

# **THOMAS MERTON'S AMERICANISM: A STUDY OF HIS IDEAS ON AMERICA IN HIS LETTERS TO WRITERS**

MARCELA RAGGIO

*Universidad Nacional de Cuyo, Argentina*

*marcelaraggio@yahoo.com.ar*

Received 27th September 2015

Accepted 8th March 2016

## **KEYWORDS**

Thomas Merton; Latin America; José Martí; letters to writers

## **PALABRAS CLAVE**

Thomas Merton; Latinoamérica; José Martí; cartas a escritores

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores Thomas Merton's letters to writers, in order to determine Merton's Americanist ideal. Based on the Latin American discourse of identity, especially José Martí's, our hypothesis is that though in a few letters there is a sense of "Pan-Americanism," Merton's predominant attitude is one of admiration and differentiation of Latin America from North America. Merton's concerns with Latin America are directed towards three main issues: its history and the echoes in the present; its role in the future; and, above all, its poetry. Though he writes about these issues mainly to Latin American writers, there are also references in his correspondence with poets of other nationalities. The texts in the corpus of analysis date from the 1950s and 1960s; but they have retained relevance to this day, and may provide ways of establishing a North-South dialogue, as well as of valuing the contributions such ideas can make to contemporary relations among people.

## **RESUMEN**

Este artículo explora las cartas de Thomas Merton a escritores, a fin de determinar el ideal americanista del poeta y monje norteamericano. Basándonos en el discurso latinoamericano sobre la identidad, principalmente en José Martí, proponemos como hipótesis que si bien en algunas cartas se manifiestan nociones "panamericanistas", en la mayoría Merton demuestra admiración y diferencia la América del Sur de Norteamérica. El interés de Merton por Latinoamérica se relaciona con tres aspectos: su historia y los ecos de esta en el presente; su rol en el futuro y, sobre todo, su

poesía. Si bien escribe sobre estos temas principalmente a corresponsales escritores latinoamericanos, hay referencias también en las cartas a autores de otras nacionalidades. Los textos que conforman nuestro corpus de análisis datan de las décadas de 1950 y 1960; pero mantienen aun hoy su relevancia, y pueden sugerir modos de establecer un fructífero diálogo entre el Norte y el Sur. Al mismo tiempo, pueden demostrar modos de valorar las relaciones entre los pueblos y naciones en nuestros tiempos, a partir de la literatura.

*We are praying for America, the great America of the future,  
free and spiritual...* (Thomas Merton)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout his writings, whether journals, articles, letters etc., Thomas Merton reflects, among several other interests, upon the meaning of Americanness. His thoughts, as reflected in the writing, aim at clarifying what it means to be American, the role(s) performed by the continent, and the poetry it has produced. From the vast range of Merton's writings, his letters to fellow writers have been selected as the corpus of analysis for this paper. These letters do not necessarily share the same tone, themes, style and concerns; both because they date from different moments in Merton's life, and because his relation with each of the correspondants differed according to their degree of acquaintance, age, common interests, and other details. Despite these differences, one of the persistent references in several letters to varied writers is that of America in a wide sense, i.e. the continent, North and South. Merton's first and only direct contact with Latin America was his visit to Cuba in 1940, recorded in *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948). Once in the Abbey at Gethsemani, his interest in Latin America grew as he came to know novices from the south of the continent, some of whom introduced him to the literature of their countries. In many cases, Merton's knowledge of Latin American writers came through the novices and / or through the publications they brought with them, or through the letters he sent to start a connection with his South American fellow writers. In his study of the Merton-Victoria Ocampo's correspondence, Mark Meade points out that the exchange, one of the first to be started by Merton with Latin American fellow

intellectuals, could be considered a consequence of his Fourth and Walnut experience, “a link between this event and Merton commencing engagements, mainly through correspondence, with a worldwide cadre of great minds—firstly, Victoria Ocampo” (Meade 173).

Merton's contacts with the world outside Gethsemani increased, as Meade states, after 1958. A great number of his letters were sent to Latin American writers. Such an interest was based on Merton's thought about the Americas, which developed the conviction that the future of humanity lay south of the Equator.

## **2. THE AMERICAS IN THOUGHT**

### **2.1. AN APPROACH TO JOSÉ MARTÍ'S VIEWS ON LATIN AMERICAN IDENTITY**

The Latin American discourse about identity has shown two poles, which may well be represented by José Martí's idea of “Nuestra América” on the one hand, and Lezama Lima's North-South American expression on the other. For this paper, we consider in some depth Martí's ideas, as we find a connection with those of Merton's, even though there is no evidence that Merton had read Martí.

