars as well as the daily office crowd moved along the streets; the clouds. [...] But everything for him, even those things that were hurtful and wrong, were a part of some growing fulfillment. Few men have opposed evil —wars and violence— with more consistent openness than he did, but the depth of his consciousness gave his opposition a healing and pervasive quality. One can call this attitude not only opposition but remedial spiritual and transforming power. Throughout his life he challenged the color bar, religious tyranny and economic injustice, and took up the cause of suffering minorities and majorities. (Chakravarty, 1983: 171-172)

With this attitude, at once solitary and solidary, Merton assumed the twofold yet indivisible task of praying and acting in the world, in order to conceive (that is to say, to imagine and to gestate) what educator Paulo Freire called the "*inédito viable*", that which is still "untested yet [is] feasible", (vva on Freire 2020) for "old answers are not sufficient" (Beltrán Llavador, 2016: 131-166). And he did so as an expression of his many-sided personality, trying to discern the real and the false in his own self; unveiling the fictions and deceptions at the root of all sorts of symbolic and real expressions of violence and in the configuration of

² Gardner, F. (2015). *The Only Mind Worth Having: Thomas Merton and the Child Mind*. Cascade Books: 3.

³ See also Quinn Raab (2005).

conventional behaviour, which the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu referred to as *habitus*, (Hernández; Beltrán; Marrero, 2003: 819-888) adopting the original concept of St. Thomas Aquinas. He also did so by denouncing conformism or complacency in the realm of the religious; rejecting abstractions when they serve to whitewash inhuman actions in concrete situations and conflicts; claiming forgiveness and mercy as imperatives of justice; assuming contradictions and giving a profound meaning, far beyond the common sense, to existential paradoxes, many of which he illustrated with wisdom and irony in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. Thus, for Merton, clearly, and although necessary, "solitude is not separation". (Merton, 2003: 52)

In his childhood, Merton had already experienced, in solitude and in society, different modalities of alienation. The school of charity and the elected silence of his monastic profession made it possible for him to discover that another inner experience and other forms of genuine coexistence are possible.

As a result of this education, his prolific and multifaceted work "challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church". (USA Pope Francis address: 2015) After becoming a citizen of the USA, Merton denounced with prophetic authority racial discrimination, the giant's intervention in Vietnam and the deadly use of nuclear force. Through his words and from his hermitage he broke down barriers, built bridges, and brought contemplatives, artists and activists together to explore, with passion and compassion, the spiritual roots of protest and the ultimate reasons for hope.

I will illustrate his efforts to ground, promote, and support a "patient architecture of peace"⁴ —from the abyss of solitude towards a social maturing of love—, with two examples from the interreligious dialogue of

⁴ This image is taken from "Merton's prayer for peace", which he wrote and was read in the House of Representatives by Congressman Frank Kowalski (Connecticut) on the Wednesday in Holy Week of the year 1962. See article by Fernando Beltrán Llavador (2005).

which he was a pioneer⁵ between Zen Buddhism and the Christian faith. Let me first provide some previous background.

Merton saw that the “divine spark”, described by Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1328) as “the highest reason” or “the enlightened understanding”, (Petisco, 2019: 398) resided, in solicitous latency, in every person, without exception; not only that, but it is that invisible light what makes us unique and unifies us within and with each other. Hence his profound intuition that the call to be *monos* or *monachos*, one (with God, with one’s fellow human beings and with oneself) is universal and cannot exclude anyone even if cloistered spaces may be necessary where, with a particularly intense dedication that perhaps may reach a sacramental commitment, this seed of light can be cultivated so that its fire can be rekindled in everyone.

At the same time, it must be said that Merton had already realized that, although this longing is not confined to any particular culture because it is constitutive of the human condition, society is plagued with forms of “mass distraction”, expressions of what Pascal called *divertissement*, “diversion, systematic distraction” (Merton, 1960: 178) that can deviate our attention from the true Light by “amusing ourselves to death”, to use Neil Postman’s graphic image in his book of the same title (Postman, 1985).

In his youth, Merton recognized the articulation of his own personal dilemmas and the contradictions of his time in the 1937 book by Aldous Huxley *Ends and Means*, which played a crucial role in his own conversion. For Merton, if the figure of Jesus Christ is still scandalous today, it is precisely because of his integrity and the utter coherence between his words, his deeds and his being. As Way, Truth and Life, he showed no duplicity between his compassionate action and his merciful vision.

Drawing from the sources of his tradition and building bridges to the East, which others after him keep crossing in both directions, Merton helped to overcome false dichotomies between body and cosmos, love and

⁵ Merton’s specific contribution and his pioneering role in the interreligious, intermonastic and intercontemplative spheres (dialogue and communion) have been addressed in Park (2019).

wisdom, *caritas* and *karuna*, *gnosis* and *agape*, enlightenment and prophecy. (Pieris, 1988: 16)

St. John of the Cross provides us with yet another example of seamless integration of means and ends when he counsels us, in a logic that defies any kind of instrumental or interested calculation: "where there is no love, put love, and you will draw out love" (Juan de la Cruz, 1991: 760). At the very heart of the Christian understanding of self and other as "person", that is made subject rather than object by love, lies the Trinitarian relationship, in a universe experienced as "a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects" (Swimme; Berry, 1994: 243). It is in this relational nature of the person where Merton found a common ground with representatives of other religious traditions in their sincere and shared striving towards peace.

In this regard, I will briefly refer, by way of illustration, to Merton's discovery in the "void" of Hui Neng, (the Sixth Patriarch of the Ch'an or Zen of China) of a "surprising Trinitarian structure" that, even if Merton admitted that "is not theological and not even explicitly or manifestly religious" it meant, for him, "an inevitable fulfillment in love". (Merton, 1967: 40)

In his "Notes for a philosophy of solitude", Merton had already affirmed: "the vocation of solitude is not a vocation to the warm narcissistic dream of a private religion. It is a vocation to become *fully awake*" (Merton, 1988: 184); and this was an aspiration of both Buddhists and Christians, albeit with different emphases.

Discovering a Trinitarian core in the experience of the Void has enormous implications, which he began to elaborate in the essay "Mystics and Zen Masters". It is full of profound and luminous intuitions in which, incidentally, Merton noted that in D.T. Suzuki's translation of Hui Neng's texts, "Suzuki is obviously thinking of Eckhart" (Merton, 1967: 28), to whom Merton himself also turned in his dialogue with Suzuki.

Later, Merton underlined that Dr. Suzuki, as a Zen scholar representative of the Rinzai tradition, in their encounter in New York on June 17, 1964, openly admitted to him: "the most important thing of all is love" (Merton, 1967: 41). Merton records in his diary: "The thing he insisted on most —in

Christianity and Buddhism—love more than enlightenment—”. (Merton; Suzuki, 83)

Merton’s constant concern for mercy, purity of heart and the attainment of peace in light of the beatitudes, which he considers “aspects of love” (Merton, 1968: 26), underpins the vast scope and the poignancy of his message.

Referring to the beatitudes, both the root and the fruit of love —its premise and its promise— in a lecture dealing with the sayings by Saint John of the Cross on the conditions of the solitary bird, Professor Asunción Escribano, of the Pontifical University of Salamanca, made the following remarks:

Their mere utterance entails their realization; like all his promises, the beatitudes as spoken by Christ are made concrete and realized when they are uttered by the One from Whom they emanate... They come true when they are spoken, and they do not only embrace the future but they thread together all times... To that air does the solitary bird point its beak. The novelty of [the] words of Jesus as opposed to those of others... regardless of their power and moral authority, is that this realization includes all forms of language, so that it even... affects the imperatives, which in the New Testament do not oblige anyone but offer in freedom what they contain: ‘Get up, take up your stretcher and go off home’... ‘Follow me’... [or] ‘Lazarus, come out’... Jesus’ whole discourse is thus featured, for he does not say things, but makes them happen. Thus, when Jesus addresses his disciples and conveys to them the message: ‘you are the salt of the earth’ he is not describing them but transforming them, in utter freedom... To us is delegated by derivation that quality of making real what is named when we make the word of God flesh in our life. (Escribano, 2021)

Merton’s engagement in monastic renewal, interfaith dialogue, and social and environmental issues is his personal response to this imperative that is an invitation to the freedom of a way of life characterized by charity, detachment and humility. The beatitudes remind us that, once we are pronounced into the world, our very “ground of birth is Paradise”. (Merton, 2005: 191)

We are, Merton affirms, God's new Paradise wherein "stands Christ Himself, the Tree of Life" (Merton, 1961: 161), the contemplative horizon and the root of compassionate action.

At this point, with a view to balance a perhaps excessive use of abstract language, I would like to invite you to match these notions with concrete faces, situations, stories, events, news, facts, and scenarios which may bring them closer to your experience, for the correlations are there.

Disciples of Christ today are urged both to find intimations of God's reign in the very midst "of this historical and revolutionary time of crisis" (Merton, 1971: 180) and to become signs of divine compassion, seeing and serving Christ in, and being Christ for, those who are most neglected and despised. (O'Connell, 2015: 240)

And while the beatitudes entail a way of seeing the world through Christ's merciful eyes and acting accordingly, Buddha's realization of the emptiness—that is, the transparent purity and pristine quality—of everything, set in motion an eightfold path of liberation out of compassion for all sentient beings.

Just before his death, Merton rendered his illumination in Asia in a seemingly Buddhist guise: "everything is emptiness and everything is compassion" (Merton, 1973: 235). On the other hand, his epiphany is to be situated within his recognition that the essence of the monastic life was concerned with "this business of inner transformation", another way of expressing Cassian's words on the need for every monastic observance to tend toward purity of heart (Merton, 1973: 340)⁶.

Regarding this "seeing" with a pure heart, empty of obstacles and filled, instead, with mercy, Bonnie Thurston timely explains that for ancient people the eye was thought to work like a lamp projecting inner light onto objects which could only then be seen. The eye, therefore, both reflects and is a reflection of the heart. If the heart is cleansed, empty like a luminous and cloudless sky, the eye is "single", that is, "simple" and

⁶ Slightly adapted excerpts, preceding and following this paragraph, a further contextualization of the teachings of Cassian, and a different but complementary development of the topic of this essay can be found in Beltrán Llavador, F. (2014). "Landscapes of redemption: Thomas Merton's vision of the world from the Mount", *The Merton Annual. Studies in Culture, Spirituality and Social Concerns*. Vol. 27: 133-148.

“sincere”, casting with equanimity the light of heaven, which suffuses the soul, on earth. In Scripture, she adds, “God dwells in light and gives light” (Thurston, 2006: 53). Thus, when Canadian Sister Elaine MacInnes, a Catholic member of the religious order Our Lady’s Missionaries and a Zen teacher, asked her own Buddhist teacher what he thought prayer should be for Christians, he responded without any hesitation: “It should be the same as for a Buddhist. Prayer is light sitting in light”. (MacInnes, 1996: xviii)

The New Testament revolves around the interplay of seeing and acting from the heart. And this is why “when we ‘see’ properly, we see the needs of those around us and respond to them” (Thurston, 2006: 54). In other words, the radiance of light dwelling in light radiates as “mercy within mercy within mercy”. (Merton, 1981: 362)

As for emptiness, realized as the spring of compassion, Merton’s deep intuition of its Trinitarian structure has been approached from the views of committed representatives of the Buddhist and Christian traditions. From an interreligious perspective, creating has been regarded as the emptying or *kenosis* of the Father, sanctification as the *kenosis* of the Holy Spirit, and redemption as the *kenosis* of the Son. We can also partake in this *kenosis* by emptying ourselves, with a threefold projection: for our own inner transformation, to effect structural changes in society, and to commune with the sophianic foundation of the cosmos.

In spite of its somewhat abstract formulation, this is existentially incarnated every time Jesus abandoned is found and cared for in everyone who suffers around us, “the least” of our brothers and sisters (Matthew, 25:40), as strangers, in hunger and thirst, in poverty, in illness and in prison.

In this light, a resonance has been found between the “purity of heart” emphasized by Merton, of which grows merciful action—living and loving for the sake of others, and *bodhicitta*, the very heart of enlightenment. Jesus forsaken embodies the redemptive *kenosis* of God, where the unity of heaven and earth meet—.

While the above, as Donald W. Mitchell holds, defines “the vocation of the church as the suffering servant” (Mitchell, 1991: 77), for Masao Abe, the emptying of the self frees the person to live fully and compassionately

for the sake of the suffering world (Henry; Swearer 1989: 20-30). In this regard, emptiness is to be understood as a verb rather than as a noun, as a process and not as a state, that is, as "a dynamic and creative function" (Cobbs; Ives, 1990: 144). That resonates with the understanding that we are part of a sort of Trinitarian dance -known in theological terms as *perichoresis* (Greshake, 2002: 29), and may provide a wider context to further appreciate and to gratefully accept Merton's invitation to join what he called the "general dance" (Merton, 2003: 9).

In the third part of "Notes for a philosophy of solitude", on "spiritual poverty", Merton defines this "deep self" as "Christ Himself" and states, "unless one becomes empty and alone, he cannot give himself in love". (Merton, 1960: 206-207)

Professor Greshake holds that "from a Christian perspective the 'I' can only be true to his or herself by breaking its boundaries in an attempt to reach out towards 'you' and 'him/her', thus becoming a 'we'. This can happen if the basic assumption is not that 'I think' but that 'I believe in love'" (Greshake, 2001: 312). This vision does not only purport a thorough revision of the epistemological tenets of modernity regarding the understanding of the individual as a thinking being, but it also provides hermeneutical keys for a new vision of cultures, religions, and societies. In fact, the commandment to love involves a greater openness to and gratitude for the unique and specific value of the other. Difference and unity, then, are no longer mutually exclusive but are coexistent and dynamic principles, and this not as something to be found in a divine "essence" outside the order of creation but at the heart of all reality. Similarly, Raimon Panikkar saw the Trinity as a primordial human experience. What is more, he considered Reality itself to be intrinsically Trinitarian, and he coined the word "cosmotheandric" to define its mystery, which pervades our whole being and embraces the cosmos, God, and the person. (Pannikar, 1998: 99)⁷

I would like next to further exemplify the inseparable relationship between the experience of solitude and the social projection of love in Merton, using another of his writings on Zen, still little known among Spanish-speaking mertonians, which I had the opportunity to translate a

⁷ For a further development of this vision, see Pannikar, R. (1993).

few years ago for a school of Zen practitioners, mostly Catholics, who follow the path opened by the Jesuit missionary Enomiya-Lassalle, whom Merton intended to visit during his stay in Asia. It may be helpful again to frame it first with a brief background commentary.

I deem it important to begin by noting one of Joseph Quinn Raab's conclusions in his book on Merton's dialogue with Dr. Suzuki. Raab emphasizes that, despite their growing mutual understanding, Merton stressed the need for inner illumination, or *mysticism*, to be married "to the prophecy of the Incarnate Word who advocates for the poor and oppressed, stands in judgment of our injustice, liberates captives, redeems, heals, calls" (Quinn Raab, 2021: 22-23), and translates the light of the Spirit into acts of love. Let me add that Rita M. Gross, in her volume on Buddhism after patriarchy, which I was also privileged to translate, similarly defended, this time from the vantage point of Vajrayana Buddhism, the importance of incorporating the prophetic impulse of Judeo-Christian inspiration to the wisdom of Buddhist awakening. "Inner" liberations cannot be alienated from historically situated struggles against all kinds of oppression⁸.

Henceforth, then, the second example will come from an essay by Merton, this time not on the Sixth Patriarch, but on his successor (Merton, 1988: 3-14). Although I will use lengthy excerpts from the text, I will at the same time dispense with other important comments and nuances that Merton himself introduces in his writing in order to highlight only a few aspects relevant to the theme of solitude and society in Thomas Merton⁹.

Brother Patrick Hart, who served as Merton's secretary, explained in a preliminary background note that when preparing the first volume of *The Merton Annual* in 1988, twenty years after Merton's death, an unpublished manuscript by Thomas Merton was "unearthed". It was the introduction to the translations of Shen Hui by Richard S. Y. Chi, which had been mentioned in the correspondence between Merton and Dr. Chi in the first volume of Merton's letters (Merton, 1985: 121-125). In the first

⁸ See also: <https://www.society-buddhist-christian-studies.org/>

⁹ A theme studied in depth in Fernando Beltrán Llavador (2020), *La encendida memoria: aproximación a Thomas Merton*. Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans: https://www.unebook.es/es/libro/la-encendida-memoria-aproximacion-a-thomas-merton-2-ed-_268622

letter, dated December 26, 1967, Merton wrote that he was reading "the excellent ms. on Shen Hui [...] with great pleasure" (Merton, 1988: 3).

Shen Hui, the Seventh Patriarch and successor to Hui Neng, was a figure of decisive importance, not inferior to that of the Sixth Patriarch, but less known, in the development of Chinese Zen Buddhism¹⁰.

After receiving Merton's introduction to his translations of Shen Hui's writings, Dr. Chi replied to Merton on April 23: "Your introduction is really a masterpiece. This is the first time I have seen anything written by a non-Chinese with such a deep understanding of Ch'an" (Merton, 1988: 4). The last letter of their exchange was written by Merton on November 21, 1968 from Darjeeling, only a couple of weeks before his death in Bangkok, and in it, he expresses his wish for copies of the book to be sent to the Dalai Lama and other people in India who would be interested.

Merton begins by noting that, for Shen Hui, *dhyana* (meditation) and *prajna* (contemplative insight or wisdom) were not limited to moments of silence and "quiet sitting" in the forest or meditation hall but, rather, his teaching itself was *dhyana* and *prajna* in one (Merton, 1988: 6). He adds that "the uniqueness of a purely Asian approach" was based on the "insights that emanate from the void and from *wu-wei* (non-action) (Merton, 1988: 8). And he continues:

What really marks him out as extraordinary is that his action was at the same time his Ch'an, his contemplation (though the word simply does not apply here). The impact of his action, preaching and teaching derived not from strength and application of will-power (still less of will-to-power) but from a will-less-ness endowed with lucid and total efficacy. (Merton, 1988: 8)

In short, Merton later writes:

Shen Hui's teaching is not that the mind *must be* emptied, but that it is empty in the first place, and what 'fills' it is the ground of volition or craving that Buddhism calls *avidya*, the ignorance that wills itself as a willing self. To will the mind to be empty is to fill it

¹⁰ For an authoritative context of his role in the history of Zen Buddhism, see Dumoulin (1994).

with a ground of willed content and therefore to will it to be not-empty. What then? (Merton, 1988: 10)

What, indeed, then? For this seems to threaten the very foundations of any sort of “spiritual” project, aspiration, or ambition. The question, formulated in different ways, was a preoccupation of Merton’s, and its consequences -at once religious and social- were evident in the notes he made in his diary on November 5, 1968, in Asia, where he anticipates that Buddhist dialectic, which he was studying at the moment, and “alienation” might be a good theme for his Bangkok conference. And he pointed out that both Marxism and Buddhism hold that “a fundamental egocentrism, ‘providing for the self’ (with possible economic implications in a more modern context) leads to dogmatism about the self-either that it is eternal or that it does not exist at all”. Merton stands for an attitude of some “freedom from predetermination by economic and sociological factors” but he also sees the need of a critical awareness to experience the “I” “dynamically in...a chain of economic or other causations and coordinated interrelationships”. Otherwise, he writes, “the notion of ‘I’ implies the notion of ‘mine’. I am ‘my property’ —I am constituted by what separates me from ‘not I’— i.e., by what is mine ‘and not anybody else’s’” (Merton, 1973: 105). That is selfish, not solidary; solipsistic, not solitary. In practice this is equivalent to what MacPherson, a Canadian Professor of Political Economy defined as “possessive individualism”, to describe the fact that from the seventeenth century the individual, in the West, came to be regarded as “the proprietor of his own person and capacities, for which he owes nothing to society”. (MacPherson, 1962: 263)

In his essay on Shen Hui, Merton observes that, while he “took as his framework the familiar Buddhist teaching about *silā* (morality), *dhyāna* (meditation) and *prajñā* (wisdom, insight, contemplation)”, he did his most to avoid identifying them with achievements, exterior goals, possessions or objects of the ego, fruits or outcomes associated to “the ingrained defect of voluntaristic quietism”. Thousands of monks engaged in this kind “static, inert, dead, self-defeating routine of concentration”, Merton noted, could provide “a stabilizing religious base” and serve “the purposes of a conservative and authoritarian social establishment”. (Merton, 1988: 13)

At this point, it is worth mentioning that Professor Charlotte Radler (2010) points to something very similar to the above in Eckhart's critique of a "mercantile spirituality" in the German Sermons 1 to 16b. (Eckhart, 2009)

For instance, in Sermon I, Eckhart preaches:

See, that is how your temple is cleared of merchants! The man who neither considers himself nor anything else but God alone and God's glory, he is truly free from all taint of commerce in his deeds, and seeks naught of his own just as God is entirely free in all His works and seeks not His own. (Eckhart, 2009: 67-68)

And in Sermon V:

What is my life? That which is moved from within by itself. What I move from without is not alive. So if we live with him, we must also co-operate with him from within, so that we do not work from without, we must be moved from that out of which we live, which is by him... [but] you should not bind yourself to any mode, for God is not in any mode, neither this nor that. (Eckhart, 2009: 105-106)

In a similar vein, returning to the essay on Shen Hui, Merton added:

As Shen Hui put it...: 'When a hovering bird stays motionless at a point in the sky it will inevitably fall to the ground. Similarly when one practices the "non abiding mind" and yet still abides in something, he will not be emancipated'. This brings us to the real point. If *dhyana*, *prajna*, *sila* are all one, and if they are nothing but life itself, then the thing to do is not to stop life, like the bird stopping itself in mid-flight... Instead of being like a bird with an absurd project to stop dead in mid-air and thus attain *prajna*, one should go on flying with the awareness that *prajna*, *dhyana* and *sila* are *not something other than the flight itself*. Life itself is all of these... Life lived without attachment is itself meditation and enlightenment. One does not meditate in order to live, or live in order to meditate, one lives meditating, and meditates living, and the two are not separate. (Merton, 1988: 14)

Both the tone and the content of these words show a clear affinity with the following words by Meister Eckhart:

If a man asked life for a thousand years, ‘*Why do you live?*’ if it could answer it would only say, ‘I live because I live.’ That is because life lives from its own ground, and gushes forth from its own. Therefore it lives without *Why*, because it lives for itself. And so, if you were to ask a genuine man who acted from his own ground, ‘*Why do you act?*’ if he were to answer properly he would simply say, ‘I act because I act’. (Eckhart, 2009: 110)

In the entry on nondualism that William H. Shannon wrote for *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (2002), he both captured much of the above with great insight and summed it up in very simple terms as follows:

Merton realized that it is not a question of talking yourself out of duality or reasoning your way into unity; rather you must take the time to open yourself to experience —the experience of oneness with God and in God oneness with all that is—. (Shannon, 2002: 330)

Merton was concerned above all with that “fatal division in Western thinking”, which he diagnosed as the ground of our “obsession with will, achievement, production, self-affirmation and power”. (Merton, 1988: 15)

In this “consonance of voices” that cuts across time and space and whose reverberation reaches us in the present, we may today hear Hui-neng preaching about the perfume of wisdom and St. Bernard about the scent of compassion and perceive in both a familiar resemblance.

In *The Platform Sutra*, Hui-neng addresses his audience as follows:

The *prajña* incense... means that our mind is free from all impediments, that we constantly introspect our essence of mind with wisdom, that we refrain from doing... evil deeds, that we do... good acts, yet we do not let our mind become attached to [the fruits of] such actions, and that we are respectful toward our superiors, considerate to our inferiors, and sympathetic to the destitute and the poor. (Hui-neng, 1990: 100)

For his part, St. Bernard preaches:

Happy the soul... whosoever thou art that art such, so saturated with the dew of mercy, so abounding in the bowels of piety, so

making thyself all things to all... in order to be ready always and everywhere to run to the help and relief of others, in short, so dead to thyself that thou mayst live to all beside —thou assuredly art the happy possessor of this... — most precious ointment. Thy hands have distilled this liquor containing all manner of sweetness! It shall not be dried up in evil time; neither shall the heat of persecution exhaust it. (Bernard, 1920: 100-101)

Shen Hui, Eckhart, St. Bernard and Merton's perception of reality, their "contemplation" and their "action", imbued with wisdom and mercy, continue to have concrete social, political and economic implications. (Radler, 2018: 245)

In his preface to the Vietnamese edition of *No Man is an Island*, Merton makes a comment where, when he referred to Vietnam, today I would like to suggest that, instead, we may read Afghanistan or any other zone of conflict on our planet:

The conditions of our world are simply an outward expression of our own thoughts and desires. The misfortune of Viet Nam today is that the war there expresses not merely the thoughts and desires of the people of Viet Nam but, unfortunately, the inner confusion of men in other nations in different parts of the earth. The sickness of the entire earth is now erupting in Viet Nam. But perhaps also the sickness of the entire earth may be cured there [...]. (Merton, 1989: 125-126)

Being aware that we partake in an "entangled world", (Polkinghorne, 2010) one that is deeply relational, involves giving primacy to compassion, which can only emerge from an inner solitude that is essential in order not to reify the others, but is oriented towards them because only with others can we form a common unity, that is, a "community" founded on a *communio* that reflects and celebrates the Trinitarian reality. Otherwise, even the noblest efforts at "self-realization" and some well-intentioned and undoubtedly "effective" mindfulness techniques can become subtle expressions of narcissism. We can easily get trapped in an alienating spirituality that reinforces an individualism seeking to become the owner of the flame of love that is only alive when it is shared. Or we may fall prey to a spiritual mercantilism at the service of an inhuman capitalism that seeks to "pacify" any critical conscience indignant with and refusing to

assume as “normal” and as “normative” the existence of structural injustices.