Martí clearly distinguishes between “our” America (Latin America) and North America, the United States. Yet, in spite of the differentiation, Martí was arguing for acceptance based on the respect and mutual understanding that come when peoples know each other. Tinged with the nostalgia of exile, the first step Martí proposes is that “our” America should first come to know itself, and assume its full heritage: “These sons of our America, [...] will be saved by its Indians in blood and is growing better; these deserters who take up arms in the army of a North America that drowns its Indians in blood and is growing worse.” “Our” America will grow only if she assumes her native blood. Otherwise, Martí states, the processes by which “our” nations aim at finding freedom and setting up government will be only fruitless imitations of foreign ways:

Éramos una máscara, con los calzones de Inglaterra, el chaleco parisiense, el chaquetón de Norteamérica y la montera de España. El indio, mudo, nos daba vueltas alrededor, y se iba al monte, a la

cumbre del monte, a bautizar sus hijos. [...] Éramos charreteras y togas, en países que venían al mundo con la alpargata en los pies y la vincha en la cabeza. El genio hubiera estado en hermanar, con la caridad del corazón y con el atrevimiento de los fundadores, la vincha y la toga; en desestancar al indio; en ir haciendo lado al negro suficiente; en ajustar la libertad al cuerpo de los que se alzaron y vencieron por ella. (Martí 36)

But Martí goes beyond the contrast between the native and the inherited: he suggests that North Americans should get to know the South better. This would lead to respect and to fruitful relations:

El desdén del vecino formidable, que no la conoce, es el peligro mayor de nuestra América; y urge, porque el día de la visita está próximo, que el vecino la conozca, la conozca pronto, para que no la desdeñe. Por ignorancia llegaría, tal vez, a poner en ella la codicia. Por el respeto, luego que la conociese, sacaría de ella las manos. Se ha de tener fe en lo mejor del hombre y desconfiar de lo peor de él. Hay que dar ocasión a lo mejor para que se revele y prevalezca sobre lo peor. Si no, lo peor prevalece. (38)

Such words are fundamental in our analysis of Merton's ideas about the Americas. On the one hand, because Martí suggests that if the United States does not get to know Latin America, there will be trouble and misunderstandings. On the other hand, Martí also presents a hopeful vision in which "the best in men" (North American men) will triumph if they come to know Latin America in depth. Thus, Martí's well-known and often-quoted difference between "our" America and North America is not based on a breach; but instead he proposes the way of dialogue and understanding in the moving conclusion of his essay:

Ni ha de suponerse, por antipatía de aldea, una maldad ingénita y fatal al pueblo rubio del continente, porque no habla nuestro idioma, ni ve la casa como nosotros la vemos, ni se nos parece en sus lacras políticas, que son diferentes de las nuestras; ni tiene en mucho a los hombres biliosos y trigueños, ni mira caritativo, desde su eminencia aún mal segura, a los que, con menos favor de la Historia, suben a tramos heroicos la vía de las repúblicas; ni se han de esconder los datos patentes del problema que puede resolverse, para la paz de los siglos, con el estudio oportuno y la unión tácita y urgente del alma continental. ¡Porque ya suena el himno unánime; la generación actual lleva a cuestras, por el camino abonado por los padres

sublimes, la América trabajadora; del Bravo a Magallanes, sentado en el lomo del cóndor, regó el Gran Semí, por las naciones románticas del continente y por las islas dolorosas del mar, la semilla de la América nueva! (39)

The U.S.A. and Latin America are different; yet he warns readers against “provincial antipathy.” On the contrary, the closing lines of “Nuestra América” actively suggest lines for mutual understanding of the “continental spirit.” At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Martí was saying that unless the two Americas resort to the dialogue that breeds mutual knowledge, not much would be done towards mutual esteem.

## 2.2. MERTON ON INTER-AMERICAN DIALOGUE

Though this issue is discussed at length in the following pages, some reference should be made first to what we consider Merton's fundamental text on Latin America: his “Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Concerning Giants”, which was published in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963), as well as in several Latin American periodicals (among them, *Sur* and *El Pez y la Serpiente*). Beginning with an analysis of international relations in the Cold War period, the “Letter” goes on to foresee that, once the two “giants” (the United States and the Soviet Union) have destroyed each other, the future of humanity will lie in the “largest, richest and best developed single landmass south of the Equator” (*Emblems* 77), which is South America. He holds in high regard the peoples of those lands, whose culture he contrasts to the “more cerebral and mechanistic cultures, those which have tended to live more and more by abstractions and to isolate themselves more and more from the rational world by rationalization [...]” (*Emblems* 77). On the contrary, the words he uses to describe the cultures that will take over are positive and laudatory: “Characteristic of these races is a totally different outlook on life, a spiritual outlook which is not abstract but concrete, not pragmatic but hieratic, intuitive and affective rather than rationalistic and aggressive” (*Emblems* 78). The concreteness and the hieratic character that Merton sees in the native cultures of the Americas -of South America, in particular- are the same he sees reflected in its literature, as we will prove later, in the study of his letters to writers. Where Martí saw that “our America” would be saved only if its Indians were saved, Merton goes even deeper,

suggesting that it is the native peoples who will save humanity. What is more, he develops an idea that was also present in Martí, that of equality among races, together with the need for dialogue and understanding between the North and the South:

If only North Americans had realized, after a hundred and fifty years, that Latin Americans really existed. That they were really people. That they spoke a different language. That they had a culture. That they had more than something to sell! Money has totally corrupted the brotherhood that should have united all the peoples of America. It has destroyed the sense of relationship, the spiritual community that had already begun to flourish in the years of Bolívar. (*Emblems* 85)

What Merton proposes is a sense of awareness. His reference to the brotherhood born at the time of Bolívar seems to echo Martí's essay. He goes beyond the Cuban thinker in that Merton writes from within -"I write to you today from Magog's country", he says earlier in the text (*Emblems* 74), and is able to make a *mea culpa*, as if he were directly answering Martí's complaints. He acknowledges the stereotypes and overgeneralizations made by North Americans, and where Martí was asking for understanding, Merton sees that such an attitude has not prevailed:

Most North Americans [...] have never awakened to the fact that Latin America is by and large culturally superior to the United States [...] also among the desperately poor indigenous cultures, some of which are rooted in a past that has never yet been surpassed on this continent. (*Emblems* 85-86)

The "Letter Concerning Giants" was addressed to Pablo A. Cuadra because, as Merton explains in a personal letter to the Nicaraguan poet, "I felt I could say it better if I knew the person I was addressing. Hence in speaking to you first of all I have said what I thought needed to be said to everyone else, especially in Latin America. The piece is really an article [...]" (*Courage* 188-189) There is no indication that Merton had read "Nuestra América", but there is certainly a sense of brotherhood (the one Bolívar had sought) and a reflection on the need of understanding Latin American culture on the part of North Americans, which Martí hoped for. Thus, regarding Merton's Americanism, I suggest that he did not necessarily search for a unified continent; though he did look for understanding,

dialogue, cooperation and solidarity. These lines are explored and developed in his letters to Latin American writers.

### 3. ANTECEDENTS AND CURRENT CONTRIBUTION

Merton's relations with Latin America have been studied before by Malgorzata Poks (2007). Her thesis, later published in book form (*Thomas Merton and Latin America. A Consonance of Voices*) explores Merton's interest in the continent and, particularly, his connection with the poets he translated in *Emblems of a Season of Fury*. Poks studies the translated poems, the reasons Merton might have had for translating such authors and texts, and the subtle ways Merton found to transmit in English what the voices said originally in Spanish. Though the Introductory chapter presents Merton's connection with Latin America in general terms, alluding to the majority of contacts he had there, the main chapters of the book study the "consonance of voices" with Jorge Carrera Andrade (ch. II), Carlos Drummond de Andrade (ch. III), Alfonso Cortés (ch. IV), Ernesto Cardenal (ch. V), a chapter on both Cardenal and Pablo Antonio Cuadra and Native heritage (ch. VI), Nicanor Parra (ch. VII), and César Vallejo (ch. VIII). Merton included translations of these poets (except Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Nicanor Parra) in *Emblems of a Season of Fury*. When dealing with these two poets, Poks establishes the connection between Parra and Merton in the use of anti-poetry as a response to a world that has been turned upside down, and the approach to spirituality unknowingly shared by Merton and Drummond de Andrade.

The present article will explore Merton's connection with Latin America from another perspective, that is, his epistolary relation with writers (those he translated, and others he respected, admired and knew as well), in order to understand why the South of the continent pulled him so, and what aspects of it were most dear to him. In analysing these aspects, one may determine Merton's Americanist ideal, and move a step further in the idea of the poet-monk's "American vision" put forward by Poks' work.

Aguiar very precisely argues that "what drove Merton was the construction of an image in which he perceived Latin America as a paradise and Latin American writers as courageous and creative people" (ch.5). Definitely, this is the view that arises when one reads Merton's letters, which is the corpus of analysis for the present

paper. Aguilar focuses on two of Merton's Latin American friends: Ernesto Cardenal and Nicanor Parra, with whom Merton shared "despair about US society and they were politically against the role of the US as an empire [...]" (ch. 5). Aguilar points out that Cardenal introduced Merton to many aspects of Latin American life, politics, and literature; while the contact with Parra was particularly relevant in relation to anti-poetry (just as Poks also points out). Merton's relation with Latin America, and with Asia, and with the US social movements of his day, all contribute to what Aguilar considers the main commitment of contemplative life: far from being an isolationist choice, "it is through solitude that we challenge injustice in society and it is through solitude with God that we make socio-political statements that challenge society as it is now." ("Introduction"). This is one of the most interesting aspects of Aguilar's approach: the way he considers Merton's writing from a perspective contemporary to us, bringing to date a message thought, lived and written more than half a century ago.