As he approached the end of his life, Merton came to claim the streets as places for celebration; not only sites of resistance, but also spaces of creation and recreation:

They with their world have turned our lives into rubble. But we with love will set our lives on fire and turn the rubble back into gold. This time the gold will have real worth... not... just crap [but] the infinite value of human identity flaming up in a heart that is confident in loving... That is the beginning of the transformation. One day, you'll see! (Merton, 1979: 53)

In sum, interdependence, justice and celebration —a laudatory science that sings what is created and creates what it praises, go hand in hand—. The mind has mountains and frightful cliffs, but when we dare to penetrate the abyss of our own solitude, we may find that we are vast: we contain multitudes.

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton writes:

The more I am able to affirm others, to say ‘yes’ to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am. I am fully real if my heart says *yes* to *everyone*. (Merton, 1989: 144)

Dominican nun Caritas Müller’s depiction of the Trinity expresses in a simple and didactic way the teaching of spiritual masters and pilgrims of the Absolute such as Meister Eckhart, Hui Neng and his successor Shen Hui, St. John of the Cross, St. Bernard, and Merton himself. Their lessons both trace back and bring forth three reflections of God’s radiance:

Grace: signifying gratitude, as we are created in the image of God, and gratuitousness: the very core of our inner freedom, which is priceless because it is not an object and, being *no thing*, it cannot be possessed. Breathed by the Spirit of Love in and out of us, grace impinges our action in the world with life and creativity.

Celebration: the fruit of wisdom that, by praising rather than oppressing, constitutes the greatest form of power, the capacity to know as we are known. Creating and recreating, time itself is

redeemed, for we were loved even before the foundation of the world. In the words of Abraham Heschel: "At the beginning was the song, and praise is man's response to the neverending beginning". (Heschel, 2003: 232)

And justice: the indelible seal of our dignity and the expression of a "social maturing of love [that] implies at the same time the growth of a certain inner solitude". (Merton, 1960: 206)

This is the solitude and kinship of One Body that, broken yet healing, binds us together—in cloisters and streets, in deserts and gardens—, within the fabric of a *mercy-filled* reality.

References

- Beltrán Llavador, F. (200%). "Unbinding Prometheus: Thomas Merton and the 'Patient Architecture of Peace'" In: Stuart A. (Ed.). *Across the Rim of Chaos: Thomas Merton's Prophetic Vision*. The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland: 27-47.
- Beltrán Llavador, F. (2016). "Las viejas respuestas no bastan: introducción a la figura de Thomas Merton a los 100 años de su nacimiento". *Cistercium*, 26: 131-166.
- Beltrán Llavador, F. (2020). *La encendida memoria: aproximación a Thomas Merton*. Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans.
- Bergoglio, J. (Pope Francis) (September 24, 2015). *Address at the U.S. Capitol*. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html
- Bernard, S. (1920). "On the ointment of piety" (Sermon 12). *St. Bernard's Sermons on the Canticle of Canticles*, Vol. I. Dublin, Belfast Cork, Waterford: Brown and Nolan.
- Cobb, J. B. Jr.; Ives, I. (Ed.). (1990). *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*. Maryknoll. Orbis.
- Eckhart, M. (2009). *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*. M. O'C. Walshe (Ed.). A Herder & Herder Book-The Crossroad Publishing Company.
- Escribano, A. [Asunción Escribano] (March 4, 2021). *El pájaro solitario. Itinerario creyente: de la duda al testimonio*. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xuuyf2YSfAQ&t=10s>
- Gardner, F. (2015). *The Only Mind Worth Having: Thomas Merton and the Child Mind*. Cascade Books.
- Greshake, G. (2001). *El Dios uno y trino: una teología de la Trinidad*. Herder.
- Greshake, G. (2002). *Creer en el Dios uno y trino: una clave para entenderlo*. Sal Terrae.

- Gross, R. M. (1993). *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. Albany. State University of New York Press.
- Henry, P.; Swearer, D. (1989). *For the Sake of the World: The Spirit of Buddhist and Christian Monasticism*. Fortress Press.
- Hernández, F.; Beltrán, J.; Marrero, A. (2003). *Teorías sobre sociedad y educación*. Tirant lo Blanc.
- Heschel, A. (2003). "On Prayer". B. Bruteau (Ed.). In *Merton and Judaism: Recognition, Repentance, and Renewal. Holiness in Words*. Fons Vitae.
- Hui-neng (1990). *The Diamond Sutra & The Sutra of Hui-neng*. A. F. Price and W. Mou-lam (Trans.). Shambala.
- Hopkins, G. M. (1988). *Poemas completos* [bilingual edition]. M. Linares Megías (Ed.). Universidad de Deusto-Mensajero.
- John of the Cross (1991). "Letter 26 to Madre María de la Encarnación, discalced Carmelite in Segovia, July 6, 159", *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*. K. Kavanaugh, OCD and O. Rodríguez (Eds.). OCD. Institute of Carmelite Studies.
- MacInnes, E. (1996). *Light sitting in Light. A Christian experience in Zen*. HarperCollins.
- MacPherson, C. B. (1962). *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*. Oxford University Press.
- Merton, T. (1960). *Disputed Questions*. Farrar, Straus and Cudahy.
- Merton, T. (1960). "Notes for a philosophy of solitude". *Disputed Questions*. Farrar, Straus and Cudahy.
- Merton, T. (1961). *The New Man*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Merton, T. (1967). *Mystics and Zen Masters*. The Noonday Press.
- Merton, T. (1968). *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Merton, T. (1971). *Contemplation in a World of Action*. Doubleday.
- Merton, T. (1973). *The Asian Journal*. N. Burton Stone, B. P. Hart, and J. Laughlin (Eds.). New Directions.
- Merton, T. (1979). "The Street Is for Celebration". *Love and Living*. Sheldon Press.
- Merton, T. (1981). *The Sign of Jonas*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Merton, T. (1985). *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience*. W. H. Shannon (Ed.). Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Merton, T.; Suzuki, D. T. (1988). *Encounter*. R. E. Daggy (Ed.). Larkspur Press.
- Merton, T. (1988). "The Zen Insight of Shen Hui". *The Merton Annual*, 1: 3-14.

- Merton, T. (1989). *Conjectures of a Guilty Bytsander*. Doubleday.
- Merton, T. (1989). *"Honorable Reader": Reflections on My Work*. Crossroad.
- Merton, T. (1997). *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*. *Journals, Vol. 5: 1963-1965*. R. E. Daggy (Ed.). HarperCollins.
- Merton, T. (2003). *New Seeds of Contemplation*. Shambala.
- Merton, T. (2005). *In the dark before dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*. L. R. Szabo (Ed.). New Directions.
- Merton, T. ; Ocampo, V. (2010). *Fragmentos de un regalo. Correspondencia y artículos y reseñas publicados en SUR*. Juan Javier Negri (Trans. and notes). Sur.
- Mitchell, D. (1991). *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity*. Paulist Press.
- O'Connell, P. (2002). "Kingdom of God". W. H. Shannon, C. M. Bochen, and P. F. O'Connell (Eds.). In *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, 238-241.
- Pannikar, R. (1993). *The Cosmotheandric Experience*. Orbis.
- Panikkar, R. (1998). *La Trinidad: Una experiencia humana primordial*. Siruela.
- Park, J. A. (2019). *Thomas Merton's Encounter with Buddhism and beyond. His Interreligious Dialogue, Inter-Monastic Exchanges, and Their Legacy*. Liturgical Press.
- Petisco, S. (2019). *Das Seelenfünklein: Meister Eckhart o la metáfora de la chispa divina*, *Anuario Jurídico y Económico Escurialense*, LII: 395-416.
- Pieris, A. (1988). *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*. Orbis.
- Polkinghorne, J. (Ed.). (2010). *The Trinity and an Entangled World: Relationality in Physical Science and Theology*. Eedmas Pub.
- Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Viking Penguin.
- Quinn Raab, J. (2021) *New Horizons: Seeds of a Theology of Religious Pluralism in Thomas Merton's Dialogue with D. T. Suzuki*Pickwick. Publications.
- Quinn Raab, J. (2005). "A Naked Emperor at the Rim of Chaos: The War on Terror and the Crisis of Language", *Across the Rim of Chaos: Thomas Merton's Prophetic Vision*. A. Stuart (Ed.). The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 48-59.
- Radler, C. (2018). "And so the Prajña Eye Sees a Wide, Impregnable Country: Communal Spirituality in Meister Eckhart, Thomas Merton, Margaret Farelly, and Mahayan Buddhism", *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 38, 231-251.
- Radler, C. (2010). *Living Without A Why: Meister Eckhart's Mysticism* [CD lectures]. Now You Know Media.
- Shannon, W. (2002). "Nondualism". W. H. Shannon, C. M. Bochen, and P. F. O'Connell (Eds.). In *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*. 328-330.

Swimme, B.; Berry, T. (1994). *The Universe Story*. HarperOne.

Thurston, B. B. (2006). *Religious Vows, the Sermon on the Mount and Christian Living*. Liturgical Press.

Isusi-Fagoaga, R. et al. (2020). Monograph on Paulo Freire on the 25th anniversary of his lecture in Valencia (Spain) and on the eve of the centenary of his birth, *Creativity and Educational Innovation Review* 4:
<https://ojs.uv.es/index.php/creativity>

A Close Reading of Two Merton Poems: For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943' & 'Grace's House

Michael Anthony Woodward

Science and Faith Institute,
Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum
Italy
shotwithspirit@gmail.com

For My Brother: Reported Missing In Action, 1943

I like this poem. It's one I keep going back to, and find more there to enjoy. It stands out among Merton's *Thirty Poems* in which it first appeared in 1944, stands out in the *Selected Poems*, and stands out as one of Merton's most fully achieved poems.

It is also distinctive for its subject matter. The dreadful hurt of losing his brother could only happen once. Merton rose to meet the brutal finality of his brother's death with a poem of weight and depth, providing a lasting memorial and a shaft of resurrection light in the darkness of his loss. In so doing, he has achieved something universal about trusting God's love in the face of death. It is a mature poem of clear-eyed hope.

We have a short time to spend on a poem with many layers and considerable subtlety. So I'm not going into possible sources in St Bernard or an elegy by Catullus for his own brother, and I'm not going in for a line by line commentary. I want to simply move through the text and point up a few moments of special resonance.

But first I would like to set the poem in the context of the relationship between John Paul and his elder brother. On the whole, I am dubious about introducing material from outside a poem. But in this case I think it enriches our reading to be reminded of the salient points.

I think it is fair to describe their early relationship as troubled. Tom understandably felt his place as *le fils unique* usurped, and his exclusive claim on his mother's attention diluted. Tom was three and a half when John Paul was born.

Tom wrote:

He was a child with a much serener nature than mine... I remember that... in the long evenings when he was put to bed before the sun went down, instead of protesting or fighting, as I did when I had to go to bed, he would lie upstairs in his crib, and we would hear him singing a little tune. (Merton, 1948: 8)

The contrast contributed to the young Merton's sense of himself as unworthy and unsatisfactory. In their early life the brothers were not soulmates or even playmates. With an age gap of nearly four years it's not surprising.

We have that terribly poignant image Merton wrote about in *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

The picture I get of my brother John Paul is this: standing in a field, about a hundred yards away from the clump of sumachs where we have built our hut, is this little perplexed five-year old kid in short pants and a kind of leather jacket standing quite still, with his arms hanging down at his sides, and gazing in our direction, afraid to come any nearer on account of the stones, as insulted as he was saddened, and his eyes full of indignation and sorrow. And yet he does not go away. We shout at him to get out of there, to beat it, and go home, and wing a couple of more rocks in that direction, and he does not go away. We tell him to play in some other place. He does not move. (Merton, 1948: 23)

After Merton's mother's death in 1921, much of their growing-up was apart: Tom away with his father or at school, John Paul with Ruth's family on Long Island. Later on, they grew closer, becoming movie addicts and going camping together. With the war and American neutrality, John Paul enlisted by crossing the border and joining the Royal Canadian Air Force in Toronto. The war brought a concentration to their relationship. John Paul spent his 1942 embarkation leave at Gethsemani. Tom saw John Paul for the first time in the uniform of Sergeant Observer. He had been

trained to read aerial photographs, and distinguish what was going on on the ground -he was not a pilot as Monica Furlong's book maintains (1980: 132).

John Paul had decided to become a Catholic, and it was wisely arranged for Tom to do most of the instructing, even though he was simply a novice rather than a priest. They spent time talking among the Stations of the Cross. Before John Paul left the brothers received Holy Communion together.

Michael Mott writes:

The Chapel of our Lady of Victories was ever after a place for Merton where a greater mystery than reconciliation had taken place. Here, finally, he had been helped to help his brother. Before they had been little more to each other than orphans of the same parents. (Mott, 1984: 21)

John Paul left in July 1942 for England. By early spring he had married a young radio operator in the A.T.S. (Auxiliary Territorial Service: the Women's branch of the British Army), Margaret Evans. News of this happy event came to Merton on Easter Monday in a letter held over for him because of Lent. The next day he was called to the Abbot to receive a telegram saying that his brother had been reported missing ten days earlier. Soon the details came though of his broken back, his delirium during hours adrift with his crew in a rubber dinghy, calling for water; his burial at sea¹. Touchingly, his RAF Navigator crewmate wrote (John Paul was Bombardier on this mission),

Merton was in the last stages of exhaustion, being severely injured... but it never occurred to him to let go of the pilot. He was an American, and if I ever hear anyone running down the Yankees in future, I will have a word ready.

Thérèse Lentfoehr tells us that the holograph manuscript of the poem is dated April 28, the day after the telegram (1979: 9). So Merton probably began the poem, and may even have finished it, without knowing the details of John Paul's death. I can't be as certain of this as Patrick

¹ The details of Sgt. Merton's injuries and death can be found at: <http://aircrewremembered.com/lupton-selwyn.html>

O'Connell (1993) seems to be. The poem itself, however, deals wholeheartedly with a death: there is no sense of a question mark. So the title tag "Reported Missing" takes on a special poignancy: it is, perhaps, a subliminal denial of the facts, bearing a vestigial hope that it was all a mistake.

That background gives us an insight into the weight of emotion carried by the opening "Sweet brother". It has taken death to call this "sweet" forth. It contains Tom's remorse for past hostility, regret for the words never spoken; appreciation of what he has suddenly lost; the pathos of his brother's untimely death.

Drawing on his very recent experience of Lenten fasts and the reality of manual work in the Kentucky sunshine, in the first stanza Merton weaves this stuff of his daily life into a parallel structure redolent of the psalms he was chanting by night and day in the Abbey church. His own discomfort is offered as a sacrifice, becoming "flowers", "food" and "water" to bring comfort to his brother.

What impresses throughout the poem is its sombre, restrained ritual. It needs that strong framework to contain the intensity of the emotion. The mechanical rhythm and clipped vocabulary work to the same end.

The first sentence of the second stanza deals with the pain of not knowing where his "poor" brother's body lies. Ironically, John Paul, the trained Sergeant Observer, would have been the one best equipped to find it. But it is the "unhappy spirit" of his brother, and its fate in the "landscape of disaster" that preoccupies the poet from now on.

Merton goes on to offer more than his physical discomfort. He moves from "labor" to "life" and "blood" to "breath" and "death": anything and everything to give his brother peace.

But then, in the fourth stanza, the audacity and impracticality of this rhetoric is acknowledged. The perspective of time is introduced, with the "flags... fallen into dust", as the poet accepts there is no salvation or restitution, he can possibly bring to his brother alone. Indeed, Tom's need is as great as John Paul's. Here, at the end of the fourth stanza, the One who can redeem is revealed, the vital third presence capable of breathing life into the touching, but one-sided and ultimately sterile, dialogue of aspirations the poem has so far been.

For the suffering that has been inflicted on John Paul and offered by the poet is not wasted. It is taken up in the transforming power of the Easter mystery. The poet and John Paul will ultimately share the same death and, in doing so, share in Christ's atonement and resurrection.

This is developed particularly well in the final stanza, alive with resonances. Now, the brothers have different faces of Christ in common. John Paul has the Christ of Calvary, "slain" (and notice the stark appropriateness of the triple-stressed, "Christ lies slain..."); Merton identifies with the Christ who actively mourns: for his friend Lazarus, for the intractable city of Jerusalem. This grief is redemptive. Helpless as his brother is now, the Christ-tears are his ransom. As the paradoxes, images and tenses leap and dart, future and present time inter-penetrate. The tears become bells, suggestive of Gethsemani's own bells, tolling to summon John Paul home. A home, ironically, was the thing both brothers lacked for many years-like Christ during his public life.

Here we connect directly with the events and liturgy of Holy Week. There is an echo of the Last Supper: the money hints at Judas, and Tom's sense of his own past betrayals. But in Merton's notebook the poem appears among notes on the liturgy for Holy Saturday (Lentfoehr, 1979: 9). Deeply embedded in the writing process and the final poem is the silent waiting of Holy Saturday, and the drama of the Harrowing of Hell. John Paul becomes one of those released by Christ's power in his descent to Hell to open its gates after his death on the Cross, and before his physical resurrection.

Special attention should be paid at the rhymes here. After the metronomic pairing of "full" with "full" and "hand" with "land", the poem ends with the deft uncertainty of an internal rhyme "tomb/home". These two, in turn, are played off against another near-rhyme, "come" which rests between them in the middle of the final line. Their discordant music denotes a painful grappling with events that eschews pat answers. The triad itself is suggestive of John Paul, Tom and Christ: John Paul, the "tomb"; Merton the advocate for his brother who is crying, "come"; Christ, the Alpha & Omega, their destined "home".

At its end the poem has achieved a unity of sorts, a complex unity of sorts; but it is one based on hope and things unseen, and contains the dissonance of separation.

And finally, the last line. Few last lines of poems, and very few of Merton's last lines, contain any more punctuation than a stray comma. The last line tends to come in on the surge of the tide, finishing off with a flourish. But here we have a colon. To me it's like a fulcrum, a pivot or a hinge, almost the opening of a door. It's a gateway of hope, not in a naive or sentimental way but, in its movement of return, it subtly communicates a rooted belief in the communion possible between the living and the dead, and speaks of the gathering to come, when what has been lost will be restored, and the dead will be raised to new life.

'Grace's House'

I'd like to acknowledge in this appreciation of 'Grace's House' a great debt to Pat O'Brien, whose paper, 'To Credit Marvels: Thomas Merton's "Grace's House"', followed mine at the Oakham Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain & Ireland in 2000, and in the subsequent publication, *Thomas Merton: A Mind Awake in the Dark* (2002). I've often used it with appropriate attribution when discussing poems at weekends, rather than trying to re-present what he writes in an adapted form, since Pat himself says it so well and succinctly. With a few relevant adaptations and additions, I have done that here. So please credit Pat for his subtle elucidation of 'Grace's House'.

I hope you find the discovery of young Grace Sisson's original drawing of her 'House' as helpful, charming and illuminating as I did when I came across it.

Merton is nearly fifty when 'Grace's House' is written and it is part of a collection of poetry, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* published in 1963 which includes poems experimental, "angry, and apocalyptic" along with poems like this which as Pat O'Brien says, "dance to fresh, bracing air" (77).

It is a transitional collection for Merton, pointing towards his final two longer masterpieces, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire* (Paul Pearson has written illuminatingly about these). In those works he finds a way to bring together all the elements of his poetry and life. He produces two sustained masterpieces with long, kaleidoscope structures allowing him to bring into creative tension many different things.

Emblems of a Season of Fury contains several poems in which Merton further explores the possibilities of anti-poetry which started with 'Original Child Bomb' (1962). These would include a very current refugee poem 'A Picture of Lee Ying', and 'Chant to be used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces', which Lawrence Ferlinghetti used to great effect in the 1961 *Journal for the Protection of All Beings*.

Patrick O'Brien states,

Generally it is accepted that Nicanor Parra is the founder of the Anti-Poem, but in a 1965 letter to him Merton says:

I am happy that you are thinking about maybe translating some poems of mine: you will find that before knowing your work I had written some antipoems.

Indeed the influence of the poetry of South America will play like background pan music to much of *Emblems* and reach orchestral level in his *A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadro Concerning Giants*. (O'Brien, 2002: 77)

We also find Merton's momentous *Hagia Sophia*, just nonchalantly tacked on as the last poem. "This central text in Merton's life is, in many ways, another version of 'Grace's House'". (O'Brien, 2002: 77)

The happy coincidence of Grace's name (Jung's 'synchronicity'?) echoes the feminine principle of God which is savoured and explored in *Hagia Sophia*.

The poems of wonder in *Emblems* include some highlights of Merton's career. As well as 'Grace's House' we have also 'Song for Nobody', 'Love Winter when the Plant says Nothing', 'The Fall' and, supremely, 'Night-Flowering Cactus'. They are all poems of Eden, poems that attempt to name the earth in fresh, childlike innocence. To cut through the metaphors and similes and say that we do exist in a redeemed world. (O'Brien, 2002: 77)

If the anti-poetry is a powerful way of telling the hard truth about the "disgrace" of so many events in our history, those counterbalancing poems are efforts to speak the moments when redemption and grace, pours like rain on Kentucky woods. So many influences are at work in giving Merton the freedom to write this new poetry: obviously the draw

of South America, also the enigmatic simplicity of Chuang Tzu and Merton's deep sympathy with the poetry of Louis Zukovsky. His later article on Zukovsky will be called 'The Paradise Ear' and it is a self-descriptive title also for the Merton of those poems.

The background of 'Grace's House' is simple. A letter from her father, a Quaker, includes a drawing by his five year old daughter, Grace. The first four verses are a quiet description of the drawing: "...smoke/Rolls from the chimney", the blades of grass and the flowers are counted, the dog is caught "with his foreleg curled". But even in those verses there are clues to something deeper. The girl's name in the title. The first phrase "On the summit" suggests some overview of creation. "No blade of grass is not counted" echoes the words of Jesus Christ: 'Not a hair of your head is not counted' (Luke, 12:7). "Twelve flowers" has its own biblical undertones in the sacred number. The final devastating line of the whole poem is already given in three lines of verse two: "There is no path to the summit/No path drawn/To Grace's house". Here it is merely descriptive. Later, in that last line, it becomes prescriptive, theological.

Verse Five introduces the world: "And there: the World!" It is a world seemingly benign —it sends Valentines for Grace—. But Valentine cards are only a game, a pretence. Indeed part of the advertising world, which will be one of the fragments that create the chequered mosaic of Merton's later work. At the end of Verse Five we find ourselves somewhere radically different. It is the first clue to the Eden theme of the poem.

"There is a name on the box, name of a family/Not yet ready to be written in language". It is the time before the Fall, before the command to name the earth, to give titles to the animals, etc. Paradise will not be specifically mentioned until Verse Eight: "O Paradise, O child's world!" but it is now invoked. As Pat O'Brien observes: "That phrase from Verse Eight will echo around the last years of Merton's life. His hermitage will become his own 'Grace's House' and there he will enter fully the Blakean age of Innocence before the mystery of life".

Merton's article on Zukovsky will say:

“The speech of the child is paradise speech for it familiarly addresses all things, not yet knowing them as alien and anticipating nothing from them but joy...”. (O’Brien, 2002: 78)

‘Grace’s House’ does bring in, and hint at, the alien in the world beyond “this archetypal hill”. The “spangled arrow” which “Points from our Coney Island/ To her green sun-hill” invokes Coney Island which will be the New York of *Lograire*.

Indeed we have a hint of the geographical divisions that will later structure *Lograire* in Verse Eight:

The huge sun, bigger than the house
Stands and streams with life in the east
While in the west a thunder cloud
Moves away forever.

But this is much more than a comment on the child’s drawing, as Merton actually transposes Grace’s own arrangement of East and West. The lines subtly encapsulate his own movement towards the East and his long, lifelong, involvement in the critique of the “thunder clouds” of war and nuclear weaponry: remember one of his first published articles was on Gandhi.

Verse nine names the child-vision as “This womb of mysteries”, and again there is a hint of the Gospel image of the need for rebirth if we are to know God, to become aware of grace everywhere.

This vital awareness is directly stated in the preceding verse: “And all the animals are aware”. One is reminded of the Buddhist notion of ‘mindfulness’ which would have such a profound influence on Thomas Merton. The final two verses gather up the two elements of the poem: perhaps the physical and the metaphysical, woven into a spiritual unity. More items from the drawing are placed: “I must not omit to mention a rabbit/And two birds, bathing in the stream [...]”.

Pat O’Brien makes another good point: in every major poet (and with this collection on, Merton enters that bracket):

Every word chosen enters the magnetic field of attraction. They draw in other uses of those words, and here we are feeling the

pull of 'the birds of appetite and paradise' and the birds which are his companions in the woods.

The stream inevitably must be the Heraklitean river, that stream which is the very landscape of his entire life. His willingness to trust himself to a "river which is never crossed twice". 'Grace's House' develops this theme in its last lines:

"And two birds, bathing in a stream/Which is no road, because/
Alas, there is no road to Grace's house!". (O'Brien, 2002: 79)

This may be personal fancy on my part, but I wonder if this poem, consciously or unconsciously, resonates with Merton's lifelong interest in Mount Carmel? John of the Cross memorably drew his own mountain of spiritual experience, which was well known to Merton. He began to explore John of the Cross' writings in Perry Street, New York soon after his conversion; and after his death in Bangkok, a relic of St John is one of very few personal belongings found in his room.

Cristóbal Pagan Serrán y Fuentes presented a paper in 2000 at Oakham which includes a fragment of St John which I think hints at the landscape of 'Grace's House'.