More recently, Mark Meade (2013) has written about the letters exchanged between Merton and Victoria Ocampo. His contribution shows that this was the first epistolary dialogue that Merton began with a Latin American intellectual, which prefigures the active participation he would later have in North-South American dialogues.

Considering the existing scholarship on Merton and Latin America, our aim is to go a step beyond it and read in the letters to writers the reasons Merton had for his deep admiration for the continent. This will enable us to determine, as precisely as possible, the idea about America he built based on such an admiration.

#### **4. UNDERSTANDING THE NEIGHBORS**

The bulk of Merton's correspondence to Latin American writers is larger than that to writers of other nationalities. The number of Latin American poets he translated is larger than that of poetic translation of other languages and/or cultures, surpassed in length only by his philological translations from the Chinese, a language he did not know. References to Latin American history, current affairs and literature are often to be found in his writings. Where does this interest stem from? We could gather that the more South Americans Merton came to know, whether personally or

through letters, the deeper his interest grew. More important, as Meade suggests, the shift in Merton's understanding of his vocation after the Fourth and Walnut experience could also explain the contacts with people outside the monastery (Meade 170-171), especially with intellectuals who were denouncing the evils of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. As stated in Poks' title, Merton's interest in Latin America shows "a consonance of voices" which enabled a fruitful dialogue and collaboration between North and Latin American writers in the issues of international relations, poetic translation and exchange of ideas on 20<sup>th</sup>-century reality. If we read closely Merton's letters to writers, there are three aspects about South American countries to which he devotes more attention: their history, their role in the future, and the value of their poetry. The deeply-felt, sincere interest in Latin American history, present and literature is nothing less than the understanding of the South that Martí had asked for in "Nuestra América."

In his first letter to Victoria Ocampo, Merton alludes to the meaning of "Americanness" he has detected in *Sur*, and pledges himself to the same notion:

It seems to me of the highest importance that the intellectuals of these two continents [North and South America] should grow more and more to realize our solidarity in one America (and I don't mean in the Nixon sense of the words either). [...] I need not emphasize to you these thoughts about our American unity, since you yourself are in a way one of the embodiments of that unit. (Merton, Ocampo 60-61)

As stated above, the tone and diction in Merton's letters changes according to the addressee. In writing to V. Ocampo, he was aware that *Sur* aimed at bridging the gap between Latin America and the rest of the western world or, in other words, at placing Argentina and Latin America in the scope of the western tradition. The role *Sur* played in making American and European literature available to the Latin American public, and the role that translated literature played in reshaping modern Latin American fiction, have been studied in depth by Patricia Willson (2004). The connection between the two Americas was present in an issue which, fourteen years before Merton's first letter, Victoria dedicated to North American literature. In the Introduction to that issue, she states that the opening poem by Walt Whitman has been selected "*como testimonio de adhesión a*

*cierta América -la que quiero, espero, y a la que consagro SUR desde su aparición*<sup>1</sup> (Ocampo 9). Ocampo's venture was not only dedicated to translating foreign literature, but it also presented a space for Argentine and other Latin American writers to publish and reach a continental readership. The very name "Sur" ("South") puts the literature and the public of "our America" in the center, away from its usual marginal location.

On Merton's side, such seeming Pan-Americanism appears in letters to three other writers who were engaged in the movement of solidarity between the two continents: Ludovico Silva, Rafael Squirru and Miguel Grinberg. In a letter to Venezuelan poet Ludovico Silva dated March 30, 1967, Merton states, "I am happy to feel in agreement with you and with your collaborators, above all in the matter of Pan-Americanism" (*Courage* 229-230).

We are inclined to believe that Merton abides with the Bolivarian idea of Pan-Americanism, in contrast to the North American one, shaped by the Monroe Doctrine of "America for Americans." As Castro-Klarén states, "today's Pan-Americanism required a violent resemantization of Bolívar's concept. The Monroe Doctrine unabashedly represents the discursive and political inversion of Bolívar's concept of America as a geo-cultural space" (26). In relation to what he had written in an earlier letter to Silva (March 13, 1965), Merton sticks to the idea of the two Americas as differentiated entities which may establish a fruitful dialogue: "It is to me a great joy and encouragement to hear voices like yours from South America. Here in this country all is sickness and confusion [...] Under the mask of power in this land is a great hopelessness" (*Courage* 224). The only hope, Merton says on January 26, 1968, "is in the Third World" (*Courage*, 232). Yet, if one follows the stream of Merton's thought, that hope can be made real through dialogue and, once again, understanding, thus shaping his own vision of Pan-Americanism.

On July 12, 1964, Merton writes to Rafael Squirru:

Meanwhile the great task for the Catholic and for the humanist and indeed the honest man in this hemisphere is to work for a mutual understanding and spiritual communication between the North and the South. A tremendous task, so neglected and so misunderstood that it seems at times impossible. Fortunately books like yours [*The*

*Challenge of the New Man*, published in 1964 by the Pan American Union] and articles like some of those in *Americas* are there to give one hope. And Miguel Grinberg with his fantastic movement [Acción Interamericana]. (*Courage* 233)

One adjective stands out in this explanation: "spiritual." The dialogue between the North and the South is to be carried out at the spiritual level, a task that may be done by poets and intellectuals. Merton is not proposing an overall Americanism, but a conscientious dialogue which involves thinkers and writers in order to give hope to the world. The hopelessness brought about by the mechanization of advanced countries needs to revert and open itself to other cultures; and in such a process, Latin America plays a central role.

So he states when addressing Miguel Grinberg in his June 21, 1963 letter:

The whole question of inter-American contacts and exchange is of the greatest importance. It is important for Latin America, but it is even more important for North America, because unless the United States finally gets in touch with the reality of American life in its broadest and most relevant sense, there is going to be a lot of trouble for everybody. It is of the greatest importance, then, that the cultural vitality of the Latin American countries should be known and recognized here. [...] The world is falling into a state of confusion and barbarism, for which the responsibility lies, perhaps, with those who think themselves the most enlightened. (*Courage* 196)

The thoughts expressed here show the great coherence of Merton's ideas on the Americas: he does not use the word Pan-American, but inter-American instead. While Pan-Americanism implies, by the twist of thought explained in Castro-Klarén's article, a view of the Americas which overlooks the geo-cultural differences between North and South, inter-American instead suggests that the two regions may establish connections and respect each other, based on mutual knowledge and understanding. The different shade of the term inter-American stands for the dialogue, the exchange, the mutual understanding that he suggests in the letter to Squirru as well.

## **5. LATIN AMERICA: PAST AND PRESENT**

Merton's interest in contemporary matters related to the Americas always has a deep root in the history of the continent. Whether he writes about Latin American poetry, art or politics, he is aware that the past is at the basis of the present. If his "Letter Concerning Giants" speaks of the native peoples as the possessors of an ancient culture, in the actual letters to writers he emphasizes the central role of native cultures, whose past can be found in the core of Latin American culture, as "the Maya and the Inca, who had deep things to say" (Merton, *Courage* 81-82). Both in the "Letter Concerning Giants" and in the ones he actually sends to writers there are two types of references: on the one hand, to the greatness of the aboriginal cultures, and, on the other, to the fact that they were violently suppressed during the Conquest. Throughout the correspondence, many of the references that value Indian cultures have to do with their intrinsic religious quality, as he writes to Alejandro Vignati, who was travelling in Perú at the time, after a stay in Brazil:

I agree with that you say about the religious values of the Indians. [...] The history of the conquest was tragic, but not as tragic as that of this continent here in the North, where almost all of the Indians were exterminated. Some remain, in silence, as an accusation, and each year the white people try to steal from them another piece of the reservation that remains theirs. (*Courage* 234)

Regarding the Latin American situation, Merton observes the abuse of power, the presence of dictators, and the poverty-stricken countries where, implicitly, he sees the hand of inequality and the forgetfulness against the native populations. It is through a paradox that he defines a problem and advocates a course of action:

It is the weakness of very poor and underdeveloped countries to have to swing into a rigid absolutism dominated by force in order to maintain a certain stability in social change, and this defeats itself. Everything depends on education and leadership, and on the capacity of the intellectuals for creative and independent development, and the great danger is that men will be lacking who can measure up to the greatness of the task. (*Courage* 142)

Development, growth and independence are tasks which depend upon education. These ideas seem to echo Martí, who also stated that teaching the roots of Latin American culture would be

necessary so that its inhabitants have a creative culture. In *Nuestra América*, Martí writes, “[c]onocer el país, y gobernarlo conforme al conocimiento, es el único modo de librarlo de tiranías” (34). Once again, Merton's words are in the same line. In fact, the idea of revolution and change is one of the characteristics of contemporary Latin America that calls Merton's attention. If in his early writings there is a clear dismissal of Communism, emphasized in the “Letter to Pablo A. Cuadra,” in a letter to Alceu Amoroso Lima he states:

Yes, we should try to understand [Fidel] Castro together. This is a significant and portentous phenomenon, and it has many aspects. [...] The man who like all of us wanted to find a third way, and was immediately swallowed up by one of the two giants [...] Castro remains not as a knife pointed at the U.S. but as a big question mark in the very foundations of North America's “democracy.” (*Courage* 165)