Merton welcomed St John of the Cross' definition of contemplation found in *The Dark Night* I, 10.6. when he said: For contemplation is nothing else than a secret and loving inflow of God, which if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love. (Serrán Pagán y Fuentes, 2002: 167)

Pat O'Brien finishes his account beautifully and perceptively:

This poem will have other effects. It will become the title poem of a German selection of his poetry (with an interesting introduction by Hans Urs von Balthasar). A choice which delighted Merton. It will also become the source of two letters (one to Grace's father, Elbert R. Sisson, and the other to Mark Van Doren) which will be among the 'Cold War Letters' (94, 99). Some five years later in a letter to Grace herself, Merton uses a phrase which in turn will become the title of one of the Volumes of his Letters, "Road to Joy". (O'Brien, 2002: 79)

We will end with that letter.

It gives us the heart of the poem. It also reveals the heart of Merton, the reason why Marcela and friends have gathered us here today, the reason he will continue to be one of the few who spoke the truth to our century out of his immersion in truths beyond his own century, beyond time, out of the paradise eye and ear of one who, (through much suffering) recovered his childhood, before the God who walked in Eden in the cool of the evening. (O'Brien, 2002: 80)

The letter was written in May 1967.

Of course I remember you and your drawing. If I did not answer in a big hurry, it was because I have a lot of letters to answer and have a difficult time doing that. But I want especially to thank you for your note and for your new drawing which is very significant. I like the way you see all the little creatures tending towards a tree which is a sort of tree of life. I am glad you still draw things with love and I hope you will never lose that. But I hope that you and I together will secretly travel our own road to joy, which is mysteriously revealed to us without our exactly realising. When I say that, I don't want you to start thinking about it. You already know it without thinking about it. (Merton, 1989: 352)

So do we all know it at least a bit better, thanks to Thomas Merton. And to Pat O'Brien.

References

- Furlong, M. (1980). *Merton: A Biography*. Collins.
- Lentfoehr, T. (1979). *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton*. New Directions.
- Merton, T. (1948). *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc.
- Merton, T. (1989). *The Road to Joy. Letters to New and Old Friends*.
- Mott, M. (1984). *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. Houghton Mifflin.
- O'Connell, P. (1993). 'Grief Transfigured: Merton's Elegy on His Brother'. *The Merton Seasonal*, 18.1, 10-15.
- O'Brien, P. (2002). "To Credit Marvels: Thomas Merton's 'Grace's House'". *A Mind Awake In The Dark*. Three Peaks Press, 75-80.

Sisson, G. (1962). "The Road to Joy". Drawing retrieved from the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University.

Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes, C. (2002). "Merton's Understanding of the Mystical Doctrine of St. John of the Cross' Dark Night of the Soul". *A Mind Awake In The Dark*. Three Peaks Press, 165-173.



Grace Sisson. "The Road to Joy" (1962). Drawing retrieved from the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University. Louisville, Kentucky.

El concepto de “Dao” en *The Way of Chuang Tzu* de Thomas Merton

Tzu Ying Lee

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
Universidad Nacional de Cuyo
Argentina
tzuying29@gmail.com

Introducción

A lo largo de su vida y de sus obras, Thomas Merton expresó la importancia del intercambio y el diálogo entre culturas. No se interesó solamente por las culturas del mundo occidental, sino también hubo un acercamiento a Asia a través del estudio de las filosofías, religiones y literaturas, del intercambio epistolar con eruditos y figuras religiosas orientales y de viajes al oriente. Durante su viaje a Asia en 1968, falleció accidentalmente en Tailandia y no alcanzó a conocer China. Aunque nunca pudo concretar su visita a China, su interés y entusiasmo por conectar esta cultura con la suya lo llevó a traducir y escribir sobre filosofía china.

Merton y las filosofías-religiones chinas

Aproximadamente una década antes de su fallecimiento, Merton entró en contacto con el Oriente, como afirma Cyrus Lee: “*About ten years before his death, Merton started his own search for wisdom in the Chinese traditions, including Confucianism, Taoism, and Zen Buddhism*”¹ (Lee, 1994: 3). Fue recomendado por el arzobispo Yü Pin para escribir las reseñas de *Hsiao Ching* (1961), *Tao Teh Ching* (1966) y *The Platform Scripture* (1963), publicadas por la Universidad de San Juan en Nueva York (Lee, 1994: 3). Así, Merton se inició en el conocimiento de las filosofías

¹ “Unos diez años antes de su muerte, Merton comenzó su búsqueda de sabiduría en las tradiciones chinas, incluyendo el confucianismo, el taoísmo y el budismo zen”.

más importantes de la China tradicional: confucianismo y taoísmo. Entre las amistades que compartieron con Merton el acercamiento a los pensamientos orientales se encontraban el confuciano Paul Sih (1910-1978), el taoísta John. Wu (1899-1986) y el budista Dalai Lama (Taktser, 1935).

En uno de sus primeros ensayos sobre China, "*Classic Chinese Thought*" (1961), Merton explora las fuentes del pensamiento clásico chino y, sobre todo, del pensamiento confuciano. Define al Confucianismo de la siguiente manera:

Confucianism is less a "faith" than a sacred philosophy, a way of life based on | archaic religious wisdom, and capable of coexistence with some other faith in religious revelation. [...] it should not be impossible to remain essentially a Confucian and yet to become a Christian, since Confucianism is nothing more or less than natural ethics in a very refined and traditional form: the natural law expressed in a sacred culture.² (Merton, 1999: 46-47)

Merton había leído sobre Confucio y profundizado en sus ideas en cuanto al ámbito espiritual, filosófico y social. El pensamiento confuciano afirma que el hombre es esencialmente bondadoso y solo necesita ser debidamente educado para recuperar gradualmente la bondad innata. Por eso, en este ensayo, Merton relaciona las virtudes importantes enseñadas por Confucio como *li* (ritos y cortesía) y *ren* (benevolencia) con la vida cotidiana, la educación y la sociedad en sí.

También es evidente que Merton había leído las traducciones de los Cuatros Clásicos Confucianos y, en dos oportunidades, menciona a Ezra Pound y sus traducciones confucianas en "*Classic Chinese Thought*". En una de ellas, elogia el título traducido por Pound de *Doctrina de la medianía (Zhong Yong)*, *Unwobbling Pivot*, que es quizás la traducción más acertada y reveladora de la intención del autor. (Merton, 1999: 52)

² "El confucianismo es menos una 'fe' que una filosofía sagrada, una forma de vida basada en la sabiduría religiosa arcaica, que puede coexistir con alguna otra fe en la revelación religiosa. [...] No debería resultar imposible continuar siendo esencialmente confuciano y a la vez convertirse al cristianismo, ya que el confucianismo no es más que la ética natural en una forma refinada y tradicional: la ley natural expresada en una cultura sagrada". Merton, Thomas (1999). [Traducción de la editora Marcela Raggio].

Desde el punto de vista religioso, Merton encuentra mucho en común entre su propia fe y la enseñanza de Confucio, y afirma: “*Benedictines can hardly find it difficult to understand and to admire the tradition of Kung Tzu [Confucio], which has in it so many elements in common with the tradition and spirit of St. Benedict*”³ (Merton, 1999: 52).

Merton publicó otro ensayo importante sobre el estudio de Laozi (y el taoísmo) un año después bajo el título de “*Two Chinese Classics*” (1962). El mismo fue publicado nuevamente como “*Love and Tao*” en *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1999). Luego del proceso de acercamiento a China, el interés de Merton se depositó en el taoísmo y en el budismo zen, como manifiesta Lee: “*Merton’s interest in searching for Chinese wisdom had been switched from the interpersonally-oriented Confucianism to the transpersonally-oriented Taoism and Zen Buddhism*” (Lee, 1994: 5).

Luego de leer y meditar el texto taoísta, *Daode jing* o *Tao Te Ching*, Merton invitó a John C. H. Wu a trabajar en un proyecto de traducción. El resultado de esta cooperación fue *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (2010: 1965).

***The Way of Chuang Tzu* de Merton**

The Way of Chuang Tzu es la traducción de *Zhuangzi* o *Chuang Tzu*, pero Merton no tradujo el libro completo, sino que hizo una selección de fragmentos que le parecía interesante. En sus palabras, estos fragmentos son el resultado de una lectura interpretativa de pasajes característicos que le atraen, como él mismo afirma:

The texts from Chuang Tzu assembled here are the result of five years of reading, study, annotation, and meditation. The notes have in time acquired a shape of their own and have become, as it were, "imitations" of Chuang Tzu, or rather, free interpretative reading of characteristic passages which appeal especially to me.
(Merton, 2010: 9)

En la carta a W. H. Ferry escrita el 26 de enero de 1966, en referencia a su propia obra *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, Merton expresó que este libro es su libro favorito: “...*Glad you like Chuang Tzu. I certainly do. That is my*

³ “Los benedictinos pueden fácilmente entender y admirar la tradición de Confucio, la cual tiene muchos elementos en común con la tradición y el espíritu de San Benito”. Merton, Thomas: 1999. [Traducción de la editora Marcela Raggio].

favorite book. I mean of my own. Most of my own books I can't stand. This one I really like" (Merton, 1985: 223).

Con respecto al conocimiento del idioma chino, Merton comenzó a estudiar chino en 1962, aprendió unos caracteres que los usaba para enseñar filosofía china a sus novicios. Virginia Bear, en su artículo "A Woodshed Full of French Angels: Multilingual Merton" (2002), clasificó el nivel de conocimiento del idioma chino de Merton con grado cero. Por eso, además de la colaboración de John Wu, Merton se apoyó en las traducciones ya existentes al inglés, al francés y al alemán de *Chuang Tzu: "These 'readings' of my own grew out of a comparison of four of the best translations of Chuang Tzu into western languages, two English, one French, and one German"*. (Merton, 2010: 9)

La práctica de la traducción significa para Merton un modo de estrechar la distancia entre culturas, establecer diálogos y difundir ideas. Teniendo en cuenta este concepto, se toma la traductología propuesta por Antoine Berman (1985) quien, en vez de teoría/práctica, propone la relación experiencia/reflexión en el proceso de traducción, es decir, "la traducción es una experiencia que puede desplegarse y aprehenderse de la reflexión (Berman, 4). De esta forma, el proceso traductológico no es solamente el pasaje de las letras o traducir palabra por palabra, como Berman afirma:

La traducción no solo significa el "pasaje" entre lenguas de un texto, sino —en torno a ese primer "pasaje"— toda una serie de "pasajes" diversos que tienen que ver con el acto de escribir y, de forma aún más subliminal, con el acto de vivir y de morir. (Berman, 1985: 8)

Se han seleccionado dos poemas, "Man is Born in Tao" y "The Flight of Lin Hui", que tratan sobre el sentido de "Dao" para comprender con más profundidad este concepto tan relevante en las filosofías orientales y realizaremos un análisis comparativo de las versiones chinas con las de Merton.

Para comprender el concepto "Dao", es imprescindible remontarse a *Daode Qing* o *Tao Te Ching* de Laozi. En el primer capítulo, Laozi define el

Dao diciendo: “El Dao que puede ser definido no es el Dao eterno⁴” (Laozi: s.p.). Asimismo, en el capítulo uno de *Qingjing Jing* dice:

El Gran Dao carece de forma, creó el cielo y la tierra; el Gran Dao es imparcial y regula el universo; el Gran Dao no tiene nombre, pero nutre a todos los seres; desconozco su nombre y lo llamo forzosamente ‘Dao’⁵. (Laozi: s.p.)

Es posible resumir, entonces, en forma muy general, que el Dao es la fuente de toda creación y también la naturaleza en sí.

Merton tradujo uno de los fragmentos extraídos de “Da Zong Shi” en los Capítulos Interiores bajo el título “Man is born in Tao”. En el texto chino, forma parte de un diálogo entre Confucio y su discípulo, Zi Gong⁶. En esta conversación entre Confucio y Zi Gong, se despliega el tema de vivir “en el mundo” o permanecer “fuera del mundo”. Este debate es significativo y refleja la propia experiencia de Merton, quien en un principio eligió “permanecer fuera del mundo”, es decir, vivir retirado en la abadía, hasta 1959, cuando tuvo la experiencia mística en la esquina de Calles 4º y Walnut en el centro de Louisville, y descubrió que el amor incondicional que poseía debía extenderse a todos quienes lo rodeaban, y que su deber como monje no estaba limitado al monasterio y a la comunidad monástica.

Merton escoge la respuesta de Confucio y lo traduce en “Man is born in Tao”. En este fragmento seleccionado por Merton, el personaje de Confucio medita sobre el hombre y el Dao, tomando la relación del pez y el agua como ejemplo. Está compuesto básicamente por frases breves de cinco y seis caracteres chinos, casi con la forma de un poema. Comienza comparando la importancia del agua para los peces con la del Dao para el hombre.

⁴ Laozi. (2023). Traducción propia. Texto original: 「道可道·非常道」(Laozi, s.p.).

⁵ Laozi. (2023). Traducción propia. Texto original: 「清靜經第一章: 大道無形·生育天地; 大道無情·運行日月; 大道無名·長養萬物。吾不知其名·強名曰<道>。」(Laozi, s.p.).

⁶ Su nombre completo es Duanmu Si (520-446 a.C.), uno de los diez discípulos distinguidos de Confucio.

Se observa que el poeta-traductor ha dedicado más versos para traducir 穿池而養給, que se traduce como *cavar un estanque para mantenerlos*⁷ (cuarta frase) y 無事而生定, *la inmutabilidad procede de la no alteración*⁸ (sexta frase). Merton añadió ideas para recrear estas dos frases, como "*All their needs/Are satisfied*". (vv. 6-7) y "*To forget aggression and concern,/He lacks nothing/His life is secure*" (vv. 11-13). Estos versos "agregados" muestran la interpretación que tiene Merton sobre el significado de Dao y su profundo anhelo de unirse con la propia naturaleza, llamada Dao en las obras taoístas. Al permanecer en Dao, el hombre carece de necesidades; su vida es armoniosa y completa.

Esto tiene sentido si lo relacionamos con el contexto histórico en que vivía. Al vivir en una época devastada por la inestabilidad, los conflictos y las guerras, Merton halla en la obra de un filósofo del cual lo separan miles de años y kilómetros, la misma aspiración de volver a una vida más conectada con la naturaleza y un mundo más armónico y equilibrado. Todo lo que necesita el hombre, como concluye el poema, es reencontrarse con su propia naturaleza y vivir de acuerdo con ella.

Esta visión está reflejada en numerosas obras de Merton que muestran su profundo deseo de ir en busca de la espiritualidad y de los valores innatos que paulatinamente se fueron perdiendo en el mundo moderno. Tanto su vida en silencio en la abadía y su posterior participación activa en los asuntos sociales durante la década de 1960, como así también su viaje a Asia, representan su incesante búsqueda del interior y la conexión con la propia naturaleza, con el ser innato.

"Dao" también es utilizado para referirse a la naturaleza humana. Como lo indica el nombre del libro "*Dao/Tao*" (naturaleza/esencia) "*Te*" (virtudes), que sería la naturaleza que se encuentra en el humano, y al ponerla en acción, son reflejados mediante las virtudes, las buenas obras o "el actuar correctamente según la naturaleza".

Esta idea está en el cuento de Lin Hui que Merton lo tradujo bajo el título de "*The Flight of Lin Hui*". Esta es una parábola sobre la naturaleza humana tomada de una sección de "*Shan Mu*" de los Capítulos Exteriores,

⁷ Ye, Y. (1982). Traducción propia.

⁸ Ye, Y. (1982). Traducción propia.

donde presenta un diálogo entre Confucio y Zi Shang Hu⁹ y luego se introduce esta parábola. Merton omite la parte del diálogo y solo traduce el cuento de Lin Hui.

Los primeros cinco versos de la primera estrofa,

Lin Hui of Kia took to flight.
Pursued by enemies,
He threw away the precious jade
Symbol of his rank
And took his infant child on his back. (vv. 1-5)

Corresponden a la oración “Lin Hui abandona el precioso jade y alza a su hijo para escaparse”¹⁰. En la versión de Merton se incluye una explicación de por qué Lin Hui huye: sus enemigos lo perseguían. Este agregado explica al lector el contexto, ya que las partes omitidas del texto chino relatan que el Estado Jia (o Kia) fue derrotado y el pueblo se retiraba del Estado. Otro comentario agregado por el poeta-traductor es que la piedra es un *symbol of his rank*, pues en el texto chino no hay indicaciones del estatus social del protagonista. Con estas dos explicaciones complementarias, Merton, primero, se acerca al lector anglófono y le proporciona información para una mejor comprensión del contexto. En segundo lugar, destaca la situación difícil en la que se encuentra Lin Hui, quien, perseguido por los enemigos, debe abandonar no solamente su país sino también su estatus social y nivel de vida.

Los últimos versos de la primera estrofa,

Why did he take the child
And leave the jade,
Which was worth a small fortune,
Whereas the child, if sold,
Would only bring him a paltry sum? (vv. 6-10)

⁹ 子桑雩 llamado 子桑伯子 (Zi Shang Bo Zi). Según el *Zhuangzi*, es una persona que vive alejado del mundo mundano. Para él, el mundo es ilusorio, por lo que el humano debe mostrar los verdaderos sentidos sin importar la cortesía y la cordialidad.

¹⁰ Ye, Y. (1982). Traducción propia. Texto original: 「林回棄千金之璧·負赤子而趨。」 (Ye, 252).

Presentan una alternativa distinta de traducción. En lugar de proporcionar más información al receptor, el poeta-traductor omite la estructura en chino de presentar las preguntas y sus respectivas respuestas, convirtiéndolas en una sola pregunta retórica que conserva la idea central. Lo podemos comparar con el original:

Alguien preguntó: "¿Es por la riqueza? El niño es de poco valor. ¿Es por el peso? El niño es una carga más pesada. ¿Cuál es la razón por la cual abandonaste el jade precioso y alzaste al niño para escaparte?"¹¹

Merton antepone la primera pregunta en su versión, como énfasis de la interrogación más importante entre todas estas preguntas. Al usar la tercera persona *he* en esta primera estrofa para referirse a Lin Hui, el lector pensará que probablemente el sujeto lírico es Merton (o Zhuangzi); sin embargo, volviendo al texto de donde fue extraído este fragmento, conocemos que Zi Shang Hu es quien relata este cuento, citando las palabras de "alguien" y de Lin Hui. Distinta es la versión anglófona, donde Merton dirige esta pregunta al lector sin darle lugar a ese "alguien" y solo se escucha la voz del refugiado, quien responde con esta afirmación:

My bond with the jade symbol
 And with my office
 Was the bond of self-interest.
 My bond with the child
 Was the bond of Tao. (vv. 11-16)

Esta contestación de Lin Hui en *Zhuangzi* es sumamente breve: solamente consiste en nueve caracteres chinos: "彼以利合·此以天屬也", es decir, "esa relación [con la piedra] se afianza por medio de intereses, esta relación [con el niño] es la unión de la naturaleza"¹². Sin embargo, Merton dedica toda una estrofa para traducir esta oración. Entonces, si se toma al jade como símbolo de riqueza, poder, ambición y estatus social, el Lin Hui de Merton, además de escapar de la guerra (de los enemigos),

¹¹ Ye, Y. (1982). Traducción propia. Texto original: 「為其布與？赤子之布寡矣。為其累與？赤子之累多矣。棄千金之璧·負赤子而趨·何也？」(Ye, 1982: 252).

¹² Ye, Yulin (1982).

abandona los intereses del mundo terrenal para unirse con la naturaleza, a la que denomina Dao.

Conclusión

Se ha tomado dos fragmentos que tratan sobre “Dao” y que fueron seleccionados por Merton para traducir. Esta selección no fue al azar, ya que “Dao” es la idea central de la filosofía taoísta y confuciana para explicar la naturaleza innata y las acciones guiadas por dicha naturaleza.

En cuanto a la traducción propiamente dicha, como dice el propio Merton, estas 'lecturas' no son intentos de reproducción fiel, sino aventuras de interpretación personal y espiritual (Merton, 2010: 9). Teniendo en cuenta esta idea, se puede decir que Merton traduce y recrea a partir de su propia experiencia, y vuelca su reflexión, visión del mundo y creatividad en estas traducciones.

Merton prioriza la esencia del texto chino e intenta transmitirlo en la versión inglesa, evitando la tendencia a producir el texto en forma más elegante y clara, práctica criticada por traductólogos como Antoine Berman. Sin embargo, con frecuencia Merton introduce o añade versos recreados y ciertas aclaraciones que facilitan la comprensión para un destinatario lejano, no solamente separado por el tiempo y el espacio, sino también por las diferencias culturales y la percepción del mundo. Estas explicaciones o expansión de ideas pueden ser necesarias, ya que *The Way of Chuang Tzu* no es la traducción completa del *Zhuangzi*. Los fragmentos extraídos de su contexto requieren de estas aclaraciones para que el lector anglófono logre una mejor comprensión. De esta manera, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* es, más que una traducción literal, una reescritura del texto chino.

Referencias

- Bear, V. (2002). “A Woodshed Full of French Angels: Multilingual Merton”. *The Merton Annual*, 15: 136-154.
- Berman, A. (1985). “El albergue de lo lejano”. (13 de setiembre de 2020). https://ddd.uab.cat/pub/doletiana/doletiana_a2012-2013n4/doletiana_a2012

Laozi. (13 de setiembre de 2020) *El Lao Te Ching de Laozi. Tao Te King*.
<https://www.chineseclassic.com/LauTzu/LaoTzu01.htm>

Laozi. (13 de setiembre de 2023). *Qingjing Jing*.

Laozi. (13 de setiembre de 2020) *El Tao Te Ching de Laozi. Tao Te King*.
<https://www.chineseclassic.com/LauTzu/LaoTzu01.htm>

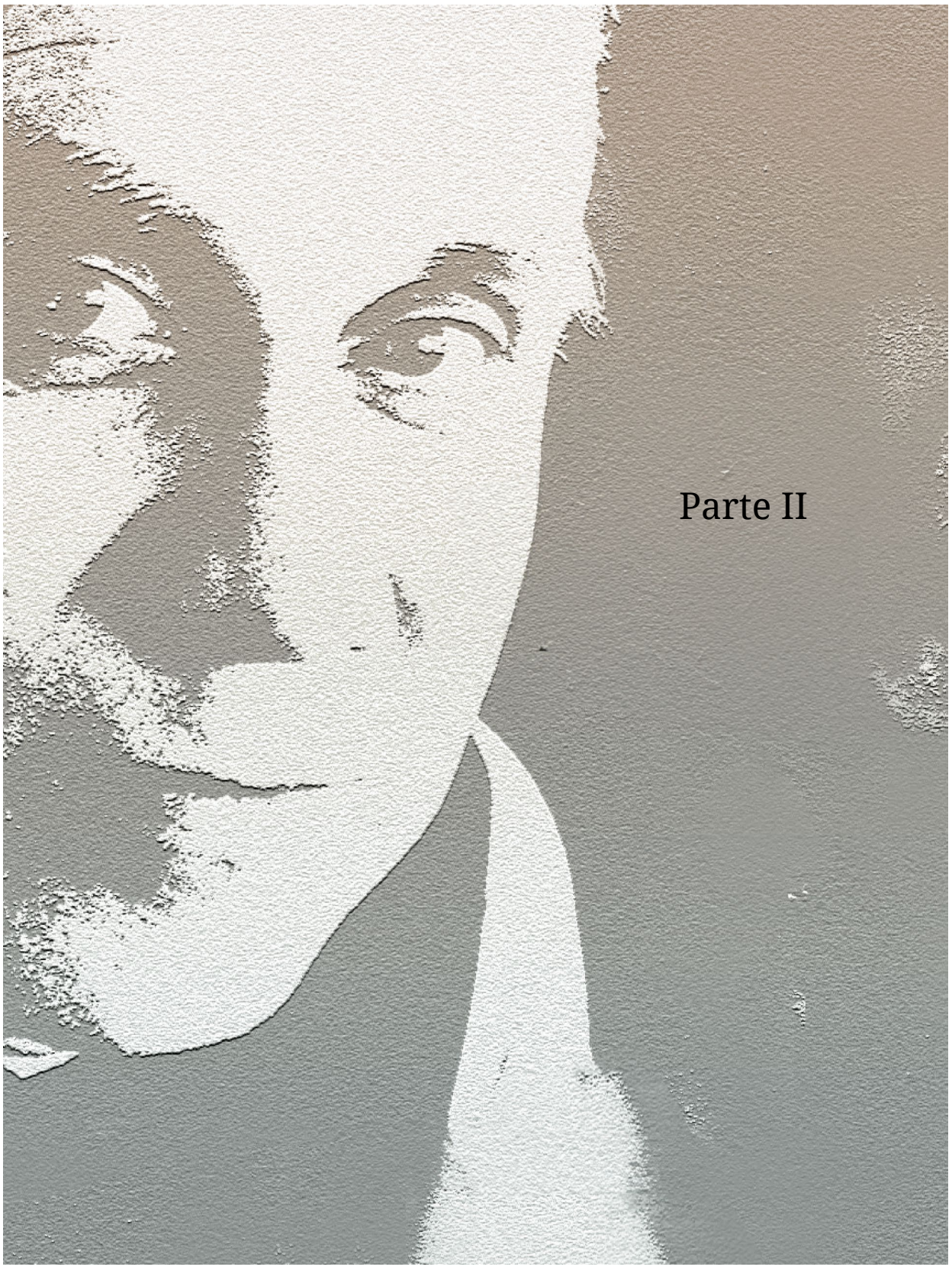
Lee, C. (1994). *Thomas Merton and Chinese Wisdom*. Sino-American Institute.

Merton, T. (1985). *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*. Farrar Straus Giroux.

Merton, T. (1999). *Mystics and Zen Masters*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Merton, T. (2010). *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. New Directions Books.

Ye, Y. (1982). *莊子新釋. Zhuangzi xin shi*. Da xia chu ban she.



Parte II

Freedom, Dialogue, and Contemplation: Thomas Merton and the New Integralism

David Golemboski

Augustana University
United States of America
davidgolemboski@gmail.com

Rowan Williams once wrote of Thomas Merton that “Merton will not let me look at him for long: he will, finally, persuade me to look in the direction he is looking” (Williams, 2011: 19). To appreciate Merton fully is not merely to dwell on Thomas Merton *the person*, but to engage with our own time and place in the world in a manner informed by the wisdom and insight of Merton’s life, work, and example. This essay is an attempt to do just this. Specifically, my aim is to engage with a new phenomenon in theology and political thought with an eye toward how Merton’s work and vision might inform a critical evaluation.

The phenomenon I have in mind is a school of thought that has seen a revival in recent years. It is the idea of *integralism*, which advocates abandoning the idea of separation of church and state in favor of a formal establishment of Catholicism: in other words, the formation of a confessional Catholic state. This recent revival of integralism has been controversial (unsurprisingly), and it has received its share of criticism, and my goal here is not to develop a comprehensive evaluation of this new school of thought. Rather, my intention is to expand on existing critical evaluations of the new integralism by drawing upon resources from Thomas Merton’s life and work. My thesis is Merton’s work contains important themes, values, and insights that can support a strong critique of contemporary integralism and point to its failures as a political application of Catholic doctrine.

Of course, “integralists” of the contemporary sort were not a primary target of Merton’s writing, so he has little to say about the idea directly. One always risks some degree of anachronism when drawing on texts from context in the past for purposes of articulating a critique of events or ideas in the present. Nevertheless, Merton has struck generations of readers as a figure whose insights were often “ahead of their time”. and continue to bear fruit in new contexts. Thus, while it is appropriate to exercise all due care to avoid distorting Merton’s views by translating them for the present day, it would be a mistake to assume that Merton has nothing to offer us in engaging with the new integralist movement.

This essay begins by elaborating on what exactly the integralist viewpoint entails. Then, I identify three basic resources in Merton’s work for articulating a critique of integralism. First, I focus on his affirmation of the value of freedom as a reflection of our confidence in our fellow humans and in the God who created them. Second, I emphasize Merton’s insistence on dialogue with citizens of diverse beliefs, as opposed to domination of them. Third, I draw a contrast between the controlling, power-driven approach to political action that the integralists’ adopt and, on the other hand, what one might call a *contemplative* approach to politics. I conclude by situating this critical perspective on the new integralism in relation to other, more commonplace critiques of the doctrine.

The New Integralism

The term ‘integralism’ itself has a complex history. It has associations with the French monarchist movement known as *Action Française*, which appropriated the label of ‘integralism’ for itself in the early twentieth century. Some years later, Jacques Maritain employed the term ‘integral humanism’ to describe his Catholic defense of liberal democracy. (Maritain, 1996: 143-345) Some contemporary political philosophers have used the term ‘integralist’ to describe anyone who believes that their religious beliefs have some bearing on their political actions.¹ The

¹ E.g., Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues”, in *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate*, by Nicholas Wolterstorff and Robert Audi (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield,

sense of the term that I am invoking here, however, is the meaning which has gained prominence most recently. In the words of one commentator, it is the belief the state “should promote a particular, Catholic vision of the ‘common good’”. (Troutner, 2020)

This notion that the political order ought to be governed by a Catholic understanding of human nature, flourishing, and morality has an obviously long lineage in the history of Christendom. Prior to the rise of the modern secular state, the notion was commonplace. In the papal declaration *Unam Sanctam*, promulgated in the year 1302, Pope Boniface VIII declared that “spiritual power surpasses in dignity and in nobility any temporal power whatever”, and therefore “it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff” (Boniface, VIII 1302). By the late nineteenth century, Pope Leo XIII began to gesture toward some acceptance of a secular political order. By the end of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, the Catholic Church had formally embraced a modern conception of individual rights—including a right to religious liberty—and abandoned its longstanding skepticism toward democracy. The starkness of this shift in doctrine cannot be overstated. As theologian Charles Curran puts it: “The Catholic Church in the nineteenth century strongly opposed all forms of liberalism and regarded democracy as political liberalism. By the end of the twentieth century, however, the Vatican had become a world leader in advocating the cause of democracy throughout the world”. (Curran, 2002: 152)

The reforms of Vatican II, however, gave rise to predictable but disturbing forms of reactionary backlash. Some of these have played out over sacramental theology or rules of liturgical practice. In the last several years, a new wave of resistance to the Church’s embrace of liberal democracy has become prominent, as conservative thinkers in the United States and elsewhere have called for a rejection of secular government and a return to various forms of a confessional, Catholic state. These authors have published primarily in semi-obscure blogs such as *The Josias* or *Public Discourse*, though in 2020, two British theologians published the first noteworthy book-length attempt at developing a full contemporary theory of Catholic integralism (Crean; Fimister, 2020), and just this year

1996), 105; Christopher J. Eberle, *Religious Conviction in Liberal Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 143.

the Harvard law professor Adrian Vermeule argued the case for an integralist legal theory in a book titled *Common Good Constitutionalism* (Vermeule, 2022)².

These authors disagree with one another in various ways, but they agree in their rejection of the liberal political tradition and, in particular its insistence on separation of church and state. They call for the elevation of religious authority over political authority, and for a reorientation of the state toward a sectarian Catholic conception of the good life. As Edmund Waldstein (a prominent early proponent of integralism in the blogosphere) summarizes the integralist view:

Catholic Integralism is a tradition of thought that, rejecting the liberal separation of politics from concern with the end of human life, holds that political rule must order man to his final goal. Since, however, man has both a temporal and an eternal end, integralism holds that there are two powers that rule him: a temporal power and a spiritual power. And since man's temporal end is subordinated to his eternal end, the temporal power must be subordinated to the spiritual power. (Waldstein, 2016)

At this point, these integralists remain mostly a fringe element in Western Catholicism, and there is always a risk that by discussing them, one provides them a platform that elevates their profile beyond what they would otherwise be able to achieve. At the same time, the integralist view is gaining in visibility, and it is important for defenders of liberal democracy to provide a strong counter-message to their agenda. There is no shortage of vantages from which one might criticize these “new integralists”, and in this paper I want to raise some insights from Thomas Merton’s work that might provide intellectual resources for resisting the integralist movement. Merton was by no means a champion of secular liberalism, certainly not in the mold of someone like the Cold War liberal Reinhold Niebuhr, nor of the “Secular City” theologians like Harvey Cox. In fact, Merton was critical of those Christians who too readily embraced

² The book expands on Vermeule’s arguments in “Beyond Originalism”, *The Atlantic*, March 31, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/common-good-constitutionalism/609037/>

the privatization of religion, and famously insisted on the relevance of Christian contemplative spirituality to social and political issues. Merton was not, however, an integralist. The way that Merton conceptualized the relationship between the spiritual and the political, in fact, challenges key assumptions in the integralist project, and calls into question the authenticity of integralism as a representation of the Catholic tradition's understanding of politics. We now turn to the three specific themes in Merton's work that provide a basis for resisting the integralist approach.

Freedom

One of the most obvious and frequently voiced objections to the integralists' proposal has to do with the status of non-baptized persons in a confessional Catholic state. Given the conditions of pluralism which any modern political order must confront, how do integralists propose that outsiders to the official state religion be treated? Integralist writers have often been cagey about this, avoiding giving straight answers or much beyond vague guarantees that "nothing bad" would happen to religious minorities in an integralist state (Vermeule, 2018)³. Their hesitance to say anything that would sound like a rejection of the principle of religious liberty is strategically smart: they are unlikely to win people over on a platform of punishing heretics—a method of governance more readily associated with the Taliban than with contemporary Catholicism—. It might seem totally beyond comprehension that present-day Catholic theologians could support imposing legal penalties on people simply for failing to adopt the proper religious beliefs. And yet, this is precisely what some of the most prominent integralists have admitted their position requires.

Thomas Crean and Alan Fimister, the British integralists who have written the recent book I mentioned above, have argued that full citizenship must be reserved for those who are baptized into the Church. They insist that the unbaptized—including atheists as well as adherents of any other denomination or faith—should retain some civil rights, but they also that they should be excluded from the legislature and from executive and

³ For more on this critique, see Micah Schwartzman and Richard Schragger, "What Common Good?" *The American Prospect*, April 7, 2022.

<https://prospect.org/culture/books/what-common-good-vermeule-review/>

judicial offices. When the Church declares that one of its members has committed an act of heresy, that person's citizenship should be suspended "until they have been absolved in the public forum" (Crean; Fimister, 2020: 117). Crean and Fimister allow that Jews should be granted freedom of worship, given the historical connection between Judaic practice and the Christian tradition. "However", they write, "neither they nor any other group may seek proselytes among the baptized [...]" (Crean; Fimister, 2020: 118). The function of the integralist state, then, is not merely to enforce the moral values of Catholic teaching, but to enforce Catholicism as the only fully acceptable religion, including by relegating non-Catholics to marginalized and subjugated political status.

The integralist mentality on this question is motivated by a certain logic: the spiritual objective of salvation is of utmost importance, and therefore the laws must advance the goal of guiding as many persons toward salvation as possible. (This includes not only encouraging and incentivizing non-Catholics to convert, but also safeguarding baptized Catholics from the harmful influence of non-believers.) What the integralist approach misses, however, is the critical importance of *freedom* in the individual's temporal and spiritual experience—in other words, the freedom of religious belief and practice. Of course, the integralist would happily reject this freedom as a misbegotten priority of secular, liberal modernism, and would declare that it has, at best, limited value in the ideal Catholic state toward which we should work. They would agree with Pope Gregory XVI, who in 1844 wrote that the liberty of conscience is nothing more than the liberty "of error" (Gregory XVI, 1990). Thomas Merton believed, though, that freedom is not merely a value of the secular Enlightenment, but rather a value of the contemporary Catholic faith. It is a reflection of our confidence in God's working in history and in our fellow humans who are created in the image of that God.

Merton wrote on the theme of freedom in a variety of contexts, typically focusing on the dynamics of *spiritual* freedom. Some of his clearest reflections on *political* freedom, specifically, come in the long essay at the center of his 1964 book *Seeds of Destruction*, titled "The Christian in World Crisis". There, Merton dedicates several pages to an analysis of

Pope John XXIII's encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris*. Merton focuses on the encyclical's discussion of the true nature of political authority, which he describes as structuring "the order of freedom into which we are called by the very fact that we are persons created in the image and likeness of God" (Merton, 1964: 172). Merton draws a contrast between Pope John's conception of freedom as the basis for authority and what he calls the "authority of brute force". That latter understanding of authority sees freedom as nothing more than "licence and rebellion", and can think of nothing other than "to take up arms against it, to restrict it, punish it and imprison it in blind and disciplined servitude" (Merton, 1964: 174). Merton's reflections on *Pacem in Terris* are not written about *religious* freedom, specifically, but they represent Merton's engagement with the Catholic magisterium's growing embrace of political liberty in general, which would culminate in Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Freedom the very next year, in 1965.

Merton casts Pope John's openness to political freedom not as a pragmatic capitulation to the liberal world, but rather as a positive affirmation of optimism in human nature. The impulse to control and dominate people, Merton writes, stems from "a completely pessimistic view of man and of the world". This outlook admits that "man is perhaps capable of good behavior, but only if he is forced into it by implacable authority" (Merton, 1964: 173). It is not hard to observe this pessimism about human freedom in the integralist orientation: believing that people cannot be allowed to experience the journey of spirituality, nor even to be exposed to those whose beliefs fall outside of the official orthodoxy, for fear that it will lead them astray, down a path of ruin. Merton notes that this instinct has appeared throughout human history; in addition to identifying it in religious thinkers like Tertullian and Calvin, Merton also says that this pessimistic view of humanity "provides specious reasons for the Inquisition as well as Auschwitz" placing the integralist vision in tellingly horrific company (Merton, 1964: 173).

In contrast to these "triumphalists", who seek to "exalt the Church by placing an authoritarian heel on the neck" of humanity, Merton celebrates the optimism of Pope John XXIII. John, he writes, "dared to hope in the goodness" of humanity (Merton, 1964: 174), and in the law that is implanted within "man's free nature as an intelligent being, who is

capable of desiring peace in justice and of being a peace-maker in the fulness of love” (Merton, 1964: 178-179). John’s openness to human freedom rests not on a resigned despair over the lost days when the Church could coerce belief from those under its influence, but rather on a hopeful affirmation of human possibility, and the conviction that “because God has given man the abundant help of supernatural grace, then no matter how great man’s confusion and servitude to evil may have become, he can still be liberated and fulfil his vocation in peace as a free, spiritual being redeemed in the blood of Christ” (Merton, 1964: 179).

The problem with the integralists’ denial of religious liberty, then, is not that it violates a liberal, individualistic right to freedom of belief. Rather, the problem is that the integralists are implicitly rejecting the way that God works through human freedom to achieve good things and new possibilities. Their denial of religious liberty is not simply a denial of non-believers’ religious misadventures, but also a denial of God’s own power and presence in human affairs.

Dialogue

A second objection to the integralist project might draw on Merton’s commitment to dialogue, and on the integralists’ failure to be open to dialogue with their non-Catholic neighbors. The integralists’ approach to religious liberty—in particular, their willingness to impose substantial restrictions on people who do not adhere to the official religion of the state—not only suppresses those believers’ freedom, but reflects a failure of dialogue—. The integralists not only place non-Catholics in a position of political or legal disadvantage, but moreover reveal zero interest in engaging with and learning from people who believe differently. Of course, for all we know, some of these authors may be personally open to interreligious dialogue or other forms of relationship with non-Catholics. My point is not an *ad hominem* observation about any of the integralist authors, personally. Rather, the issue is that the integralists’ *political platform* reflects a mindset that is closed to dialogue, listening, and mutual learning across religious difference.

From the outset, it is clear that the integralists’ understanding of Catholic religious belief is not characterized by much in the way of humility. They tend to be quite certain of the rightness of their belief—or, more

specifically, of the Church's teaching as handed down by the magisterium. Crean and Fimister make this clear when they describe the Church as the only truly "perfect" society in existence. What makes it perfect is that the Church is oriented toward the highest, most worthy end —salvation of souls— and that the Church "contains within herself the means necessary to bring us to this end: the deposit of faith as guarded by an infallible magisterium, the indefectible apostolic succession, and the sacraments of grace" (Crean; Fimister, 2020: 20). It is no surprise that integralists proposing the formation of a confessional Catholic state would feel strongly about the rightness of their beliefs, but what is especially striking is their conviction that any viewpoints, experiences, or perspectives from outside the Church have nothing to add to the journey toward salvation. The Church "contains within herself the means necessary" for salvation, and requires nothing additional from without. Moreover, the way that integralists write about non-Catholic beliefs often gives an impression of lament or frustration that competing, "erroneous" viewpoints have polluted the clarity of Catholic orthodoxy. Integralist theorist Thomas Pink, for instance, emphasizes the state's role as a "public teacher", helping to correct humans' flawed reason by instilling the truth of Catholic doctrine (Pink, 2018). He quotes Pope Pius IX (the last ruler of the Papal States) as saying that "where religion has been removed from civil society, and the doctrine and authority of divine revelation repudiated, the genuine notion itself of justice and human right is darkened and lost [...]" (Pius IX, 1864). In other words, it is the task of the Church to shine the light of truth into the darkness of human affairs, hoping that misguided nonbelievers will be edified and find their way to salvation.

The integralists' approach to religious difference is diametrically opposed to the mindset embraced by Thomas Merton. Merton was famously committed to interreligious dialogue, not only as an exercise in curiosity or even evangelization, but as part of his own journey toward spiritual understanding and communion with God.

An important piece of context for understanding Merton's embrace of dialogue is how he understood the situation of the Christian believer in the contemporary moment. Merton famously referred to his day as a "post-Christian era" (Merton, 2004), and he was well-attuned to the dynamics of a secularized public square. In another essay published in

Seeds of Destruction, Merton appropriates Karl Rahner's conception of the Christian "diaspora" to describe the situation of the Christian in the West today. Christians have been cast out, dispersed around the world to live in all kinds of strange lands. As Merton describes it, the diaspora is captured in the observation that "the individual Christian will be simultaneously a member of Christ and a citizen of a perhaps godless society" (Merton, 1964: 197). Whereas integralists lament the fact that Christianity has lost its privileged place atop the social and political hierarchy, Rahner and Merton embrace this historical evolution. The situation of the Christian as a member of a "diaspora", *in but not of* their society, is an opportunity for new avenues of salvation. It presents new possibilities for "advancing the work of Redemption and deepening the penetration of grace" into society (Merton, 1964: 191).

One consequence of living in the diaspora is that Christians will be surrounded by people who are indifferent—if not downright hostile—to Christian belief. This, too, is not for Merton (and Rahner) a sad, regrettable fact, but an opportunity. Merton describes Rahner's emphasis on "an attitude of openness, understanding, and sympathy" toward non-believers. Whereas some integralists might think that this approach is naïve or misguided, that it might leave a Catholic susceptible to corrupting influence of heterodox beliefs, Merton holds that the opposite is true: adopting Rahner's attitude of openness actually "enables the Catholic to discover unsuspected values in a secular world which he has hitherto regarded only with mistrust and contempt". (Merton, 1964: 198) In other words, there is unexpected truth to be discovered among the experiences, perspectives, and beliefs of our non-Catholic neighbors. Merton understood that dialogue was central to the charism of the Catholic tradition itself. In order for a church to be "catholic" in the sense of its universality, the church must embrace the opportunity to affirm signs of truth across the wide variety of religious experience—not wall itself off from that variety in fear that it will somehow corrode the "perfect" truth safeguarded by the magisterium. As Merton put it, "the 'universality' and 'catholicity' which are essential to the Church necessarily imply an ability and a readiness to enter into dialogue with all that is pure, wise, profound and humane in every kind of culture. [...] A Christian culture that is not capable of such a dialogue would show, by that very fact, that it lacked catholicity" (Merton, 2013: 112).

Merton expressed this view repeatedly over his life, and exemplified it in his active pursuit of interreligious conversation and friendship. Those relationships, and the mutual learning that they enabled, did not erode or undermine Merton's sense of himself as a Christian believer, but rather enriched it. He captured this conviction famously in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, where he wrote that "I will be a better Catholic not if I can *refute* every shade of Protestantism, but if I can affirm the truth in it and still go further" (Merton, 1966: 129). Dialogue with non-Catholics, in other words, can be a fruitful part of the journey toward ever-increasing wisdom and understanding. Engaging with non-believers —not merely from a posture of proselytization or, worse, antagonism— can make one a more faithful Catholic more fully attuned to the divine reality. Moreover, Merton emphasizes that communion with our neighbors, regardless of religious belief, is simply a necessary part of being human, of being truly ourselves as created by God. This goes beyond merely being in proximity to one another, even when there is not outright hostility. "To live in the midst of others", Merton writes in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, "sharing nothing with them but the common noise and the general distraction, isolates a man in the worst way, separates him from reality in a way that is almost painless. It divides him off and separates him from other men and from his true self" (Merton, 1961: 55).

The integralists' conception of how non-Catholics relate to the confessional Catholic state —as agents of falsehood who must be either converted or contained— fails to recognize the imperative of dialogue and the fruitfulness of communion with others across religious difference. The integralist platform supposes that salvation comes by "defending" sacred doctrine against the pernicious influence of alternative beliefs—ignoring the likelihood that adherents of other faith possess wisdom from which Catholics may learn and grow. And, most importantly, the integralist orientation toward non-believers neglects the basic necessity of finding ways of entering into communion with our fellow humans, not for the sake of winning them over to our side, but for the sake of finding our true selves in relationship to them.

Contemplative Approach to Politics

A basis for a broader and farther-reaching critique of the integralist approach can be found in Merton's understanding of the Christian

vocation in contemporary society and politics. In that essay on “The Christian in the Diaspora”, in *Seeds of Destruction*, Merton reflects on the futile ambitions of a certain Christian “triumphalist” approach to the political order—an approach which hopes for a Christian “victory” over the dark forces of secularism and modernism. Merton writes that Rahner rejects the “unrealistic optimism of the triumphalist type”, which aims to revive the “glorious past” of medieval Christendom. These people, Merton says, are those who issue “dire prophecies and lamentations [...] to condemn the decadence, the ‘modernism’, the ‘secularism’ which have ‘utterly ruined’ Catholicism and Christian culture today” (Merton, 1967: 186). They suppose that if Christians would only set their minds to it, they could abandon modern secular liberalism and re-assert the primacy of religious authority, much as it was hundreds of years ago.

Now, for one thing, Rahner points out that the apparent righteousness of that era was always an illusion. In medieval Christendom, it was possible to confuse the organs and practices of religio-political power for the principles of Christian morality. But this was a mistake. Those were merely the prevalent structures of authority in that day—not a divinely-ordained model for a perfect society. In fact, Rahner says, there is no single “pattern” of the secular world as it ought to be, and “we must face the fact that ‘we do not have a complete recipe for the world’s problems in our pockets’”. (Merton, 1967: 190)

This might come as news to authors such as Thomas Crean and Alan Fimister, the authors of the book I discussed earlier: its title is “*Integralism: A Manual of Political Philosophy*”. As one reviewer has noted (Troutner, 2020), by adopting the form of a “Manual”, the book is modeled after nineteenth century textbooks which were structured around an impenetrable deductive system of argument which was designed to marginalize dissent or disagreement. As the reviewer puts it, a manual is (ostensibly) “a synthesis of authoritative magisterial and theological sources”, a presentation of self-evidently true claims “which cannot ultimately be questioned”. Thus, the very format of these integralists’ writing suggests a profound simplicity in their view: the magisterium lays down the one, true pattern of political authority, and faithful Catholics have no option but to agree and to comply. Merton’s recognition (channeling Rahner) of the variety of human experience

challenges the integralist authors' assertion of unquestionable truths about the organization of society. In actuality, these forms might be merely one "pattern" of social organization. The fact that it made a certain kind of sense in medieval Europe does not imply that it is the *only* way that political and religious authorities should relate to one another, much less that it makes any sense for us, here and now, in the present day.

Even more fundamentally, the integralists' ambitions of political influence and control reflect an understanding of human work in the world that is both deeply arrogant and much less distinctively "Christian" than the integralists believe. As Merton writes, the proponents of a return to medieval Christendom imagine that their victory is right around the corner. They suppose that "with a little more zeal, a little more energy, a few more mass movements and a smarter use of mass-media, the Church will very likely take over everything and definitively convert the City of Man into the City of God" (Merton, 1967: 187). They are, in other words, ordinary political operators, driven ostensibly by their passion for Christian virtue, but ultimately aiming for the same kind of political power that their secular "enemies" desire.

In his 1957 poem, "The Tower of Babel: A Morality", Merton presents a dramatization of the famous Genesis story of the Tower of Babel, which reads very clearly as a condemnation of certain approaches to political power and social control (Merton, 1980: 247-273). In the way Merton describes the builders of the tower, there are clear echoes of the Christian "triumphalists" who imagine that they are on the front lines of some great struggle for Christian political dominance. The first part of the poem is a dialogue between two characters —"Thomas" and "Raphael"— who discuss the tower while a crew of builders works on the construction. The "Leader" of those builders describes their ambitious project in terms not unlike those used by the integralists: "It is the greatest of all Towers, in fact/It is the only perfect and eternal Tower. [...] The Tower is inviolable. It will/Be attacked by invisible powers/From above and from below by agents of social corruption. [...] Then, when the Tower is built,/We shall have war. But the Tower is impregnable" (Merton, 1980: 250). The tower represents an achievement of virtue, but more importantly an achievement of *power*. The character of Raphael criticizes the builders of

the tower as divided among themselves and perversely hungry for their own failure. He describes the construction as “a tower of unbelief”, reflecting the inability of the builders to believe in themselves or to believe in God. He surmises that they know the tower will fail, and that they are looking for a kind of consolation: “Their hearts seek disaster as a relief from the tedium of an unsatisfactory experience. Ruin will at least divide them from one another. They will be able to scatter, to run away, to put barricades against one another. Since they cannot stand the pretense of unity, they must seek the open avowal of their enmity” (Merton, 1980: 251-252). Thus, the aspiration of the tower builders is a mask for their own dissatisfaction with themselves and their reluctance to open toward one another in love. It is a device for distracting from their own emptiness, and a justification for sealing themselves off against their neighbors.

The very first lines of the poem depict “Thomas” asking, “Ought we, Raphael, to join/The builders of this city? We can quickly learn/Their language and their ambition”. Raphael pushes back: “No, we must stand apart. [...] If we imitate their zeal/We will lose all sense of what is to be done” (Merton, 1980: 248-249). Later, in the second part of the poem, a newly arrived “Prophet” character offers an alternative vision of how the City is to be constructed: “[T]he great city shall be built without hands, without labor, without money and without plans. It will be a perfect city, built on eternal foundations, and it shall stand forever, because it is built by the thought and the silence and the wisdom and the power of God” (Merton, 1980: 263). The genuine Christian vision of how a social order is to come about, how the “beloved community” is to be constructed, does not involve the “labor” and “plans” of ordinary political operators, but rather silence and wisdom—in which lies the authentic power of God—.