What shows Merton's awareness, his “difference”<sup>2</sup> from the American perception of the Cuban Revolution is his capacity to go beyond the Marxist affiliation of the movement. He does so in order to understand its origins and its consequences. In both he sees the “question mark” of North America's incomprehension of what Castro in the late 1950s –and so many other Latin American revolutionaries after that– stood for: the inequality and lack of dialogue between the North and the South. After all, Merton believed that the same creative power that feeds Latin American poetry should help its people find a way out of poverty; and, quite explicitly, he denounces North American interventionism: “Yet still the grinding poverty of Latin America has to be relieved, but it must not be the moon lit by the North American sun. It must relieve itself from within its own resources, which must be spiritual and human and creative” (*Courage* 190-191).

Now that the ways for dialogue between Cuba and the United States have been opened again, at least by the symbolic facts of re-establishing diplomatic relations, re-opening the respective embassies, and lifting the trade embargo, one can only think that Merton's words have had an echo across history, and wonder if many conflicts could have been avoided had the echo resounded earlier.

---

<sup>2</sup> See the idea of difference as explained by Merton in his letters to Clayton Eshelman below.

## 6. LATIN AMERICA'S ROLE IN THE FUTURE

When referring to the possibility of joining Cardenal's foundation in Solentiname, Merton refers indirectly to the differences between the North and the South that he sees embodied in himself:

First there is the ambiguity in the fact that I am a North American. I know that I am not a typical North American and that I disagree with much that is typically U.S. [...] But I do not want to be in any sense whatever a kind of occult cultural ambassador for this society, and I cannot help being so in some involuntary sense. (*Courage* 154)

The ambiguity Merton refers to is not only that of his unwillingly and helplessly being a cultural ambassador of the U.S. in Solentiname, if he ever joins it; but the more profound paradox of representing a country in the midst of which he feels an alien, and at the same time that of feeling part of the foreign culture, in which he is more at ease, an idea he has already developed in previous writings.

By the 1960s Merton is not a speaker for Pan-Americanism; on the contrary, his idea of the role of Latin America in the future is based on its revolutionary reform. In a letter to Cardenal, (no date, 1963), he says, "it can be said that the future of the world depends in large measure upon the quality of the social reform, let us say revolution, that is effected in Latin America" (*Courage* 142). The reform, however, is not only political but cultural. Merton believes that the path to that reform should be founded only in listening to the Indian, an act which he equates with an apostolic mission. Moved by Squirru's book *The New Man* (1964), Merton tells Cardenal that there is a "need for admitting to hearing the voice of the new man who is rooted in the American earth, [...] especially the earth of South America." And then he asserts, "It is wonderful to realize the full dimension of our priestly calling in the hemisphere. [...] the activity of true atonement, a redemptive and healing work, that begins with *hearing*" (*Courage* 146). Hearing is part of a dialogue; and this is a word that Merton extends beyond the North-South dialogue, to give it a religious significance for 20<sup>th</sup>-century Latin America: priests will better carry out their mission if they *hear* the ancient cultures, the Indian culture that speaks from the past and where Merton believes Christ had been present even before the Conquest. The futures of humanity, of Latin America, and of native people are interrelated, then, in the horizon of dialogue across races,

cultures and religions. Beyond these ideas, what shows the interconnection among the different spheres of interest for Merton is the role he assigns to literature in the process of social change. He writes to the Nicaraguan Napoleon Chow that, in Latin America, “[t]here is a truly great potential for thought and for creative writing, and there is no question that this must seek its full fruitfulness in a great movement of social renovation and growth” (*Courage* 168-169). Creative writing is thus joined to the possibility of creative social renewal.<sup>3</sup>

## 7. SOUTH AMERICAN POETRY

When writing to Hernán Lavín Cerda, Merton affirms, “I am not a North American poet, but rather a South American. I feel closer to them because of their sensitivity, irony, political point of view, etc.” (*Courage* 205). In a letter to Pablo A. Cuadra dated January 8, 1959 (that is, an early letter, before the turn of the decade), Merton states, “I am convinced that Latin American poetry has an ambience more pleasing and appropriate for me than that of the United States, which seems a little removed, less spontaneous, less fiery, more cerebral” (*Courage* 183). On the contrary, Latin American poetry could be described from Merton’s perspective as involved, spontaneous, fiery, emotional. Poetry is closely connected to truth, or to the search for truth; and in this sense, the figure of the poet assumes a role that stems from the Romantics and, deeper into the pits of time, from ancient peoples’ belief in poets as prophets: “[...] the poets have the humility to seek truth from the springs of life, [...] and the personal and spiritual liberty which [...] can unite men in a solidarity which noise and terror cannot penetrate” (*Courage* 172). Merton writes this to José Coronel Urtecho, commenting on Miguel Grinberg’s visit to Gethsemani in April 1964. In several other letters to Latin American writers Merton stresses this idea of himself as being closer to them than to North American poets. His enthusiasm for Latin American poetry remains unchanged from letter to letter, year in, year out; and it can be said to grow only, not to decrease, as