The integralists are tower builders, crafting theories that are fixated on the pursuit of political power. Their desire for dominance and control reflects a yearning for the safety and order that medieval Christendom provided—protection against their own insecurities and their fear of other people—. What they want is not to build a true City of God, but rather to claim control of the City of Man. Merton suggests that this is a futile and misguided ambition in a time of Christian “diaspora”. Not only is the integralist program destined for failure, but it mistakes the real

promise of divine presence in human affairs. As Merton writes, the situation of the Christian in secular, post-Christian modernity offers an opportunity to embrace “a *true* hope, hope not in ‘Catholic power’ but in the eschatological victory of Christ” (Merton, 1967: 189). This is a contemplative vision of political activity, posed in stark contrast to the utterly profane —fundamentally “secular”— vision offered by the integralists.

Conclusion

To reiterate, my aim here has not been to develop a comprehensive critique of integralism. Nor have I aimed to present integralism in any favorable terms, weighing its salutary features against its faults. This is, in part, because I do not suppose that most readers will require much convincing of the dangers of integralism. For most readers in the contemporary, liberal West, the idea of a Catholic theocracy oriented toward enforcing a Catholic conception of the common good by the mechanisms of state power will land as patently unacceptable. It has not been my goal to provide a complete account of the correctness of this conclusion.

Rather, the distinctive contribution of the analysis I have developed here is that by identifying these resources within Merton’s writing for articulating a critique of integralism, we can appreciate integralism’s failings from a perspective other than that of the secular modernists whom the integralists regard as their enemies. There is nothing surprising nor original in noting that integralism will be rejected by those who promote liberal values of maximal individual freedom, separation of church and state, and political “neutrality” on matters of morality and the good. Merton, however, is not some typical post-Enlightenment liberal. Merton did not advocate the relegation of religion to the private sphere, and he did not regard the liberal fetishization of individual freedom as a positive feature of the contemporary Western world. Nevertheless, even from within the perspective of the Catholic tradition —articulated from the vantage of a monk who left “the world” behind in pursuit of a life dedicated to what integralists call “supernatural ends”— there are reasons to reject the integralist outlook. Despite all their noisy claims to be speaking on behalf of the deepest truths of Catholic doctrine, the

integralists fail to account for essential pieces of a truly Christian approach to the contemporary world.

We do not ultimately know what Merton would make of the new integralists. Nevertheless, by drawing on words that Merton wrote over half a century ago, we can identify at least these three basic flaws in what the integralists propose. They neglect the value of freedom as an expression of our confidence in God's continued presence in history and in our fellow humans as creatures made in the image and likeness of God. They overlook the role of interreligious dialogue (and even dialogue with non-believers) as a means of deepening one's own faith and demonstrating the capaciousness of the Catholic tradition. And they embrace a fundamentally secular approach to political action and social change, aiming at control and domination, rather than trusting in the grace of God to build a "perfect City" not through the work of our hands or the awesomeness of our influence, but through the silent action of God's grace, making things new and holy in ways that we cannot even begin to imagine.

References

- Boniface VIII. *Unam Sanctam (1302) Papal Encyclicals Online*. (May 20, 2020). <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/bon08/b8unam.htm>
- Crean, T.; Fimister, A. (2020). *Integralism: A Manual of Political Philosophy*. Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae.
- Curran, C. (2002). *Catholic Social Teaching, 1891-Present: A Historical, Theological, and Ethical Analysis*. Georgetown University Press.
- Gregory XVI (1990). "Inter Praecipuas". In *The Papal Encyclicals*. C. Carlen (Ed.). Raleigh: Pierian Press.
- Maritain, J. (1996). "Integral Humanism". In *Integral Humanism, Freedom in the Modern World, and a Letter on Independence, the Collected Works of Jacques Maritain, Vol. 11*. O. Bird (Ed.). University of Notre Dame Press: 143-345.
- Merton, T. (1961). *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New Directions Books.
- Merton, T. (1964). *Seeds of Destruction*. Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- Merton, T. (1966). *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Doubleday.
- Merton, T. (1980). *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*. New Directions.

- Merton, T. (2004). *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. P. A. Burton (Ed.). Orbis Books.
- Merton, T. (2013). "Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom". In *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays*. P. F. O'Connell (Ed.). Orbis Books.
- Pink, T. (12 August 2018). "In Defence of Catholic Integralism". *Public Discourse*.
<https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/08/39362/>
- Pius IX, "Quanta Cura" (October, 2020),
<https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9quanta.htm>
- Troutner, T. (October 28, 2020). "The New Integralists". *Commonweal*.
<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/new-integralists>
- Vermeule, A. (July 19, 2018). "According to Truth". *The Josias*.
<https://thejosias.com/2018/07/19/according-to-truth/>
- Vermeule, A. (2022). *Common Good Constitutionalism: Recovering the Classical Legal Tradition*. Polity Press.
- Waldstein, E. (October 17, 2016). "Integralism in Three Sentences". *The Josias*.
<https://thejosias.com/2016/10/17/integralism-in-three-sentences/>
- Williams, R. (2011). *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton*. Fons Vitae.

The Role of Victoria Ocampo in Thomas Merton's Engagement with Global Intellectuals

Mark Meade

Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University
United States of America
mmeade@bellarmine.edu

It has been over 10 years since the publication of *Fragments de un Regalo*, “Fragments of a Gift”, the extant correspondence of Victoria Ocampo and Thomas Merton. Merton described Victoria’s¹ first letter to him as a “true gift from God”. This first letter from Victoria and some other early letters from Victoria to Merton have not been found and likely will not be. Yet, the publication of *Fragments* included newly-discovered letters by Merton, including his earliest letters, and published Victoria’s side of the conversation for the first time. Most of the letters were written in French, both Victoria and Merton having a shared history with France and sense of comfort with the language. The richness of what was shared in their letters and the new connections I have discovered in the years since have made it, though fragmentary, a gift that keeps giving.

The correspondence between Victoria and Merton can, when placed alongside a revelatory experience Merton had in Louisville in 1958, help to explain how Merton positioned himself to initiate contact with intellectuals from around the world and an outlook that transcended his identity as a North American writer.² Though the strongest influence I

¹ Throughout the paper, I will shorten Victoria Ocampo to Victoria to distinguish her from her sister Silvina who is also a well-known literary figure. Thomas Merton is most often shortened to Merton, and I will follow this convention.

² Though Merton (1915-1968) was born in France and educated in France and England, he finished his university education in the United States, would live in the U.S. from 1934 until his death. He became a U.S. citizen in 1951.

trace of Victoria on Merton is through the initiation of global dialogue with intellectuals, I find that Merton and Victoria shared a quality of transcending boundaries in many areas that may explain why Victoria and Merton found such a connection. After Merton's 1958 experience in Louisville, his flattening of the distinction between the religious and the secular world led him to admit the wider world into his consciousness. Merton's writings and translations would bridge the gaps of language and culture, especially between North and South America as Victoria achieved through the publication of *Sur*. *Sur* was a pioneering literary journal of the 20th century published by Victoria. *Sur* was published in Buenos Aires and brought the literature of Latin America to a world audience while translating global authors for Latin America. Victoria's work with *Sur* and the post-1958 Merton demonstrated the ability of both intellectuals to transcend the polarities of gender roles, forge connections between religious traditions, and create friendships across racial and ethnic barriers. Both Merton and Ocampo's lives were touched by losses of loved ones that sparked a dialogue about transcending the duality of life and death. In this study, I outline Merton's prior connections with Latin American writers, his 1958 revelation, his initiation of contact with Victoria preceding other global connections of this sort, and aspects that united Merton and Victoria as figures who transcended boundaries.

Victoria Ocampo was born in 1890 to a wealthy family in Argentina. The first of six daughters, and with no brothers, she would become heiress to her family's fortune. Later in life, Victoria used this wealth to found and promote the literary journal *Sur* that gained her international fame and which helped her to export Latin American literature to the world and to import world literature to Latin America. Like Merton, Victoria spent much of her childhood in France. Though the girls of the family were not allowed formal education outside the house, they had a French tutor. Victoria's old-money family also prohibited university matriculation, but she regularly attended lectures at the Sorbonne. She was drawn to the theater and allowed to take private acting lessons in her youth, but her father forbade her to be publicly on stage. Victoria found her life's work in publishing and writing. The latter were mainly literary critiques beginning with a book in French highlighting the female characters in the *Divine Comedy*. In addition, she wrote biographies of Virginia Woolf and T. E. Lawrence. She was admirer of Indian poet, educator, and intellectual

Rabindranath Tagore. Victoria's crowning achievements were the founding in 1931 of the journal *Sur* and in 1933 of *Sur's* book-publishing wing. In journal and book form, she published authors with whom Merton corresponded, like Henry Miller and Octavio Paz, and those whom Merton read, such as Albert Camus. She continued to travel throughout her life and to host authors and intellectuals at her family estate, Villa Ocampo. Dying in 1979, she had donated the villa in her will to UNESCO, much of the family land having been sold during her lifetime to fund *Sur* and other literary projects.

Some of Victoria's best writing, like Merton's, can be found in her memoirs and in a vast correspondence with an international array of friends and intellectuals. Ivonne Bordelois describes Victoria the letter writer as one who, not unlike Merton, possessed a mixture of cutting wit, warmth and candor emerging from the hidden realm of private correspondence with friends. For Merton, his private journals and correspondence provided sanctuary from monastic censorship and the demands of his order for a famous monk to maintain a holy public veneer. In Victoria's case, the privacy freed her from certain social expectations and limitations. Bordelois writes of Victoria:

Beyond her articles, books, and memoirs, Victoria penned a huge number of letters, the volume of which exceeds the rest of her written work put together. Her correspondence was written in silence, with her notable tenacity and a headstrong determination. As generous as Victoria was, her words often stung, and in her letters can be found a number of biting finales vis-à-vis the brilliant figures that encircled her: "Lacan struck me as a small Napoleon", she writes, or "Ravel seemed to pay no heed to Ravel", "Borges doesn't deserve the talent he has", ...[and] "Simone de Beauvoir, who went on about Virginia Woolf's feminism, had never heard of Three Guineas". (Bordelois s/f)

Before establishing Victoria's importance in Merton's outreach to global intellectuals, it is important to note that Merton had contacts in Latin America prior to Victoria, but most were responsive on his part, for example, Merton responding to publishers of his books in translation in Latin America or letters written to Merton by monks and nuns there for spiritual advice. He had an interesting exchange of letters with sculptor

Jaime Andrade from Ecuador (Merton, 1990: 107-109, 111-12, 113-15, 248) beginning shortly before his letters with Victoria; however, Merton had written to Andrade because he was searching for an artist to carve a statue for the chapel used by Gethsemani's novices, an increasing number of whom were coming from Latin America at that time. Not long after the time Merton and Victoria began dialogue, the Andrade correspondence was deepening into issues regarding global solidarity and not simply the art commission. In contrast to most prior interactions with Latin Americans, Merton *initiates* correspondence with Victoria. There may have been a publishing motive in mind because Merton sends Victoria a couple of items for possible inclusion in *Sur*. However, it is clear from the tone of the first letter that there is a connection to the experience in Louisville and a theme of solidarity that would prefigure the Cold War Letters of the early 1960s.

Although their correspondence begins with Merton writing to Victoria, I should not place all the initiative for Merton's connection with Latin America with Merton himself. In a sense, Latin America came to him. Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal had spent some time in his early life as a novice under Merton at his monastery, Gethsemani, but novices also came to Gethsemani from Colombia, Bolivia, Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America. It was through the poet Cardenal and James Laughlin at New Directions Publishing that Merton gained access to the poets of South America and fell in love with their writings.

I believe the correspondence between Merton and Victoria is greatly significant to Merton studies in the following ways. It has been widely noted that Merton's Fourth and Walnut experience in downtown Louisville³ broadened his view of the type of issues he would address, namely, moving from writing exclusively personal reflections about the spiritual life and poetry centered around life at Gethsemani to writing essays and poetry that brought his religious convictions to bear on the social issues of the day and that addressed global concerns. Scholars like William Shannon have noted that not long after this experience, Merton initiated exchanges of letters with people from outside the monastery,

³ For details on this event, see Merton, T. (1966). *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, Vol. 3: 1952-1960*. HarperCollins: 181-82 [March 19, 1958]; y Merton, T. (1966) *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Doubleday: 140-42.

from various places globally, and from religious and cultural traditions quite different from his own (Shannon, 2005: 35-38). Not all have linked Merton's contact with intellectuals of the world to his experience in Louisville, but I think the recently found Victoria Ocampo correspondence helps us to see this link was more than a private revelation later published. The timing of Merton's first letter to Victoria places her squarely amid a pivotal shift in Thomas Merton's writing. What Merton chose to write to Victoria and when he did it reveal new insights about Merton.

In Merton's case, the path to wisdom was a long road of self-growth and discovery to achieve a spirituality that embraced the world, a journey now documented in his journals. To say that Victoria and Merton were possessed of this transcendent quality is not a novel assertion. However, I believe that it was Merton's inauguration of contact with Victoria that was one of the first human connections that put into action in Merton's life the mental shift from world-denial to world-affirmation, from self-isolation to transcendence. I can trace the significance that Victoria had on Merton from his first letter to her on July 21, 1958. The date of the letter is significant. This was the mid-point of Merton's most active years as a writer. For this chronology, I refer to the time beginning with Merton's first great success as a writer, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in 1948, to his death in 1968. More than simply a mid-point, 1958 was a pivot point. In Merton's personal journals we can pinpoint an important revelatory experience that happened just a few months prior to his first letter to Victoria, March 18, 1958, at Fourth and Walnut Streets in Louisville. As noted in the analysis of William Shannon, this experience is commonly seen as a shift for Merton away from an insular view of the monastic life, a view that saw the goal of monasticism and the spiritual life as denying the world outside the cloister wall in favor of an idealized life of prayer and asceticism. Merton described the revelatory experience in his journal of March 19, 1958:

Yesterday, in Louisville, at the corner of 4th and Walnut, suddenly realized that I loved all the people and that none of them were, or, could be totally alien to me. As if waking from a dream —the dream of my separateness, of the "special" vocation to be different. My vocation does not really make me different from the rest of men or put me in a special category except artificially,

juridically. I am still a member of the human race— and what more glorious destiny is there for man, since the Word was made flesh and became, too, a member of the Human Race! Thank God! Thank God! I am only another member of the human race. (Merton, 1996: 181-182)

I affirm the prior analysis of this downtown Louisville event and take it a step further. In *Merton: A Film Biography* by Paul Wilkes and Audrey Glynn, Fourth and Walnut is portrayed as a cosmic reordering, a change in Merton's mental landscape which affected all his future writing. This change forced him to reconsider his monastic vocation and to now include in it a concern for problems of the world, including racism and atomic weapon proliferation, issues he confronted in critical essays following this revelation. When reflecting back on the downtown Louisville revelation, he expands on what it meant to him when publishing it in 1966's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

[T]he conception of "separation from the world" that we have in the monastery too easily present itself as a complete illusion... [T]hough "out of the world" we are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest. (Merton, 1966: 140-141)

What I am proposing is a link between the downtown Louisville revelation and Merton commencing engagements, mainly through correspondence, with a worldwide cadre of great minds—firstly, Victoria Ocampo. Many of these types of letters were only privately published during Merton's lifetime because of the censorship he experienced from his monastic superiors on controversial subjects, especially about nuclear war, e.g., his mimeographed private circulation of the "Cold War Letters" (Merton, 2006), which had been barred from publication. In such letters as these, it would not just be the wall of the cloister that would be transcended, but barriers such as the Iron Curtain. One of Merton's earliest letters inaugurating a vocation of global correspondence was with Russian author Boris Pasternak in August of 1958 (Merton, 1993: 87-93). However, we now know that the first such barrier to be crossed was between the poles on a north-south axis when Merton first wrote to

Victoria, one of culture and language, between the American divide, the Anglo-American north and the Latin American south.

Shortly after recording the revelation at 4th and Walnut in his journal, in April of 1958 during Easter, Merton penned the preface to the Argentine edition of *Obras Completas*. In it, he expresses his desire to become a person of the whole hemisphere:

In the silence of the countryside and the forest, in the cloistered solitude of my monastery, I have discovered the whole Western Hemisphere. Here I have been able, through the grace of God, to explore the New World, without traveling from city to city, without flying over the Andes or the Amazon, stopping one day here, two there, and then continuing on. Perhaps if had traveled in this manner, I should have seen nothing: generally those who travel most see the least.

It seems that I have heard the voice of all the hemisphere in the silence of my monastery, a voice that speaks from the depths of my being with a clarity at once magnificent and terrible: as if I had in my heart the vast and solitary pampas [...]. (Merton, 1989: 40)

I find a first reference to Merton hearing about *Sur* through New Directions Vice-President Robert MacGregor. He offered to send Merton a novel by Adolfo Bioy Casares from *Sur's* publishing wing. (Merton; Laughlin, 1997: 134) Merton had asked a postulant coming to the monastery from Argentina in spring of 1958 to bring him a copy of *Sur*, and the *Sur* office sent him multiple issues (Merton, 1996: 188 [April 4, 1958]). Merton may not have realized that *Sur* had by this time included reviews of three of his books between 1950 and 1956. These were the Latin American releases in Spanish by Editorial Sudamericana of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *Seeds of Contemplation* and *No Man Is an Island*.

According to Christine Bochen, editor of *The Courage for Truth*, the collection of Merton's letters to writers, "The earliest of these letters [to writers in Latin America] were written to Pablo Antonio Cuadra, the Nicaraguan writer and editor of *La Prensa* [...] beginning in 1958" (Merton, 1994: xiii). Although Victoria Ocampo is listed among fifteen other contacts from Latin America, Bochen was not aware at time of publication in 1993 of Merton's early correspondence with Victoria, nor was any

scholar aware of this before the recent discovery of thirteen new letters, the first of which precedes that of the Cuadra correspondence (Merton, 1993: 178-95). Cuadra had already visited Merton at Gethsemani through a visit arranged by Ernesto Cardenal. However, Merton waited to write to Cuadra and first reaches out to Victoria in letter form.

Merton had other earlier global contacts prior to Victoria. For a decade Merton had been in contact with English author Evelyn Waugh following the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Merton, 1993: 3-21). Merton reached out to Waugh for the sake of a writing mentor, not to open himself to the wider world. One could argue that Merton's correspondence with Jacques Maritain in the same year, 1948, was an earlier thread of engagement with the world than with Victoria (Merton, 1993: 22-53); however, Maritain wrote first to Merton. Victoria also knew and greatly respected Maritain, thinking maybe he was a better Catholic because he was a Catholic convert, and maybe she reasoned the same for Merton. Merton initiates contact with Erich Fromm, the German-born psychoanalyst and philosopher living in Mexico. He engaged Fromm on the intellectual plane, but Merton was not yet in the mode of worldly engagement. Though claiming sympathy in opposition to war, Merton refused to sign an anti-war declaration Fromm sent in March of 1955, claiming he was ignorant of current events and that his superiors would likely object to his signing a public statement. Moreover, at this time, he claimed that he did not know of progressive Catholics who might sign, except possibly Jacques Maritain or Bishop John Wright of Springfield, Massachusetts. By the 1960s, he had signed public petitions and was in contact with many anti-war Catholics, which emphasizes the changes that Merton experienced in 1958.

Merton's letters to Victoria are a rare example of an international contact that Merton initiated and that was begun primarily for the sake of communication before late 1958. Also, they are the first of such letters to follow his experience at Fourth and Walnut Streets in Louisville. The words of Merton's first letters to Victoria echoed the language expressed in his journal entry about his downtown Louisville revelation and demonstrated his desire to establish human connection with like-minded intellectuals:

I assure you of my complete agreement with all that *Sur* stands for, and my utter 'solidarity' with you. I say this not only as a writer but as a monk, because I realize now more than ever dedication to God in religious life cannot be pretense for attempted evasions, but on the contrary commits a man all the more irrevocably to a position and a witness in the world of this time. (Merton; Ocampo, 2011: 59-60)

Merton called his first response to this letter, "*un vrai don de dieu*" ("a true gift from God") (Merton; Ocampo, 2011: 69). Unfortunately, Victoria's first letters to Merton have not been discovered and likely will not be; yet, a few things are apparent. As in her biting comments quoted earlier, she was known not to mince words, and Merton asks, "How can I thank you for the simplicity and confidence with which you tell me so frankly what you think?" (Merton; Ocampo, 2011: 69). In her frank response, Victoria seemed to have quickly established a connection with Merton, but she was also clear that Merton's relationship with God and with the institutional Catholic Church differed from her understanding. This seemed evident from Merton's attempts at clarification. He did not back down from his essentially Christian identity as a monk, but, perhaps for the first time, tried to articulate to someone else the unifying vision he had in Louisville:

[N]ever believe that I am some different being from you because I am here in a very quiet monastery without problems like yours. Much to the contrary, I live in the heart of your problem because I live in the heart of the Church. I do not believe myself truly a monk, or truly a priest, if I were not able to feel in myself all of the revolts and all of the anguish of modern man. (Merton; Ocampo, 2011: 70-71)⁴

Merton sent two poetic essays with his initial letter, "Prometheus: A Meditation" (Merton, 1961: 15-23) and what he calls a "statement addressed to intellectuals", which he did not name, but which from the context was likely his "Letter to an Innocent Bystander" (Merton, 1961: 51-64), an essay in the form of an open letter. Merton named the

⁴ Except for Merton's first letter to Victoria, which was written in English, the rest are all in French. All quotations from Merton; Ocampo 2011 have been ytranslated by the autor of this paper.

intellectual who witnessed violence as an “innocent bystander”. Though not the cause of violence, the intellectual was also not ignorant of it, was implicated through shared humanity, and must resist injustice through courageous witness. He included clergy among the bystanders called to bear witness. He would carry this theme into the title and message of his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* of 1966, the same volume that published his world-affirming revelation at Fourth and Walnut. The monk now not only must recognize the positive aspects of connectivity to the rest of humanity, but he must also implicate himself in the violence of the world and recognize that to be aware of these evils is to be a “guilty bystander”. Yet, the intellectual and the monk must respond non-violently.

From available evidence, Victoria was one of the earliest people to whom Merton had sent “Letter to an Innocent Bystander”. It was published the following month in France; Victoria published it in early 1959, it was sent to Czeslaw Milosz for his journal for Polish émigrés later in 1959, and it did not appear in English until 1961 in *The Behavior of Titans*. Once again, for Merton, this essay was part of a process of crossing boundaries and forming connections between intellectuals throughout the world. How better to accomplish this than to send it to Victoria because *Sur* was already at the forefront of this process?

The correspondence between Victoria and Merton demonstrate mystical outlooks Merton and Victoria had in common. Both shared a quality of transcendence that manifested itself in various aspects of their lives. Possibly, the term transcendence could be used to describe a state inhabited those who have crossed into a metaphysical world detached from the rest of us, and further, employed with a pejorative connotation referring to those who seem to have lost contact with the material world. By transcendence, I refer to the more literal meaning of the Latin *trans-* and *scandere*, to climb across, to climb over. Merton and Victoria crossed boundaries and healed divisions. They overcame barriers in communications, culture, politics, gender dynamics and religious division. Both drew on sources new and ancient. Victoria’s cosmopolitan tastes as a publisher did not deny her distinctly Argentine voice.

For Merton, being a mystic meant seeing the “hidden wholeness” in all things, as he expressed in the poem *Hagia Sophia* (Merton, 1977: 363).

The mystic need not lose grounding with the material world to see beyond the external differences. The true mystic does not have to lose his or her personal uniqueness and rootedness to a particular culture or faith tradition to recognize a connection to all people, to all creation and to the divine. As Merton states in an essay titled “The Contemplative Life in the Modern World”:

Ancient and traditional societies, whether of Asia or of the West, always specifically recognized “the way” of the wise... whether in art, in philosophy, in religion, or in the monastic life ...they would so to speak bring together in themselves the divisions or complications that confused the life of their fellows. By healing the divisions in themselves they would help heal the divisions of the whole world... This way of wisdom is no dream, no temptation and no evasion, for it is on the contrary a return to reality in its very root. (Merton, 1968a: 218)

For Merton, the mystic was not only continually aware of the world’s problems, but one who sought to resolve the conflicts on a personal level and then to universalize reconciliation.

Victoria’s mystical insights came from within and without her birth culture’s Catholic milieu. Doris Meyer, in her biography of Victoria, notes that Victoria equally drew inspiration from Dante’s vision in the *Divine Comedy* and the Eastern wisdom of Rabindranath Tagore. In them, Victoria discovered something akin to Merton’s idea of “hidden wholeness”. Meyer writes that Victoria recognized that “both Dante and Tagore aspired to achieve ‘allness’, ‘wholeness’, the union of finite and infinite” (Meyer, 1979: 64). As in *Hagia Sophia*, Merton often cited the Holy Wisdom of God manifesting itself as a feminine force, a tradition with its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures. He may have seen in Victoria reflections of these unifying and sapiential aspects.

The challenge for Merton as a monk was to engage in an authentic dialogue as a person of faith with those, such as Victoria, who may have been drawn to things spiritual, but who operated outside of religious institutions and traditional roles. This was especially true for Merton as a Catholic in dialogue with intellectuals from Latin America, whose struggles with the institutional Church were cast against a history of colonial exploitation. At a meeting of the International Thomas Merton

Society in 1995, Miguel Grinberg spoke of how he counseled Merton in his "Message to Poets" (Merton, 1966: 155-161) to neutralize certain clerical language (Grinberg, 1995). Merton was writing this message for a meeting in Mexico City in 1964 of poets, most of whom were from Latin America. Merton went to the extent of signing the piece with a familiar form of his monastic name, Louis, but changing his title from "Father" to "Uncle Louie". In his January 1959 letter to Victoria, Merton was clear that when he speaks to her of God, it was a dialogue, not a sermon, refuting the assumption that by having taken vows or being an ordained cleric, he had all the answers. If Merton did not already know of Victoria's interest in Tagore, he would have seen in the pages of *Sur* openness to varied religious traditions. We see references to the Buddha and to the *Bhagavad Gita* in the reviews of Merton's books of the 1950s, well before Merton himself had published on traditions of the East.

Merton also sensed that to stand with the intellectual, he had to acknowledge a rift between the secular and religious worlds. He wrote in his first letter, "it seems to me that I am bound, by the circumstances of my own life and background, to do something to heal the prodigious and unpardonable breach that has arisen between the Church and the intellectual world of our time" (Merton; Ocampo, 2001: 60). Merton would many times revisit this style of dialogue that he first exhibits with Victoria. Such letters to friends and some written as essays in the form of open letters followed the theme of the "guilty bystander", self-inclusion in systems of violence and miscommunication that lead to division. An example is his "Apologies to an Unbeliever" (Merton, 1968a: 205-14), an attempt at respectful dialogue between the monk and the atheist or agnostic. Another example is his "Letters to a White Liberal", (Merton, 1964: 3-71) which is addressed to fellow white progressives engaged in the struggle for equal civil rights for Black Americans in the United States. Merton claimed that these "white liberals", though viewing themselves as working for a just cause, were undermining equality by their own prejudiced assumptions. Merton was concerned about a subtle condescension that existed among whites that defined equality by unfairly projecting that Blacks would need to be recreated in the image of whites to be equal.

Though Victoria clearly identified as a feminist, she was sometimes critical of the movement in a way that resonates with many of today's feminists.

Like Merton's "white liberal", she felt that progressive women and their male allies may have hurt the women's movement by expecting that women must become just like men to achieve equality, even taking on many faults inherent to patriarchy. She recognized the liberated woman might lead in different ways than a man in power and might carry herself differently. An expression of this belief was her admiration of businesswoman Coco Chanel and the world of high fashion that she revolutionized. In contrast to mainly mainline feminists who advocated eschewing high fashion, Victoria stated, "it would be a shame for them to do away with the spectacle of a well-dressed woman". (Gainza; Bordelois)

Merton's and Victoria's dialogue did not progress to such a discussion on the topic of feminism, but we can see Merton expressing similar ideas in some of the conferences he gave for religious sisters in 1968. He discussed "The Feminine Mystique" in a conference published posthumously in *Springs of Contemplation*. (Merton, 1992: 161-176) Despite the title, I do not find evidence that Merton had read Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique*, though he may well have known about it. He referred mainly to Mary Daly's book *The Church and the Second Sex*, describing the "feminine mystique" as an idealization of women which also harms them through patriarchal distortion of their true nature.

Of course, it was in a spirit of international solidarity, especially between North and South America, that Merton found some of his truest resonance with Victoria. Both made connections across hemispheric borders and helped foster a sense of unified American identity across continents through literature. As Merton wrote for a commemorative volume about Victoria, "she symbolizes America in the broad sense, the only sense, in which I am proud to be numbered among Americans". (Merton, 1964: 284)

The paradox of lives of transcendence, of establishing deep bonds of love which can bring great joy, is the parallel pain when these bonds are severed by death. Merton and Victoria had the ability to realize on an intuitive level a broader perspective on death, not just the negative. Yet, both still felt deeply the pain of their own losses and could empathize with the pain of another. Victoria revealed to Merton the heartache caused by three family deaths. In a letter of July 4, 1959 (not extant), she told Merton of the death by suicide of her niece Angélica Bengolea Ocampo,

not yet 32 years of age, whom she called “Bebita”. We know only of the letter through Merton’s answer. He did not minimize the pain of the loss or claim to be able to explain why suicide or the death of young people happened. Instead, he connected her death to a larger illness shared by humanity. Merton wrote, “everyone, the whole world, is very sick. If Bebita has died, it is because we are all very sick in one way or another” (Merton; Ocampo, 2011: 123). In less than a year, Victoria would lose two sisters.

When she informed Merton in December of 1967 of the death of her sister Francisca, she spoke of her sister’s long sufferings as a caregiver for her husband contrasted with the mercy of only a brief illness and sudden death. She wrote, “The unexpected death (merciful to her) was cruel for us, for my sisters” (Merton; Ocampo, 2011: 300). The following June another sister died suddenly, Rosa, the mother of the young woman who had committed suicide. Maybe because of Rosa’s continued suffering over the loss of her daughter or for other reasons, Victoria again described her death as “merciful”. However, this did not diminish her pain. She continued, “Why can we not understand or accept death as something as natural as birth? It is still incomprehensible and horrible” (Merton; Ocampo, 2011: 306).

Merton was all too familiar with the impact of the death of loved ones, having lost his mother at six and father at fifteen, as well as his brother during the Second World War. Not long after responding to Victoria in her loss, he would depart for a journey to Asia. This trip would be his greatest achievement in his lifelong task of building bridges. This time it was to enter dialogue with the religions of the East. He would speak at an interreligious conference and meet the Dalai Lama. As I mentioned before, transcendence need not imply a severing of one’s roots. Merton’s embrace of Buddhism did not imply a breaking of ties with his identity as a Christian monk. He had received permission to travel to Asia by his abbot, and while there, he prayed the psalms and celebrated Mass each day.

It was his Asian trip that also brought him face-to-face with the mystery and inevitability of death, both natural and incomprehensible as Victoria described. Just a week before the tragic accident that would take his life, he describes in his Asian journal a powerful experience, maybe as

powerful as the one he experienced a decade prior in Louisville, while he visited the Buddha statues of Polonnaruwa in Ceylon. (Merton, 1998: 321-323)

Facing his death soon after, we will never know if Merton's 1968 revelation at the Buddha statues of Polonnaruwa would have made the same type of transformation in his writings as his 1958 revelation in Louisville. However, I am confident that Victoria would have been a person with whom he could have shared the experience had he returned from Asia-someone who understood transcending the limits of country and culture, and a person who searched for God in novel ways.

In conclusion, Victoria Ocampo and Thomas Merton continue to inform and inspire a broken world, a world in need of wisdom, art and the kind of vision that transcends the differences that cause global unrest. Merton's 1958 revelation in Louisville revealed to Merton his connection and responsibility to a wider world. As a writer and intellectual, Merton needed methods of communicating with a wider world. He found a model for making these connections and a kindred spirit in cosmopolitanism in Victoria. Both strove to break down barriers of culture, language, religion, and gender. Theirs was also a friendship that could offer mutual support during personal loss. In troubled yet exciting times, Merton and Victoria forged a bond of healing that was, at first, a joy to one another and has now become a gift, or at least the fragments of a gift, for us to piece together. They were the pioneers, but, ultimately, it is up to us to take the fragments they left us and to learn how they can be pieced together in the process of global reconciliation.

References

- Bordelois, I. (May 12, 2021). *Villa Ocampo in the Arts. Her Essays*.
https://web.archive.org/web/20160312035853/http://www.villaocampo.org/ing/historico/cultura_10.htm
- Gainza, M.; Bordelois, I. (May 15, 2021). *Victoria Ocampo in the Arts: Fashion*.
https://web.archive.org/web/20160317070001/http://www.villaocampo.org/ing/historico/cultura_8.htm
- Grinberg, M. (1995). "Thomas Merton and the New World Kairos". Audio recording from the Fourth General Meeting of the Thomas Merton Society. Sounds True Recordings.

- Merton, T. (1961). *The Behavior of Titans*. New Directions.
- Merton, T. (1964). *Seeds of Destruction*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Merton, T. (1966). *Raids on the Unspeakable*. New Directions.
- Merton, T. (1968). *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Merton, T. (1977). *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*. New Directions.
- Merton, T. (1989). *Honorable Reader*. R. Daggy (Ed.). Crossroad.
- Merton, T. (1990). *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*. P. Hart (Ed.). Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- Merton, T. (1992). *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*. J. M. Richardson (Ed.). Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- Merton, T. (1993). *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*. C. M. Bochen (Ed.). Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- Merton, T. (1996). *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals*, Vol. 3, 1952-1960. L. S. Cunningham (Ed.). HarperCollins.
- Merton, T.; Laughlin, J. (1997). *Selected Letters*. D. D. Cooper (Ed.). W. W. Norton.
- Merton, T. (1998). *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals*, Vol. 7, 1967-1968. P. Hart (Ed.). HarperCollins.
- Merton, T. (2006). *Cold War Letters*. C. M. Bochen and W. H. Shannon (Eds.). Orbis.
- Merton T.; Ocampo, V. (2011) *Fragmentos de un Regalo: Correspondencia y Artículos y Reseñas* En Sur. J. J. Negri (Trans. and notes). Sur.
- Meyer, D. (1979). *Victoria Ocampo: Against the Wind and the Tide*. G. Braziller.
- Shannon, W. (2005). 'Something of a Rebel': *Thomas Merton: His Life and Works: An Introduction* St. Anthony Messenger Press, 35-38.

Madre de América: las raíces latinoamericanas de *Hagia Sophia*

María Helena Barrera-Agarwal

Academia Nacional de la Historia del Ecuador
Academia Ecuatoriana de la Lengua
Ecuador
mhbarrerab@gmail.com

Introducción

Desde su publicación en 1962, el poema en prosa de Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia*, ha atraído atención crítica constante. Es quizás el más enigmático de los trabajos de Merton, tan breve como amplio en significado. Numerosos estudios han considerado su lugar en las exploraciones teológicas de Merton. En *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, el primer libro dedicado al tema, Christopher Pramuk presenta el poema como el punto clave de la sofiología de Merton, sustentado en amplio conocimiento obtenido de variedad de fuentes. Entre las mismas se hallan las obras de autores católicos y ruso ortodoxos. Fuentes adicionales, contemporáneas y posteriores a esos años, junto con materiales tomados de diversas tradiciones religiosas, particularmente el Zen y el hinduismo.

Este ensayo propone dos adiciones, previamente desconocidas, a las posibles fuentes de *Hagia Sophia*. Durante los años en los que desarrolló su sofiología, Merton estuvo en contacto con dos intelectuales ecuatorianos, el artista Jaime Andrade Moscoso y el poeta Jorge Carrera Andrade. Merton encargó a Andrade Moscoso la creación de una estatua de la Virgen y el Niño para Getsemaní, durante cuya creación mantuvo con él una correspondencia que profundiza en la noción de María como *Sophia*. Más tarde, Merton estuvo en contacto también con Carrera Andrade, con quien mantendría un diálogo epistolar que resultaría en un comentario y traducción de los poemas del ecuatoriano, trabajos ambos de simbolismo relacionado con *Hagia Sophia*.

América Latina

La amistad entre Thomas Merton y Carolyn y Victor Hammer fue profunda y multifacética. Uno de los aspectos más interesantes de la misma es el modo en que Carolyn, bibliotecaria en la Universidad de Kentucky, ayudó a Merton a acceder a material de lectura de la biblioteca de Kentucky o por medio de préstamos interbibliotecarios. Su correspondencia, hecha pública recientemente, nos permite determinar el contenido de las solicitudes de Merton —un ejercicio fascinante—. Así, en una carta fechada el 5 de julio de 1957, Merton escribe a Carolyn:

Espero que pueda prestarme algunos de los siguientes datos de la biblioteca de la universidad. Daré una "primera lista" y luego mencionaré algunas alternativas en caso de que no se den las de la primera lista. Todos son libros sobre América del Sur [...]¹.
(Merton, 2014: 37)

Adelantándose a posibles preguntas de Carolyn sobre su solicitud, Merton ofrece en la misma carta una explicación bastante ordinaria de su interés: “Tenemos muchos novicios y postulantes en este momento. Estoy recibiendo muchos desde América del Sur, y eso explica en parte mi interés en los libros que he mencionado”. (Merton, 2014: 38)

El interés de Merton por América del Sur no era algo nuevo. Durante sus años en Nueva York, había comenzado a aprender español, un esfuerzo que continuó mientras estaba en Getsemaní. También interactuó con compañeros neoyorquinos de habla hispana y frecuentó la iglesia eminentemente mexicana de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, en la Calle 14, Manhattan. Durante su único viaje más allá del Río Bravo, en 1940, pasó un tiempo en Cuba. Allí, en la iglesia de San Francisco, experimentó un despertar místico, centrado en la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre —un episodio que precedió muy de cerca a su pedido para ser aceptado en Getsemaní—. Tales antecedentes, sin embargo, no explican completamente el novísimo enfoque que más tarde expresará en su carta a Carolyn: “No he enumerado nada específico sobre Colombia y Ecuador,

¹ Merton, T. (2014). Traducción propia.

pero estos dos países me interesan más en este momento". (Merton, 2014: 38)

En cartas posteriores, en medio de una serie de solicitudes relacionadas con América del Sur, Merton pedirá a Carolyn títulos clave relacionados con Ecuador, incluyendo *Huasipungo*, de Jorge Icaza; *Nuestro Pan*, de Enrique Gil Gilbert y *Ecuador, drama y paradoja*, de Leopoldo Benítez. Para entender el significado completo detrás de la simple afirmación de interés y del pedido de esos y otros libros, es necesario revisar el testimonio de Ernesto Cardenal, uno de los postulantes que estaban llegando a Getsemaní en ese tiempo.

Cardenal había llegado a la abadía en mayo de 1957. Sus intereses literarios y políticos, así como sus antecedentes estaban alineados con los de Merton. El nicaragüense halló su inspiración para unirse a los cistercienses después de leer *The Seven Storey Mountain* siendo estudiante de maestría en la Universidad de Columbia. Una vez en la abadía, se convertiría en persona cercana a su mentor. Uno de los temas que tenían en común era la pasión por la idea de una fundación cisterciense que se rumoreaba que tendría lugar en América Latina. Tanto el Maestro de Novicios como su postulante se entusiasmaron con esa posibilidad y discutieron posibles lugares, incluyendo Nicaragua. Empero, un país distinto iba a tomar sitial preeminente: el hermano de Cardenal, Fernando, era en ese momento un jesuita en ciernes, que estudiaba para obtener una licenciatura en filosofía en la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Quito. Al enterarse de este hecho, Merton le pidió a Cardenal que se comunicara con él, solicitándole detalles sobre Ecuador, uno de los lugares que más lo atraía.

Ecuador

Es imposible determinar si el interés de Merton por Ecuador precedió a la llegada de Cardenal a Getsemaní. Lo que es seguro, sin embargo, es que, para julio de 1957, sus esperanzas sobre una fundación en el país andino estaban muy presentes. Al igual que con otros deseos de cambio de escenario monástico, Merton se mostró reacio a revelar cuán intensos eran esos anhelos: en una carta al abad Dom James, fechada el 15 de julio de 1957, nombra a Ecuador como una posibilidad para una fundación, pero solo como uno más de los países en una lista que incluye a Argentina,

Chile, Uruguay, Colombia, Bolivia, Venezuela y México. La moderación en su carta a Dom James contrasta con sus verdaderos sentimientos, evidentes en una entrada de sus diarios, fechada quince días más tarde, el 30 de julio:

La esperanza de un monasterio en Ecuador. ¿Puede tal esperanza ser realizada por cualquier cosa excepto la oración? ¿Es una esperanza o una tentación? Se podría hacer fácilmente: un monasterio simple como Toumliline en Marruecos, como Cuernavaca [...]. Visitar primero a Dom Gregorio en Cuernavaca y aprender de él cómo crear un monasterio pequeño y simple, lo más diferente posible a Getsemaní. Con quizás muy pocos estadounidenses en él. (Todo el tiempo mi estómago está enfermo con la sensación de que con Dom James nada de eso es posible). ¿Puede tal esperanza ser realizada por cualquier cosa menos por la oración? Santa Mariana de Jesús, tú que oraste en Quito y amaste a Dios allí y donde eres venerada todavía y tienes poder todavía: potencia tus oraciones ahora y ruega por un monasterio cerca de Quito o tal vez cerca de Riobamba bajo el Chimborazo, un monasterio en uno de los grandes valles. [...] ¿Puede tal esperanza ser realizada por cualquier cosa que no sea la oración, la oración que quema el corazón, que lucha contra la desesperación, que se enciende en llamas y brega contra la fría oscuridad de la desesperación? (Merton, 2014: 104)

En los meses siguientes, las solicitudes de Merton a Fernando Cardenal y a Carolyn Hammer darían lugar a contactos tangibles, con diversos resultados. Vía Cardenal, Merton se corresponderá con el P. Marco Rueda, SJ, Maestro de Novicios en Quito, quien apoyaría con entusiasmo la idea de una fundación en Ecuador en una carta del 23 de noviembre de 1957. La respuesta de Merton, fechada el 11 de diciembre de 1957, tiene idéntico fervor. Sin embargo, el diálogo entre ellos iba a ser de corta duración. Las noticias de la correspondencia del P. Rueda con Merton fueron publicadas en un periódico ecuatoriano y llegaron eventualmente a Getsemaní, causando una reacción muy negativa en Dom James.

La ayuda de Carolyn Hammer resultó más enriquecedora para la visión de Merton. A través de los préstamos facilitados por su intermedio, Merton pudo leer una serie de libros importantes sobre Ecuador. Este camino

eventualmente llevaría a un título excepcional, *Ecuador: Andean Mosaic*. La obra había sido publicada en 1952 por Rolf Blomberg, un artista sueco residente en Ecuador, y proporcionaba información actualizada sobre la vida artística e intelectual del país, junto con una gran cantidad de fotografías de extraordinaria calidad.

La información incluida por Blomberg permitió a Merton contactar, a través de la Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana, con dos de los intelectuales ecuatorianos más importantes de su tiempo, el artista Jaime Andrade Moscoso y el poeta Jorge Carrera Andrade. Los intercambios de Merton con ambos nacieron de su interés por Ecuador. Sin embargo, evolucionaron para encarnar de manera profunda, aunque distinta en expresión final, su sociología.

Sophia y la Virgen y el Niño

Una de las imágenes del libro de Blomberg es una representación fotográfica de una escultura de Jaime Andrade Moscoso. Representa la misma a un campesino ecuatoriano, lleno de dignidad y energía. Su cuerpo está firmemente arraigado en la tierra —de hecho, se puede argumentar que incorpora la tierra— y lleva una única gavilla de trigo. El título es *La parva*. Inspirado en esta única escultura, Merton concibió la idea de encargar a Andrade la creación de una imagen del Niño Jesús y la Virgen María. Andrade respondió a la solicitud de Merton aceptando la comisión. Mencionaría en su carta cómo “Siempre he pensado que el arte religioso alcanzó dimensiones extraordinarias en el pasado, las mismas que ahora son difíciles de superar”. (Andrade Moscoso. 1958)

Esta afirmación no es circunstancial: sin que Merton lo sepa, Andrade ha trabajado previamente en una obra que contiene la imagen de Cristo. Ha colocado un Jesús resucitado, entre otras imágenes bíblicas, en el panel central de un mural monumental para el campus de la Universidad Central de Ecuador, en Quito. Es un precedente importante, ya que incluye un árbol de la vida, que se fusiona con y complementa al Cristo triunfante. Eventualmente, habrá de concebir la idea de la Virgen y el Niño en líneas similares. En las ideas favorecidas por Andrade, Merton reconoce sus propias exploraciones, a las que agregaría la necesidad de incorporar una intensa naturaleza indígena: la imagen debe representar a “la Virgen

Madre de los indios de los Andes, llevando en sus brazos al Cristo encarnado en la carne y la sangre de la verdadera América”:

Debemos ser testigos de la encarnación, pero eso no quiere decir que debemos ocuparnos exclusivamente en la contemplación de una Hermosa y sentimental Navidad. La "Navidad" de Dios en el mundo se está desarrollando en la historia del hombre. [...] Debemos aprender a ver a Dios no sólo en las viejas formas, casi muertas, de una Europa cuya misión histórica está terminando, sino encarnada en las formas del país iberoamericano cuya misión se encuentra en el futuro. (Merton, 1958)

La última afirmación es clave, ya que el concepto de Merton es de renovación, centrado en un futuro en el que América Latina juega un papel esencial, como anticipó en su momento en la carta inicial a la Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana:

Quiero precisamente alejarme de la escultura "piadosa" convencional, y buscar algo fuerte, original y con el aliento de la vida espiritual. Particularmente me gustaría algo con un carácter indio, pero debemos pensar que no soy el único en estar interesado en ese proyecto y, por lo tanto, para otros en la comunidad la nota indianizante podría estar un poco atenuada. (Merton, 1958)

Tal petición encaja con los conceptos que Merton incluye en su prefacio al primer —y único— volumen de sus *Obras completas*, publicado por Editorial Sudamericana en 1958. Allí afirma que, en los Estados Unidos, "la Santísima Virgen, cuando está representada, es pálida y melancólica", en oposición a "[l]a Santa Madre [que] es la Madre de América, está en todas partes de América, ¡la Virgen Oscura!" El color de la madera utilizada o la estatua tenía que coincidir con esa visión, y, por lo tanto, Merton es muy específico sobre el material que quiere para la estatua, determinando que debe ser de una madera de origen tropical, "negra o marrón". Esto podría parecer un detalle mínimo, de no mediar la descripción que Merton proporciona en una carta a Victor Hammer, fechada en mayo 14, 1959, sobre el tema de *Hagia Sophia*:

En su aspecto más primitivo, *Hagia Sophia* es la Ousia oscura y sin nombre del Padre, el Hijo y el Espíritu Santo, la oscuridad

incomprensible y "primordial" que es luz infinita. [...] Sofía es la contraparte femenina, oscura y tierna del poder, la justicia, el dinamismo creativo del Padre. [...] Si recibimos la humildad de Dios en nuestros corazones, llegamos a ser capaces de aceptar, abrazar y amar esta misma pobreza, que es Él mismo y Su Sophia. Y entonces la oscuridad de la sabiduría se convierte para nosotros en luz inexpresable. (Merton, 2014: 66)

Y, en la misma carta a Hammer, Merton escribe cómo

Las Tres Personas Divinas, cada una al mismo tiempo, son Sophia y la manifiestan. La sabiduría de Dios, "que se extiende de extremo a extremo poderosamente" es también el Tao, el pivote sin nombre de todo ser y naturaleza, el centro y el significado de todo, lo que es lo más pequeño, lo más pobre y lo más humilde de todos. (Merton, 2014: 66)

Las últimas palabras son prácticamente idénticas en significado a las utilizadas por Merton en una carta a Herbert Mason —tan importante para este tema como aquella dirigida a Victor Hammer— en la que analiza la estatua de Andrade después de su finalización: "la Santísima Madre es la mujer indígena de los Andes, la representante de todo lo que es más humillado, olvidado, abandonado y dejado de lado". La centralidad de tal identificación y de ese origen está relacionada con los conceptos sapienciales de Merton, que son evidentes en toda su dimensión mientras se consideran con otros documentos, privados o públicos, de su canon. Uno de estos documentos es una carta clave a Andrade, en la que Merton disecciona las raíces de su idea. Es un texto de gran densidad teológica, que permite vislumbrar la posible razón de su intensa atracción por los Andes ecuatorianos:

Puesto que el hombre es la imagen de Dios, y puesto que, en el hombre, Dios mismo es oprimido, negado y rechazado a su propia imagen, espero con interés el nacimiento de Cristo en el mundo, en renacimiento, hacia la libertad, del "hombre" que ha sido oprimido y explotado. Y el prototipo de todos los hombres explotados es el indígena andino, el más pobre, el más olvidado de la tierra y, al mismo tiempo, el reservorio de una tradición espiritual pura, antigua y perenne. En nuestra época, en la que el hombre ha sido alienado y el espíritu ha sido alienado, creo que

Dios se manifestará en la tierra en el lugar preciso donde su nombre está más oculto y, al mismo tiempo, más evidente. Esta verdad no es nada nuevo, es lo que se aprende una y otra vez de los profetas del Antiguo Testamento, y es la enseñanza de Cristo, es la vida de Cristo en la tierra. La Virgen Madre es la misericordia, la sabiduría, la Providencia de Dios cuidando de esos seres ocultos y guardando su secreto hasta que sea el momento de sacarlo a la luz. (Merton, 1958)

La colaboración entre Merton y Andrade dio como resultado una imagen que encarnaba estos conceptos. Andrade mencionaría más tarde cómo el proceso había sido una "experiencia espiritual invaluable". Merton apreció la verdad de esa evaluación y la encontró reflejada en la estatua. En abril de 1959, después de haber llegado a Getsemaní, mencionó en su diario: "La estatua vino de Andrade, en Ecuador, y está muy bien. Una estatua muy seria y misteriosa que sin duda está a la altura de la idea virginal y la transmite bien". (Merton, 1996: 275)

Y, posteriormente, escribió a Andrade:

Quiero decirte que la estatua es realmente muy impresionante. Hay algo en ello que una fotografía no puede mostrar. Tiene una cualidad religiosa y espiritual muy fuerte, una cualidad de misterio y fuerza y eso es exactamente lo que esperaba. El tratamiento de las caras es particularmente efectivo en este sentido. Ciertamente ha tomado la idea del tema que le propuse y lo ha ejecutado admirablemente. (Merton, 1959)

El verdadero significado de La Virgen y el Niño, sin embargo, fue más allá de una comisión terminada con éxito. En sus intercambios con Andrade, Merton había mencionado sus deseos de una fundación trapense en Ecuador. Andrade, profundamente realista y de reconocida honestidad, aconsejó no proseguir con tal esfuerzo, que pensaba no tendría éxito en el Ecuador de su tiempo. Merton aceptó su consejo, reconociendo la validez de sus argumentos. A pesar de ello, sus esperanzas, combinadas con sus exploraciones sapienciales, iban a seguir vivas mucho después de que la posibilidad de una fundación andina se convirtiera en una imposibilidad. Aun más revelador, en una entrada a su diario, fechada el 10 de julio de 1964, Merton escribió:

Debo leer, leer y leer. Es mi vocación. El riesgo no está en buscar y conocer estas cosas, sino en pretender más de lo que soy capaz de pretender. Están buscando un Salvador y tomarán a cualquiera como uno. Y supongo que estoy buscando un Salvador o una Madre Tierra. Sigo creyendo en la idea de la oscura Virgen Ecuatoriana que conseguí que Jaime Andrade tallara en madera para el noviciado. Ella está allí, no hablo con ella, nadie le reza, ¡pero tal presencia de todos modos! (A Dom Gabriel no le gustaba). Algunas conclusiones: literatura, contemplación, soledad, América Latina, Asia, zen, islam, etc. Todas estas cosas se combinan en mi vida. Sería una locura hacer un "monacato" simplemente excluyéndolos. Sería menos un monje. Otros tienen su propio camino, yo tengo el mío. (Merton, 1997: 124)

***Sophia* y el 'País Secreto'**

En una de sus cartas a Jaime Andrade, enviada en abril de 1958, Merton escribe que está interesado en la obra de Jorge Carrera Andrade, y pregunta si el poeta es pariente del artista. Andrade, en su respuesta, aclara que no son parientes y proporciona a Merton la dirección del poeta en París. El cómo Merton descubrió la poesía de Carrera Andrade es tema aún incierto. Se puede conjeturar que Ernesto Cardenal pudo servir de enlace, o que los brillantes comentarios sobre Carrera Andrade en el libro de Blomberg estimularon una búsqueda específica. La primera mención de las obras de Carrera Andrade en los diarios de Merton aparece en noviembre de 1957. Por su naturaleza se puede inferir que Merton ya ha leído sus poemas. Este conocimiento previo es parcial, en el mejor de los casos, ya que Merton desconoce la existencia de la traducción al inglés de *País secreto*, de Carrera Andrade, efectuada por Muna Lee para Macmillan en 1946.