---

<sup>3</sup> At moments, Merton sees this idea somehow reflected in Fidel Castro’s beginning the Cuban Revolution. His appreciation of the Cuban Revolution changes Merton’s early perspectives on Communism, though the full implications of the shift need a detailed study that goes beyond the reach of these pages. As example of one letter in which he refers to this is one to Napoleon Chow, dated May 14, 1963. (*Courage* 169-171)

his interest in and involvement with Latin American issues and writers becomes more intense.

Among the letters in which Merton praises South American poetry, there are those to two correspondents who are, in fact, North American: Margaret Randall and Clayton Eshelman. With Margaret Randall he shares the enthusiasm for Latin America; it could be even ventured that Merton saw in her the great adventure his own life would have been, had he been allowed to travel South.<sup>4</sup> Merton says to Margaret, “I am personally convinced that the best American poetry is written in Latin America. [...] One feels that in Latin America the voice of the poet has significance because it has something to do with life” (*Courage* 215). The social role of literature in Latin America is a concept that permeates South American criticism. Navas Ruiz’s *Literatura y compromiso* (1964) suggests that Latin American novels show social commitment because the circumstances require so, since an unstable political situation calls for a statement from writers. Such an urgent answer to an urgent call is what Merton perceives as the lively quality of South American poetry, too. After all, his growing concern with social and political matters was calling for the same type of writing. In the same letter to M. Randall, dated January 15, 1963, he resumes his notions on contemporary poetry: “My own work is, in its way [...] an expression of something else again, of a dimension of life and experience in which the North American mind is not really interested” (*Courage* 215). The evolution in Merton’s poetry and poetics, which has been explored in depth by Petisco-Martínez (2007), and also by Paul Pearson in his study of Merton’s anti-poetry, responds after all to a growing social consciousness in which Cardenal assumes the role of Merton’s master: “In fact, a Latin American poet was not only expected to display social concern and political awareness, but would often assume the stance of a bard and act as the people’s conscience. Here at last was poetry with *meaning*” (Poks 133). In the letters sent to Randall, Merton praises Latin American culture, literature, revolutions, etc., in an almost carefree manner, knowing that the shared interest stems from an emotional reaction to Latin America – when referring to Grinberg, Merton sees him as a bridge to M. Randall and “all of you, and your love, your trust, your risk” (Merton, *Courage* 218). The “risk” implies establishing dialogue with Latin

---

<sup>4</sup> “I liked your Cuban poems. I envy you. I love Cuba, Cuban people,” says Merton to M. Randall in his April 30, 1967 letter (*Courage* 219)

Americans, seeing them as equals, working not towards unification, but towards understanding between the two Americas. In Grinberg's "Acción Interamericana," in Margaret Randall and Sergio Mondragón's *El Corno Emplumado*, Merton sees such efforts, fueled by the same enthusiasm he experiences for Latin America.

Clayton Eshelman was another North American interested in things Latin American (literature, in particular); but from the letters Merton writes, it is evident that they approach their common interest in different ways. The epistolary exchange becomes more rational, intellectual it could be said. Merton feels he has to justify himself, both for his religious choice and for his Latin American preference. In his first letter, of June 1963, Merton had written a phrase that he wrote to several other writers, as stated above: "But the Latin Americans are better, as a whole, than the North Americans." Four letters later, on January 28, 1966, Merton answers what seems to be a claim that Eshelman made on a Dec. 21<sup>st</sup> letter<sup>5</sup>. None of the extant letters by Merton between the first and the one dated January 28, 1966, include appreciations of Latin American poetry.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it could be assumed that Eshelman responded late to Merton's statement about Latin Americans being better. It could also be assumed that Eshelman criticized such a "thoughtless" affirmation on Merton's part. In answer to these (supposed) sayings by Eshelman, Merton replies:

[...] I wasn't actually saying the South Americans were all better poets. [...] what you object to is that I seem to identify more easily with "the South American mind," whatever that may be, than with North American poets. You seem to me to be berating me for being on the wrong side. As a matter of fact I am not on any side [...]. I did not mean "South American mind" in such a way that I would pretend to give it a clear definition. [...] I was thinking in terms more of culture, the European background, I like Spanish writing and the Spanish language which can be sharp and supple and well tempered like nothing on earth when it is good. (*Courage* 259-260)

---

<sup>5</sup> Such a letter is mentioned by Merton in the opening line of his own (Merton, *Courage* 259)

<sup>6</sup> There is no extant letter of Eshelman between Merton's November letter and Merton's next letter in January 1966. The analysis has to be based on what one can infer from Merton's words.