Por petición de Merton, Andrade obtendría en 1958 que Julio Endara, presidente de la Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana, enviase una caja de libros a Getsemaní. Entre esos volúmenes se encontraba uno de Carrera Andrade, *Edades Poéticas*, 1922-1956, publicado pocos meses antes. Los libros llegaron a la abadía a principios de noviembre de 1958. Merton escribió entonces en su diario:

[...] toda una avalancha de libros de Ecuador, incluido Jorge Carrera Andrade, un poeta encantador. Si ese es el espíritu de Quito que habla en él, ¡entonces entiendo por qué me siento tan poderosamente atraído por ese lugar! (Merton, 1996: 229)

Pocos días después, el dos de diciembre de 1958, Merton registra en su diario las tareas que le ocupan. Estos incluyen sus estudios rusos y portugueses y su correspondencia con Boris Pasternak. Entre otras labores, enumera también sus "lecturas latinoamericanas: trabajos sobre Carrera Andrade, etc." (Merton, 1996: 234). A pesar de ello, no buscará comunicarse directamente con el poeta hasta casi transcurrido un año. Durante este tiempo, el tema de una fundación trapense en Ecuador se volvería totalmente imposible. En consecuencia, Merton confía sus esperanzas en tal sentido a Carrera Andrade, más allá de alusiones altamente abstractas. Su afecto por Ecuador, sin embargo, emergerá tan fuerte como siempre:

No sé por qué amo tanto Ecuador, ya que nunca tuve la alegría de visitar ese país, pero creo que en su obra poética puedo buscar algo de la misteriosa explicación. Canta con la voz pura y sencilla, sincera y hermosa, de su bendito país: país de montaña y selva, de gente humilde amada por Dios; país de cultura cristiana e india. En su obra me encanta el genio y el espíritu del Ecuador. (Merton, 1959)

Tres meses después, aun antes de recibir una respuesta del poeta, Merton ya trabaja en la traducción que ha propuesto. Reflexionando sobre los poemas de Carrera Andrade, comenta cómo transmiten un carácter místico y vital con el que le es fácil identificarse:

He traducido un par de poemas de Jorge Carrera Andrade, es un poeta encantador. Lo que escribe sobre Quito en sus primeros poemas nos hace recuperar el asombro, la alegría y la absorción en la vida que conocí ese verano en Sussex, en Rye, etc. La maravilla absoluta del cielo, la ciudad tranquila, los pantanos y colinas, las campanas en la torre, los niños del coro. Tiene un poema maravilloso, claro, profundamente místico (pero muy simple) sobre la del tiempo en la Catedral de Quito, que crece en ti cada vez más. Un poema de luz, sencillez, espacio, amor. Lo

traduje esta tarde. Su compasión franciscana por las cosas pequeñas. (Merton, 1996: 357)

Carrera Andrade no es el primer poeta latinoamericano que Merton lee y traduce. Debido a sus propios intereses y por intermedio de Ernesto Cardenal, conocerá a algunos de los mejores autores contemporáneos del continente —el propio Cardenal, César Vallejo, Nicanor Parra y Pablo Antonio Cuadra, entre otros—. Su correspondencia con Carrera Andrade, sin embargo, está marcada por un doble afecto: ama al poeta y ama al país del que el poeta proviene. Malgorzata Poks (2011) ha analizado las afinidades entre Merton y Carrera Andrade, a partir de las traducciones de Merton, y encontró una resonancia entre sus visiones poéticas. Tal eco está presente, sin duda, en la primera carta que Carrera Andrade envía a Merton, recibida el 26 de enero de 1960 en Getsemaní.

En su carta, el poeta ecuatoriano aprecia el interés de Merton y acepta su ofrecimiento de traducir algunos de sus poemas. También menciona cómo, en algún momento, consideró la vida religiosa contemplativa como una opción, deseando nada más que ser "una especie de San Francisco de Asís de la Edad Atómica". Esa expresión trae a la mente precisamente el adjetivo "franciscano" con el que Merton, mucho antes de recibir la respuesta de Carrera Andrade, había ya descrito el temperamento poético del ecuatoriano. No es de extrañar por tanto que, también en enero de 1960, Merton escribiera a Carolyn Hammer: "Si puede desenterrar algo sobre el poeta ecuatoriano Jorge Carrera Andrade, se lo agradecería, ya que estoy trabajando sobre él. Es una persona muy fina e interesante" (Merton, 2014: 88).

En febrero y marzo, Merton escribe a Robert Lax y Edward Rice, y les propone notas introductorias y traducciones de la poesía de Carrera Andrade para *Pax* y *Jubilee*. Esperará hasta junio para responder en una carta que confirma la gran empatía que siente por el ecuatoriano. El proceso de publicación continuará, y Merton considerará en privado la idea de la fundación cisterciense en Ecuador, incluso después de haber concluido sus traducciones. La introducción y las versiones en inglés aparecerán finalmente en junio de 1961, incluidas en *New Directions in Prose and Poetry 17*, la colección anual publicada por James Laughlin. Después de un retrato apreciativo de Carrera Andrade, el ensayo contiene

un párrafo que resume públicamente, por primera y única vez durante la vida de Merton, su pensamiento más íntimo sobre Ecuador:

Ecuador: tierra de volcanes verdes, de selvas calientes y sierras frías, de ciudades coloniales ambientadas como joyas en valles perdidos; una tierra de indios y pobreza. La voz de Ecuador (que canta en su verso) es una voz suave, humilde: una voz oprimida, pero sin rencor, sin infelicidad, como la voz de un niño que no tiene mucho que comer pero vive al sol. Ecuador es un niño sabio hambriento, un niño antiguo, como el niño en los proverbios bíblicos que siempre estaba jugando en el mundo ante el rostro del Creador. Un niño eterno, un Cristo secreto, que sabe sonreír ante la locura de los grandes y no tener esperanza en ninguno de los países fuertes del mundo. Ecuador siempre ha sido y siempre será, traicionado por los fuertes. (Merton, 1961: 115)

Tal vez estas líneas condensan —contradictoria, mística y misteriosamente, como en tantos otros pasajes de Merton sobre el tema— la razón de su aspiración a experimentar su vocación religiosa a través de una fundación en los Andes. Más importante aún, cualquier lector de *Hagia Sophia* puede reconocer el simbolismo de un pasaje similar al publicado un año después en el poema:

Lo que es más pobre y humilde, lo que está más oculto en todas las cosas es, sin embargo, más obvio en ellas, y bastante manifiesto, porque es su propio yo el que está ante nosotros, desnudo y sin cuidado. (Merton, 1962: 7-8)

Sophia, la niña, está jugando en el mundo, obvio e invisible, jugando en todo momento ante el Creador. Sus delicias son estar con los hijos de los hombres. Ella es su hermana. El núcleo de la vida que existe en todas las cosas es la ternura, la misericordia, la virginidad, la Luz, la Vida considerada como pasiva, como recibida, como dada, como tomada, como inagotablemente renovada por el Don de Dios. Sophia es Don, es Espíritu, Donum Dei. Ella es dada por Dios y Dios mismo como regalo. Dios como todos, y Dios reducido a la Nada: nada inagotable. Exi na ni vit se me tip sum. La humildad como fuente de luz infalible. (Merton, 1962: 5)

En su carta a Carrera Andrade, unos párrafos más tarde, Merton cita uno de los pasajes más memorables de *Edades Poéticas*, aquel en el que Carrera Andrade habla del "país secreto, el país que está en todas partes, el país que no tiene mapa porque está dentro de nosotros mismos". Merton avala la noción del ecuatoriano y afirma que conoció a Carrera Andrade en ese país. Su descripción de este lugar excepcional tiene una resonancia conmovedora, particularmente cuando se considera a la luz de su anhelo, nunca expresado públicamente, con respecto a la fundación y su teología sapiencial:

Es en este país secreto donde he conocido a Carrera Andrade, y aquí nos hemos convertido en buenos amigos. Aquí, sin el ruido de las palabras, hablamos juntos de las montañas del Ecuador, y de la gente silenciosa que no siempre come todos los días. El país secreto es un país de soledad y una especie de hambre, de silencio, de perplejidad, de espera, de extrañas esperanzas; donde los hombres esperan que nazca lo imposible pero no siempre se atreven a hablar de sus esperanzas, porque todas las esperanzas que se pueden poner en palabras ahora son utilizadas por los hombres de guerra a favor de la muerte. Incluso los más sagrados y vivos a veces se usan a favor de la muerte. [...] ¿Puede la profecía ser tan humilde, tan modesta? ¿Puede la voz de un nuevo mundo estar tan tranquila? ¿Es esta la voz de los Andes grises y verdes, de la América largamente escondida, del oscuro y fresco crepúsculo del amanecer de la sierra del que algún día nacerá la paz? (Merton, 1961: 117)

En julio de 1961, James Laughlin informa a Merton que Carrera Andrade se ha mudado a Venezuela en misión diplomática oficial. En septiembre siguiente, Merton escribe al ecuatoriano una última y extensa carta. En este texto aparece la alusión más evidente, aunque todavía críptica, a las esperanzas de una fundación en Ecuador:

He pensado muy seriamente que como un acto de protesta debería renunciar a la ciudadanía estadounidense y convertirme en ciudadano de algún pequeño país modesto donde pudiera sentirme más honesto. Esto, lo sé, es solo una idea quijotesca y una posición más realista es que mi vocación es quedarme aquí en este país que necesita escuchar la voz de alguien que se opone

categoricamente a su pragmatismo materialista grosero sin sabiduría y sin visión. (Merton, 1959)

Merton cierra su carta deseando prosperidad y paz a Carrera Andrade y al Ecuador. Es una frase que resuena con la sensación de una conclusión definitiva, pues no otra mención del país o eco de la sofología a él relacionada habrá de aparecer en sus escritos.

Referencias

- Andrade Moscoso, J. (18 de marzo de 1958). [Carta a Thomas Merton]. Copia en posesión de Thomas Merton Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, Box 22.
- Merton, T. (5 de febrero de 1958). [Carta a la Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana]. Copia en posesión del Archivo de la familia Andrade. Quito, Ecuador.
- Merton, T. (3 de marzo de 1958). [Carta a Jaime Andrade Moscoso]. Copia en posesión del Archivo de la familia Andrade. Quito, Ecuador.
- Merton, T. (14 de mayo de 1958). [Carta a Jaime Andrade Moscoso]. Copia en posesión del Archivo de la familia Andrade. Quito, Ecuador.
- Merton, T. (19 de abril de 1959). [Carta a Jaime Andrade Moscoso]. Copia en posesión del Archivo de la familia Andrade. Quito, Ecuador.
- Merton, T. (23 de septiembre de 1959). [Carta a Jorge Carrera Andrade]. Copia en posesión del Jorge Carrera Andrade Collection, Manuscript Collection 202, Special Collections and University Archives, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, Box 10.
- Merton, T. (30 de septiembre de 1959). [Carta a Jorge Carrera Andrade]. Copia en posesión del Jorge Carrera Andrade Collection, Manuscript Collection 202, Special Collections and University Archives, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, Box 10.
- Merton, T. (1961) *Six Poems, Jorge Carrera Andrade-Translated, with a note on the poet*. J. Laughlin (Ed.). *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 17. New Directions.
- Merton, T. (1962) *Hagia Sophia*. Stamperia del Santuccio.
- Merton, T. (1963). *Emblems of a Season of Fury*. New Directions.
- Merton, T. (1996). *A Search for Solitude. Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Merton's Journal*, Vol. 3. L. Cunningham (Ed.). HarperCollins.
- Merton, T. (1997). *Dancing in the Water of Life Merton's Journal*, Vol. 4. R. Daggy (Ed.). HarperCollins.
- Merton, T. (2014). *The Letters of Thomas Merton and Victor and Carolyn Hammer. Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam*. D. Scutchfield and P. E. Holbrook Jr. (Eds.). University Press.

Poks, M. (2011). *Thomas Merton and Latin America: a Consonance of Voices*. LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.

Madre de América: The Latin American Roots of Hagia Sophia

María Helena Barrera-Agarwal

Academia Nacional de la Historia del Ecuador
Academia Ecuatoriana de la Lengua
Ecuador
mhbarrerab@gmail.com

Introduction

Since its publication in 1962, Thomas Merton's prose poem *Hagia Sophia* has attracted consistent critical attention. It is perhaps the most enigmatic of Merton's works, as brief as dense in meaning. In *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, the first book-length work about the subject, Christopher Pramuk presents it as the key undertaking of Merton's sophiology, sustained by a wide range of knowledge, gathered for many sources. Among these underpinnings, Pramuk lists theological works of Catholic and Russian Orthodox authors, as well as materials gathered in Merton's interactions with diverse religious traditions, particularly those of Zen and Hinduism.

This paper proposes two previously unknown additions to the possible sources of *Hagia Sophia*. During the years in which Merton developed his sophiology, he was in contact with two Ecuadorian intellectuals, artist Jaime Andrade Moscoso and poet Jorge Carrera Andrade. Merton commissioned Andrade Moscoso to execute a statue of The Virgin and the Child for Gethsemani, engaging with him during the process of creation in a lively epistolary exchange that touches on the notion of Mary as Sophia. Later, Merton engaged also with Carrera Andrade, in a dialog that would result in a commentary and translation of the latter's poems, stepped into the symbolism related to *Hagia Sophia*.

Latin America

The friendship between Thomas Merton and Carolyn and Victor Hammer was deep and multifaceted. One of the most interesting aspects of their connection is how Carolyn, a librarian working at the University of Kentucky, helped Merton access reading material, directly from the collection at Kentucky or via interlibrary loan. Their correspondence, made public recently, allows us to access the content of Merton's requests. Thus, in a letter dated July 5, 1957, Merton writes:

I hope you will be able to lend me some of the following from the university library. I will give a "first list" and then name a few alternatives in case the ones on the first list are not to be had. They are all books about South America [...]. (Merton, 2014: 37)

Preempting possible questions from Carolyn about his request, Merton offers in the same letter a rather ordinary explanation for his interest: "We have lots of novices and postulants at the moment. I am getting many from South America, and that accounts in part for my interest in the above books" (Merton, 2014: 38).

The interest in South America was not new for Merton. During his years in New York, he had started to learn Spanish, an endeavor that he continued while at Gethsemani. He also interacted with Spanish-speaking fellow New Yorkers and worshipped at the eminently Mexican church of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, in Manhattan. During his only trip beyond the Rio Grande, in 1940, he spent time in Cuba. There, at the San Francisco church, he experienced a mystical awakening, an episode that shortly preceded his quest to be accepted at Gethsemani. Such antecedents, however, do not fully explain the specific, new focus that he later expresses in his letter to Carolyn: "I have not listed anything specific on Colombia and Ecuador but these two countries interest me most at the moment" (Merton, 2014: 38).

In subsequent letters, among a number of requests related to South America, Merton will ask for key titles related to Ecuador, including Jorge Icaza's *Huasipungo*, Enrique Gil Gilbert's *Nuestro Pan*, and Leopoldo Benítez's *Ecuador, drama y paradoja*. To understand the full meaning behind this interest, it is necessary to review the testimony of Ernesto Cardenal, one of the postulants that were in Gethsemani at the time.

Cardenal had arrived to the Abbey on May, 1957. He had been inspired to join the Cistercians after reading *The Seven Story Mountain* as a graduate student at Columbia University. Once in Gethsemani, he discovered a great affinity with Merton and quickly became close to him. One of their common interests was the idea of a Cistercian foundation that was rumored would take place in Latin America. Both the Master of Novices and his postulant were enthusiastic about that possibility and discussed possible locations, including Nicaragua. A different place was to become preeminent, however: Cardenal's brother, Fernando, was at the time a budding Jesuit, studying for a philosophy degree at the Pontifical Catholic University of Quito. Privy to this fact, Merton asked Cardenal to contact him, requesting "information about Ecuador, one of the places that attracted him the most".

Ecuador

It is impossible to determine whether Merton's interest for Ecuador preceded Cardenal's arrival to Gethsemani. What is certain, however, is that by July, 1957, he was intently hoping for a foundation in the Andean country. As with other wishes for change of monastic scenario, Merton was reluctant to disclose such expectations: in a letter to abbot Dom James, dated July 15th, 1957, he names Ecuador as a possible location for a foundation, but only as one in a list that includes Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Colombia, Bolivia, Venezuela and México. The restraint he shows in his letter to Dom James contrast with his real feelings, made evident in an entry of his diaries, dated July 30th:

The hope of a monastery in Ecuador. Can such a hope be realized by anything except prayer? Is it a hope or a temptation? It could easily be done a simple monastery like Toumliline in Morocco, like Cuernavaca [...] To visit first Dom Gregorio at Cuernavaca and learn from him how to make a small, simple monastery as unlike Gethsemani as possible. With perhaps very few Americans in it. (All the time my stomach is sick with the feeling that with Dom James nothing of the sort is possible.) Can such a hope be realized by anything but prayer? St. Mariana of Jesus, you who prayed in Quito and loved God there and are venerated still and have power there still: give power to your prayers now and beg for a monastery near Quito or perhaps near Riobamba under

Chimborazo, a monastery in one of the large valleys. [...] Can such a hope be realized by anything but prayer—prayer that burns out the heart, that fights despair, that comes up in flame and fights the cold darkness of despair. (Merton, 2014: 104)

In subsequent months, Merton's requests to Fernando Cardenal and Carolyn Hammer would result in tangible contacts, with contrasting outcomes. Via Cardenal, Merton will correspond with Fr. Marco Rueda, SJ, Master of Novices in Quito, who, in a letter dated November 23, 1957, enthusiastically supported the idea of a foundation in Ecuador. Merton's reply, dated December 11, 1957, has an identical fervor. However, the exchange was to be short-lived. News of Fr. Rueda's correspondence with Merton were published in an Ecuadorian newspaper and eventually reached Gethsemani, causing a strong negative reaction from Dom James.

Carolyn Hammer's help proved more sustaining for Merton's vision. By way of the loans she facilitated, he was able to read a number of important books about Ecuador. This path was to eventually lead to an exceptional title, *Ecuador: Andean Mosaic*. This work had been published in 1952 by Rolf Blomberg, a Swedish artist living in Ecuador, and provided up to date information on the artistic and intellectual life of the country, along with a wealth of photographs.

The details provided by Blomberg allowed Merton to contact, via the Ecuadorian House of Culture, two of the most accomplished Ecuadorians of their time, the artist Jaime Andrade Moscoso and the poet Jorge Carrera Andrade. Merton's exchanges with both were born of his interest for Ecuador. However, they evolved to influence in contrasting ways his sophiology.

***Sophia* and La Virgen y el Niño**

One of the images in Blomberg's book is a photographic rendering of a sculpture by Jaime Andrade Moscoso. It depicts an Ecuadorian man, full of dignity and energy. His body is firmly rooted in the land—in fact, it can be argued that it subsumes the land—and carries a sole sheaf of wheat. The title is *La parva* (Unthreshed Grain). Inspired by this sole sculpture, Merton conceived the idea of commissioning Andrade to create an image of the Infant Jesus and the Virgin Mary. Andrade replies to Merton's request agreeing to the commission. He mentions how "I have always

thought that religious art reached extraordinary dimensions in the past, the same ones that are now difficult to be surpassed” (Andrade Moscoso, 1958).

This assertion reflects a deeper truth: unbeknown to Merton, Andrade has already worked on an image of Christ. He had placed a resurrected Jesus, among other biblical images, at the central panel of a monumental mural for the campus of Ecuador’s Central University, in Quito. It is an apt precedent, for it includes also a tree of life, that merges and complements the triumphant Christ. Accordingly, he will eventually conceive the idea of the Virgin and the Child along similar lines. In Andrade’s ideas, Merton recognized his own explorations, to which he would add an intense sense of belonging: the image was to represent “the Virgin Mother of the Indians of the Andes, carrying in her arms the Christ incarnate in the flesh and blood of true America”:

We must be witnesses of the incarnation, but that is not to say that we must occupy ourselves exclusively in the contemplation of a beautiful and sentimental Christmas. The “Christmas” of God in the world is unfolding in the history of man. [...] We must learn to see God not only in the old, almost dead forms of a Europe whose historical mission is ending, but incarnated in the forms of the Iberic-American country whose mission is in the future. (Merton, 2014: 66)

The last assertion is key, as Merton’s concept is one of renewal, centered in a future in which Latin America plays an essential part, as he anticipated in his initial letter to the House of Ecuadorian Culture:

I want precisely to get away from conventional “pious” sculpture, and look for something strong, original and with the breath of spiritual life. I would particularly like something with an Indian character-but we must think that I am not alone in being interested in that project, and therefore, for others in the community the Indianizing note could be a bit attenuated. (Merton, 2014: 66)

Such a request fits with the way in which Merton, in his preface to the first —and only— volume of his *Obras completas*, published by Editorial Sudamericana in 1958, writes that in the United States, “the Holy Virgin,

when she is represented, is pale and melancholic”, as opposed to “[t]he Holy Mother [who] is the Mother of America, is in all parts of America, the Dark Virgin!” The color of the wood used for the statue had to coincide with that vision, and thus Merton is very specific about the material he wants for the statue, determining that it must be of a wood of tropical origin, “black or brown”. This could seem a detail of mere circumstantial interest, until one remembers description that Merton provides in a letter to Victor Hammer on the subject of *Hagia Sophia*:

In its most primitive aspect, *Hagia Sophia* is the dark, nameless Ousia of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, the incomprehensible, “primordial” darkness which is infinite light. [...] Sophia is the feminine, dark yielding, tender counterpart of the power, justice, creative dynamism of the Father. [...] [I]f we receive the humility of God into our hearts, we become able to accept and embrace and love this very poverty, which is Himself and His Sophia. And then the darkness of wisdom becomes to us inexpressible light. (Merton, 2014: 66)

And, in the same letter to Hammer, Merton writes how

[t]he Three Divine Persons each at the same time are Sophia and manifest her. [T]he wisdom of God, “reaching from end to end mightily” is also the Tao, the nameless pivot of all being and nature, the center and meaning of all, that which is the smallest and poorest and most humble in all. (Merton, 2014: 66)

The last words are virtually identical in meaning to those used by Merton in a letter to Herbert Mason, analyzing Andrade’s statue after its completion: “the Blessed Mother is the indigenous woman of the Andes, the representative of all that is most humiliated, forgotten, abandoned and left aside”. The importance of such identification and of that origin is related to Merton's sapiential ideas, as expressed in other private or public documents, of his canon. One of these documents is a letter to Andrade, in which Merton dissects the roots of his idea. It is a text of great theological density. It provides a glimpse of the possible reason for his intense attraction to the Andean region in Ecuador:

Since man is the image of God, and since, in man, God himself is oppressed and denied and rejected in his own image, I look

forward to the birth of Christ in the world, in rebirth, towards freedom, of "man" who has been oppressed and exploited. And the prototype of all exploited men is the Andean indigenous, the poorest, the most forgotten on earth, and, at the same time, the reservoir of a pure and ancient and perennial spiritual tradition. In our age, in which man has been alienated and the spirit has been alienated, I think that God will manifest Himself on earth in the precise place where his name is most hidden and, at the same time, most evident. This truth is nothing new - it is what is learned over and over from the Old Testament prophets, and it is the teaching of Christ, it is the life of Christ on earth. The Virgin Mother is the mercy, the wisdom, the Providence of God watching over those hidden beings and keeping his secret until it is her time to bring him to light. (Merton, 1958)

The collaboration between Merton and Andrade resulted in an image that embodied these concepts. Andrade would mention later how the process had been an "invaluable spiritual experience". Merton appreciated the truth of that assessment and found it reflected in the statue. In April, 1959, after it had reached Gethsemani, he mentioned in his diary:

The statue came from Andrade, in Ecuador, and is very fine. A very serious and mysterious statue that certainly measures up to the virginal idea and conveys it well. (Merton, 1996: 275)

And, subsequently, wrote to Andrade:

I want to tell you that the statue is really very impressive. There is something about it that a photograph cannot show. It has a very strong religious and spiritual quality, a quality of mystery and strength and that is exactly what I expected. The treatment of the faces is particularly effective in this regard. You have certainly taken the idea of the theme I proposed to you and executed it admirably. (Merton, 1959)

The true meaning of *La Virgen y el Niño*, however, went beyond a successfully finished commission. In his exchanges with Andrade, Merton had conveyed his wishes for a Trappist foundation in Ecuador. Andrade, a realist who was well known for his honesty, advised against pursuing such an endeavor, unlikely to succeed in the Ecuador of their time. Merton

accepted his advice, recognizing the validity of Andrade's arguments. Nevertheless, his hopes, entwined with his sapiential explorations, were to remain alive well after the concept of an Andean foundation became an impossibility. Even more telling, in an entry to his diary, dated July 10, 1964, Merton wrote:

I must read, read, and read. It is my vocation. The risk is not in seeking out and knowing these things but in claiming to intend more than I am able to intend. They are looking for a Savior and will take anyone as one. And I suppose I am looking for a Savior or an Earth Mother. I still believe in the idea of the dark Ecuadorian Virgin I got Jaime Andrade to carve in wood for the novitiate. She is there, I do not talk to her, nobody prays to her, but such a presence nonetheless! (Dom Gabriel did not like her.) Some conclusions: literature, contemplation, solitude, Latin America —Asia, Zen, Islam, etc.—. All these things combine in my life. It would be madness to make a "monasticism" by simply excluding them. I would be less a monk. Others have their own way, I have mine. (Merton, 1997: 124)

***Sophia* and the 'País Secreto'**

In one of the letters from April, 1958, to Jaime Andrade, Merton writes that he is interested in the work of Jorge Carrera Andrade, asking if the poet is a relative of the artist. In his reply, Andrade clarifies he is not a relative, and provides Merton with the poet's address in Paris. It is not possible to ascertain how Merton discovered Carrera Andrade's work. Perhaps Ernesto Cardenal served as a link, or the glowing remarks about him in Blomberg's book spurred research. The first mention of Carrera Andrade's works in Merton's diaries dates from November 1957, and allows to infer that by then Merton has already read his poems. His knowledge is partial, at best, since Merton appears to be unaware of the 1946 English version of *Secret Country*, translated by Muna Lee for Macmillan.

At the request of Merton, Andrade had obtained from Julio Endara, the president of the Ecuadorian House of Culture, the gift of a box of Ecuadorian books for Gethsemani. Among those volumes was one by Carrera Andrade, *Edades Poéticas*, 1922-1956, published a few months

beforehand. The books arrived to the abbey at the beginning of November, 1958. Merton wrote in his diary:

[...] a whole spate of books from Ecuador, including Jorge Carrera Andrade —a most charming poet—. If that is the spirit of Quito that speaks in him, then I understand why I am so mightily attracted to that place! (Merton, 1996: 229)

A few days later, on December 2, 1958, Merton records in his diary the tasks that occupy him. These include his Russian and Portuguese studies and his correspondence with Boris Pasternak. Among other undertakings, he lists “reading Latin-American’s: work about Carrera Andrade, etc”. Despite such intention, Merton was to seek direct communication with the poet only a year later, when the issue of a Trappist foundation in Ecuador became moot. Accordingly, during his exchanges with Carrera Andrade, there is no mention of that hope, beyond highly abstract allusions. His affection for Ecuador, nevertheless, emerges as strong as ever:

I don't know why I love Ecuador so much, since I never had the joy of visiting that country, but I think that in your poetic work I can look for something of the mysterious explanation. You sing with the pure and simple voice, sincere and beautiful, of your blessed country: mountain and jungle country, of humble people loved by God; country of Christian and Indian culture. In your work I love the genius and the spirit of Ecuador. (Merton, 1959)

Three months later, before receiving a response from the poet, Merton is already at work on the proposed translation. Reflecting on Carrera Andrade's poems, he remarks how they convey a mystical and vital character with which he is able to identify:

Have translated a couple of poems of Jorge Carrera Andrade —he is a charming poet—. What he writes about Quito in his early poems makes us recapture the awe and joy and absorption in life that I knew that Summer in Sussex, at Rye, etc. The utter wonder of the sky, the quiet town, the marshes and hills, the bells in the tower, the choirboys. He has a wonderful, clear, deeply mystical poem (yet very simple) about the weathercock on Quito Cathedral, which grows on you more and more. A poem of light,

simplicity, space, love. I translated it this afternoon. His Franciscan compassion for small things. (Merton, 1996: 357)

Carrera Andrade is not the first Latin American poet Merton has read and translated. Due to his own interests and through Ernesto Cardenal, he is familiar with some of the continent's best contemporary authors, including Cardenal himself, César Vallejo, Nicanor Parra and Pablo Antonio Cuadra, among others. His correspondence with Carrera Andrade, however, is marked by a dual affection: he loves the poet and also loves Ecuador. Malgorzaka Poks has analyzed the affinities between Merton and Carrera Andrade, on the basis of Merton's translations, finding a resonance between their poetic visions.

Such a resonance is present, without a doubt, in the first letter that Carrera Andrade addresses to Merton, that reaches Gethsemani on January 26, 1960. The Ecuadorian poet appreciates Merton's interest and accepts his offer to translate some of his poems. He also mentions how, at some point, he considered contemplative religious life as an option, wishing for nothing more than to be "a kind of Saint Francis of Assisi of the Atomic Age". That expression brings to mind precisely the adjective "Franciscan" with which Merton, long before receiving Carrera Andrade's reply, has applied to his poetic temperament. It is no wonder that, also in January, 1960, Merton would write to Carolyn Hammer: "[i]f you can dig up anything on the Ecuadorian poet Jorge Carrera Andrade I would be grateful, as I am doing some work on him. He is a very fine and interesting person" (Merton, 2014: 88).

In February and March, Merton writes to Robert Lax y Edward Rice, proposing introductory notes and translations of Carrera Andrade's poetry for *Pax* and *Jubilee*. He will wait until June to answer Carrera Andrade's letter, with a message that confirms the great empathy he feels for the Ecuadorian. The publication process will continue, with Merton still thinking about the foundation in Ecuador as late as November, 1960, after he has concluded his translations. The introduction and translations will finally appear in June, 1961, in *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 17, the annual collection published by James Laughlin. After introducing Carrera Andrade in glowing terms, the essay contains a paragraph that summarizes publicly, for the first —and only— time during Merton's life, his most intimate thoughts about Ecuador.

Ecuador: a land of green volcanoes, of hot jungles and cold sierras, of colonial cities set like jewels in lost valleys; a land of Indians and poverty. The voice of Ecuador (which sings in his verse) is a soft, humble voice: a voice, oppressed but without rancor, without unhappiness, like the voice of a child who does not get much to eat but lives in the sun. Ecuador is a hungry wise child, an ancient child, like the child in the Biblical proverbs who was always playing in the world before the face of the Creator. An eternal child, a secret Christ, who knows how to smile at the folly of the great and to have no hope in any of the strong countries of the world. Ecuador has always been and will always be, betrayed by the strong. (Merton, 1963: 125)

These lines —contradictory, mystically and mysteriously, as in so many other passages by Merton on the issue— summarize the reason for his long aspiration to experience his faith through a foundation in the Andes. As any reader of *Hagia Sophia* would recognize, the text follows closely a passage of the poem published a year later:

That which is poorest and humblest, that which is most hidden in all things is nevertheless most obvious in them, and quite manifest, for it is their own self that stands before us, naked and without care. (Merton, 1962: 7-8)

Sophia, the feminine child, is playing in the world, obvious and unseen, playing at all times before the Creator. Her delights are to be with the children of men. She is their sister. The core of life that exists in all things is tenderness, mercy, virginity the Light, the Life considered as passive, as received, as given, as taken, as inexhaustibly renewed by the Gift of God. Sophia is Gift, is Spirit, Donum Dei. She is God-given and God Himself as Gift. God as all, and God reduced to Nothing: inexhaustible nothingness. Exinanivit semetipsum. Humility as the source of unending light. (Merton, 1962: 5)

In his letter to Carrera Andrade, a few paragraphs later, Merton quotes one of the most memorable passages in *Edades Poéticas*, the one in which Carrera Andrade speaks of "the secret country, the country that is everywhere, the country that has no map because it is within ourselves". Merton endorses the notion of the Ecuadorian and affirms that he met

Carrera Andrade in that country. His description of this exceptional place has a moving resonance, particularly when considered in the light of his own and never publicly expressed longing regarding the foundation and his sapiential theology:

It is in this secret country that I have met Carrera Andrade and here we have become good friends. Here without noise of words we talk together of the mountains of Ecuador, and of the silent people there who do not always eat every day. The secret country is a country of loneliness and of a kind of hunger, of silence, of perplexity, of waiting, of strange hopes: where men expect the impossible to be born, but do not always date to speak of their hopes. For all hopes that can be put into words are not used by men of war in favor of death: even the most sacred and living words are sometimes used in favor of death. [...] Can prophecy be so humble, so unassuming? Can the voice of a new world be so quiet? Is this the voice of the gray-green Andes, of the long-hidden America, of the dim and cool twilight of the Sierra dawn out of which peace, perhaps, will one day be born? (Merton, 1961: 117)

In July, 1961, James Laughlin advises Merton that Carrera Andrade has moved to Venezuela in an official diplomatic mission. The following September, Merton writes to Carrera Andrade, a last, long letter. In this text appears the most evident, even if still cryptic, allusion to the hopes for a foundation in Ecuador:

I have thought very seriously that as an act of protest I should renounce American citizenship and become a citizen of some modest little country where I could feel more honest. This, I know, is just a quixotic idea and a more realistic position is that my vocation is to stay here in this country that needs to hear the voice of someone who is categorically opposed to its crass materialistic pragmatism without wisdom and without vision. (Merton, 1959)

Merton closes his letter wishing prosperity and peace to Carrera Andrade and to Ecuador. It is a sentence that resonates with the feeling of a definitive conclusion, for no further mention of the country or echo of the sophiology thereof related will appear in his writings.

References

- Andrade Moscoso, J. (18 de marzo de 1958). [Letter to Thomas Merton]. Retrieved from the Thomas Merton Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, Box 22.
- Merton, T. (5 February 1958). [Letter to the Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana]. Retrieved from the Andrade family archive. Quito, Ecuador.
- Merton, T. (3 de marzo de 1958). [Letter to Jaime Andrade Moscoso]. Retrieved from the Andrade family archive. Quito, Ecuador.
- Merton, T. (14 de mayo de 1958). [Letter to Jaime Andrade Moscoso]. Retrieved from the Andrade family archive. Quito, Ecuador.
- Merton, T. (19 de abril de 1959). [Letter to Jaime Andrade Moscoso]. Retrieved from the Andrade family archive. Quito, Ecuador.
- Merton, T. (23 de septiembre de 1959). [Letter to Jorge Carrera Andrade]. Retrieved from the Jorge Carrera Andrade Collection, Manuscript Collection 202, Special Collections and University Archives, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, Box 10.
- Merton, T. (30 de septiembre de 1959). [Letter to Jorge Carrera Andrade]. Retrieved from the Jorge Carrera Andrade Collection, Manuscript Collection 202, Special Collections and University Archives, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, Box 10.
- Merton, T. (1961) *Six Poems, Jorge Carrera Andrade-Translated, with a note on the poet*. J. Laughlin (Ed.). *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 17. New Directions.
- Merton, T. (1962) *Hagia Sophia*. Stamperia del Santuccio.
- Merton, T. (1963). *Emblems of a Season of Fury*. New Directions.
- Merton, T. (1996). *A Search for Solitude. Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Merton's Journal*, Vol. 3. L. Cunningham (Ed.). HarperCollins.
- Merton, T. (1997). *Dancing in the Water of Life Merton's Journal*, Vol. 4. R. Daggy (Ed.). HarperCollins.
- Merton, T. (2014). *The Letters of Thomas Merton and Victor and Carolyn Hammer. Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam*. D. Scutchfield and P. E. Holbrook Jr. (Eds.). University Press.
- Poks, M. (2011). *Thomas Merton and Latin America: a Consonance of Voices*. LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.

Heart Speaks To Heart: How Merton's 'Apostolate of Friendship' Continues to Inspire

Brother Paul Quenon

Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance
Abbey of Gethsemani
United States of America
paulquenon@gmail.com

Judith Valente¹

St. Peter's University
United States of America
jvalente17@msn.com

Few of us can count hundreds of people as friends. Thomas Merton could. These friendships were of varying duration and depth, yet Merton expended a considerable amount of energy cultivating these relationships. The majority of these friendships unfolded not through in-person encounters, but on the page, through the letters Merton wrote.

Merton sent out an estimated 20,000 letters in his lifetime to some 2,000 correspondents. Most of those letters are archived in the Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky. He considered letter-writing both an art and a ministry. He called his letters his “apostolate of friendship”.

Many well-known poets, artists, theologians and public figures corresponded with Merton. In addition, Merton also wrote to dozens of people who were not famous in any way, and these letters comprise some of his most engaging dialogues. One of the most famous letters Merton

¹ Dr. HC (honorary doctorate, St. Peter's University)

ever wrote was to Jim Forest. Forest became a well-known spirituality writer, widely respected international peace activist and Merton biographer. However, he was a 25-year-old Catholic Worker volunteer in 1966 when he wrote an anguished letter to Merton, questioning the value of his efforts to promote peace and non-violence in the midst of the Vietnam War.

“How is it that we have become so insensitive to human life, to the wonders of this world we live in, to the mystery within us and around us? And what can we do?” Forest wrote to Merton. “Who can we become that we are not? What can we undertake that we haven’t... I have by no means given up on this work of ours. But truly I feel like an ant climbing a cliff, and even worse, for in the distance there seems to be the roar of an avalanche”. Forest continued.

Merton wrote back as a concerned father would, and certainly as a spiritual director, with one of his most memorable letters of all time. Known as Merton’s “Letter to a Young Activist”, it has been translated into foreign languages, turned into posters and books marks and placed on greeting cards. Forest has called it, “The most helpful letter I ever received”. It as though Merton is speaking to all of us when he offers Forest this unforgettable advice: “Do not depend on the hope of results... Concentrate... on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself... In the end... it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything”.

In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything

The correspondence between Merton and Jim Forest shows that letters are not merely a means of sharing information. They are a vehicle by which we get to know ourselves better. In letters, we confide our fears, express our hopes, lament our regrets, rue our mistakes and work through our struggles. The poet Willie Perdomo has called letter-writing our “resistance against loneliness”. In their anthology, *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters*, William Shannon and Christine Bochen point out that letter writing was Merton’s “way to connect with people, learn from others, try out new ideas, reflect on his work and engage with the issues of the day”. In the letters, we encounter the raw, intimate Merton.

One of Merton’s most lively heart-to-heart correspondences was with a 16-year-old high school student from California named Suzanne

Butorovich. Suzanne first writes Merton in June 1967, asking him to contribute a piece of his writing to her school's underground newspaper. And Merton agrees. He sends her a prose-poem called "Prayer to a Computer" from his poetry collection, "Cables to the Ace". It begins:

"Write a prayer to a computer? First of all you have

To find out how It thinks. *Does it dig prayer?*

In a letter accompanying the poem, Merton compares his poetry to folksinger Bob Dylan's lyrics. Take what you want [of the poem]", he writes. "It is a bit Dylan-like in spots because I love Bobby D. I have lots of his stuff".

In return for receiving the poem, Suzanne offers to educate Merton on rock music. He responds, "What do you think I am, six hundred years old or something, that I don't know Paul McCarthy is a Beatle? I have their record of Revolver —only one I have. I like them fine—".

And so it goes, prompting Suzanne to dub Merton in a subsequent letter, "the Hippie Hermit". Merton seems so enthusiastic about their correspondence that at one point he gives Suzanne detailed directions on how to mail him letters:

The post office is so bad all the brothers who run it ought to be doing life sentences in the federal pen... Twenty-five people are likely to read it on the way through and one of them may just throw it away. If you are really anxious to get through... mark it *conscience matter* and make it look like you are just entering the convent, or leaving it, or something. (Don't worry about that part, but you know what I mean).

In June of 1968, a little more than six months before Merton's own death in Bangkok, Suzanne sends Merton her high school yearbook photo. He had told her in a previous letter that he kept the First Communion photo she had given him on his mantel. The June 1968 letter is quite moving. It shows Merton's ability to relate to someone four decades younger than he is.

"I was very happy to get your graduation picture", he writes. "You have grown into a very charming and interesting young woman. Congratulations on the graduation. I was remembering you at Mass on

Saturday. Go forth into the wide world and help it make some kind of sense. Or anyway less nonsense. Graduation present: an issue of *Monks Pond*. Hope you like it”.

Their correspondence continues into the fall of 1968 after Merton leaves on the fateful trip to Asia from which he does not return alive. Butorovich was interviewed in a 2015 documentary by Morgan Atkinson called, *The Many Storeys and Last Days of Thomas Merton*. Even as a middle-aged woman, her eyes still lit up talking about Merton. She said he was the kind of person who would never grow old: “He would be hip at 95”.

Merton seemed to take particular delight in the letters he received from young people. “What wonderful children there are around”, he gushed in a 1962 letter to a friend. In the late 1950s, at the urging of their teacher, students at an all-black high school called Heart of Mary in the then segregated American south sent Merton several gifts for use on the altar following his ordination to the priesthood. Merton responded with a deeply heartfelt letter of thanks, in which he offered advice that could really be for all young people, anywhere, in any time.

“It is terribly hard for young people to find happiness in our time. Everything is mixed up. All the wrong ideas and all the wrong values are on top... You find the papers and movies telling you that happiness consists in stuffing yourself with food and drink and dancing and making love”, he wrote.

He continued, “The way to be happy is not to love these things for their own sakes, but to use them wisely for the glory of God... God is life. God is love... When our souls wake up to the presence of the Living God and feel the touch of his fire striking at the roots of our hearts, then we begin to know what happiness really is”.

Ad Reinhardt was already a famous painter known for his abstract art when Merton sent him a laugh-out-loud letter in October 1957 in response to an offer from Reinhardt to gift Merton with “a small painting”. The letter reflects the playful style Merton often exhibits in his letter-writing, especially to longtime friends such as Reinhardt, whom he met when both were studying at Columbia University in New York. The letter doesn’t appear in any of the many anthologies of Merton’s letters,

but is in the Archives of American Art. It is a long letter, but well worth quoting in its entirety.

Dear Ad:

Do I desire a small painting? Well, it is clear at least to me that I desire a small painting since I am in point of fact crazy mad for a small painting. They have to keep me chained to the wall day and night and a gag in my mouth because I roar continuously that I am dying for lack of a small painting. I have already started on a campaign of actively destroying every large painting that I can lay hands on because I am totally consecrated in life and in death to the cause of small paintings, for this reason that I am consumed with a most ardent thirst for a small painting. So much so that if I do not have a small painting in my hands by Christmas, I am like to destroy the entire building and all the monks in it, for when I love something I love it very aggressively and thus hate the opposite.

Now the monastery is very large. Thus, if I do not very soon get a small painting, I will destroy the large monastery which by contrast reminds me of my lack of a small painting and this is torment. Therefore it is clear that I want a small painting. I dream at night of getting one tomorrow, and tomorrow turns into today and brings no small painting. This is to me an ever-increasing source of consternation which has by now turned into a river of consternation, and I have to be restrained by force from rushing headlong to the paint brush and painting for myself a small painting which would clearly be a disaster.

Therefore the only solution to this problem which sears and burns the inner man is for you to send in all haste, carefully packed, mounted upon llamas, the small painting of which you speak. I will have my scouts wait for the small painting upon the summit of the Alleghany Mountains and escort it with fifes from thence to hence.

After the arrival of the small painting there will be here a week of sabbaths or a sabbath of weeks. The small painting will be taken in procession from the lavras to the basilicas. The small

painting will be revered upon the altar of Saint Panteleimon. The small painting will be removed thence with lights and incense to the altar of Sts. Boris and Bleb or is it Breb (Gleb)? The small painting will be set upon the iconostasis. It will be viewed by all during the mysteries. It will elevate the hearts and minds of all to participate in the mysteries. It will bring to the artist the Holy Spirit. It will cause all things to be transfigured. It will hasten the day of glory.

As the hart thirsteth for the waterbrooks I thirst for the small painting.

Inspired by Merton's expansive correspondence, we took up the practice several years ago of writing to each other regularly on a variety of themes both spiritual and practical. Our letters were collected into a book published in 2021 titled, *How to Be: A Monk & a Journalist Reflect on Living & Dying, Purpose & Prayer, Forgiveness & Friendship*. We offer these excerpts from the book as a way of honoring Merton and showing how his "apostolate of friendship" continues to inspire. This particular series of letters begins when Judith Valente is considering what to do next after leaving a fulltime job in daily journalism to focus on writing books.

Dear Brother Paul,

One of the issues I've struggled with since leaving journalism is figuring out what my purpose is now. I don't think I can be satisfied if the purpose of my life is simply to be. I like to take action, to be the heroine of whatever story I am in. You probably would agree that, in the final analysis, your Trappist life has also involved a purpose. I suspect you wouldn't have persevered in the monastery for more than sixty years if it didn't. Your thoughts?

Suspended between being and doing,

Judith

Dear Judith,

I draw a distinction between having a purpose and following a vocation. A vocation is beyond what you might call a purpose in life. I did not find a purpose; my purpose found me. I basically live with a sense of a call —and beyond that, a sense of someone calling—. The purpose I serve is not so much a purpose as a radical freedom that is rooted in God...

Life's purposes can be multiple and can change as time goes on. They vary as the will of God makes them from one present moment or another. Life is the art of keeping a harmony in these purposes, maintaining a balance, a serenity that comprises a living symphony of prayer...

Yours in the symphony,
Brother Paul

Dear Brother Paul,

We live in a world drenched in mystery and wonder, as you have often reminded me. I feel it too, yet easily forget. I fill my days with whirls of activity —some of it necessary, much of it not—. Sometimes dusk arrives and I've engaged in so many distractions that I can't remember exactly how I spent my time. My precious day disintegrates into a blur and I find myself flailing around, wasting time, unable to find a proper rhythm. There are days when I don't write a word. Instead, I distract myself with small, ultimately insignificant tasks. This or that email needs a response; this bookshelf needs reorganizing; these clothes need to be washed. A hundred tiny allures that add up at the end of the day to essentially nothing...

In her work *Long Life*, Mary Oliver asks what it means that the earth is so beautiful, and what we should do about it? What is the gift we should bring to the world? What is the life that we should live? These are the questions I'm asking myself as I enter this next chapter of my writing life, jettisoned from the secure way station of my long career in journalism into a new universe, feeling somewhat as if I'm walking in space without a tether.

Warmly, despite our current frigid temperature here,
Judith

Dear Judith,

I would suggest a good way of getting over the feeling you are wasting your time is to go out and waste more of it. Waste it intentionally. Take a walk in the neighborhood and see the trees and how people keep their yards. Smell the air. Get free of what seems urgent and necessary, away from the feeling the world will crumble without you.

This may or may not lead to writing something inspiring. I go through fallow periods and feel no anxiety about it, like the farm fields that need time where nothing seems to happen. But below ground the microbes, insects and millions of bacteria that make good soil are at work. Out of sight. Out of mind the heart works, and imagination ferments.

“By your patience you will win your soul”,

Brother Paul

Dear Brother Paul,

I think you would have been proud of me a couple of times this week. Twice, I actually napped in the middle of the day. As I lay down on the couch, what we here in the Midwest call a stink bug (though it doesn't actually stink) began buzzing frantically around the light fixture overhead. Who knew these bugs could survive this late into winter? I watched it whirl and whirl for several minutes, then wrote this haiku:

Frenzied insect guest

Buzzes around ceiling light

While I below, nap.

My afternoon turned out to be the inverse of what is normal for me. Usually it's the crows, squirrels and cats of the neighborhood who are the unhurried ones. Today, I was the one lolling around.

I've always loved how St. Benedict, in his *Rule* for monastics, stresses listening. Listening is a kind of waiting—a suspension of activity in favor of being—. Perhaps waiting is also a conditioning, like my fitness exercises that are easy at the beginning of the workout and gradually build in intensity. Perhaps patience does win our souls, as St. Luke says. I

will make this my practice in the coming days and let you know what happens.

Yours in halting patience,

Judith

Conclusion

Letter-writing has played an important role throughout faith history, from the Epistles of St. Paul and the missives of long-ago spiritual teachers such as St. Augustine, St. Ambrose and St. Bernard of Clairvaux to the letters of more contemporary spiritual figures such as Merton and Dorothy Day and the encyclicals addressed to the modern world by Pope Francis. Letters in which heart speaks to heart of spiritual yearning can be both a repository of wisdom and a tool for inner exploration. Our hope in publishing our own letters was to encourage others to see the narrative of their lives in our struggles and experiences, just as we often saw ourselves reflected in the themes that emerge in the vast correspondence of Thomas Merton. Our aim was to jump-start renewed interest in the fading art of letter-writing, to show that communication can still mean communion, even in an age of electronic emails, phone texts and 280-character tweets. Beginning an “apostolate of friendship” of one’s own with a spiritual adviser or trusted friend is just as valid and necessary a spiritual practice today as it was for Merton. On such a journey, may Merton be our light and our guide.