This shows two novel aspects in Merton's writing to fellow writers: on the one hand, he emphasizes Latin America's European heritage (an aspect he does not touch upon in the letters to South Americans). In writing to Eshelman, a fellow North American, it seems that he is justifying himself for an attitude that Eshelman presumably has dismissed. Such a dismissal could be attributed to the fact that Eshelman had "professionally" translated Latin American poets; and he was, at the time Merton was sending this letter, actually travelling and experiencing South America first-hand. Merton felt the need to answer from his understanding of Latin American culture, and of the "branch" that he knew better: what marks Europe had left in the New World.

The other novel aspect can be seen in the fact that Merton praises the Spanish language explicitly. His attitude towards the language is implicit in other letters, particularly when he "theorizes" about translation; for example, in letters to Cardenal, Pablo A. Cuadra and M. Randall, among others. But in this case, he openly admits that the Spanish language dazzles him. His attitude towards Latin America, its history, its present, its literature, can be explained by reference to his admiration, which is like that of anyone when confronted with newness: to Merton, South American poetry and the Spanish language have kept the originality, the brightness and the creative possibilities that North America and the English language wore out when North American poets are "posing even, especially, in their sincerity" (*Courage* 255). His favoring of the Spanish language should, at the same time, be understood in the light of his monastic vocation, as stated by Virginia Bear: "[...] Merton's own interest in Spanish and Latin American literature— starting with St John of the Cross—ensured that Spanish became a major language in his monastic life" (Bear 148). The letters to writers, the translations of poetry written in Spanish, the central place Latin America has in his personal writings and in his thoughts, all relate to his *monastic* vocation for dialogue. Poks sustains that Merton's "expertise in Latin America was to serve a double purpose: on the one hand, it was to be a reparation for North American neglect; on the other, Merton was taking seriously his role of *maestro* and spiritual guide for South American intellectuals" (Poks 67). It is true that to many of his Latin American correspondents, Merton was a guide, a master, an elder,

even if he writes in a familial tone.<sup>7</sup> But Eshelman was not South American; he was a scholar and translator of Latin American poetry and, what is more, he was having a direct contact with the culture Merton so deeply longed for. That is why, even more central than his justification of monastic life (which he does not feel he has to justify, in fact), Merton accepts that “[p]erhaps if I were closer to the scene I would be less happy about some of the political noises. [...] Perhaps my sympathy for them as a bunch is due to the fact that I was born and grew up in France” (*Courage* 260). Distance may blur his vision, Merton admits. Yet, differences and distance are what enable dialogue across barriers.

## 8. CONCLUSION

In his May 8, 1966 letter to Eshelman, Merton excuses himself for not entering an argument with his correspondent, though in fact he acknowledges that the barrier that Eshelman sees between the two Americas “is the difference of experience, history, sensibility [...] Hence there is no barrier other than that of two entirely different loads of history that we have to carry” (*Courage* 261). What is really impressive is that Merton does not see the barrier between himself as an American and Latin American, but between himself as one who feels closer to South America, and “certain aspects of North American culture” (*Courage* 261). Through the confessional, self-explanatory tone of his last letters to Eshelman, one can explain Merton’s sense of Americanness: the language, the culture, the history, the sensibility that he has chosen are to be found south of the Equator, even if scholarly, or rationally, the choice cannot be explained. Just as his being a monk cannot be explained, and should not be justified (as he states to Eshelman on several occasions), his nostalgia for the language and the culture of the poets in whom he found a closer resonance (Cardenal, Cuadra, Parra, *et al.*) is not a challenge to Eshelman<sup>8</sup>, but a way of carrying dialogue into his own life. As Mark Meade suggests in relation to Merton and Ocampo, but it could also be said of all his Latin American correspondents, “[t]hey 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

---

<sup>7</sup> Several of the letters to Miguel Grinberg, for example, are signed “Uncle Louie,” using the same title and name with which he signed the “Message to Poets.”

<sup>8</sup> Cf. the aforementioned letter.

in the process of global reconciliation” (Meade 180). Such a reconciliation will be possible only if the world, if the Americas, learn to hear each other, leaving aside impositions and power relations. As Merton said to Cardenal,

I say the future belongs to South America: and I believe it. It will belong to North America too, but only on one condition: that the United States becomes able to learn from South and Latin America and listen to the voice that has so long been ignored [...] which is a voice of the Andes and of the Amazon (not the voice of the cities, which alone is heard, and is comparatively raucous and false). (*Courage* 144)

Hopefully, five decades later we will have learned that dialogue is the only way out of conflicts; and we will have the courage for truth, like Merton. Not just the courage to speak the truth, but also to hear it in the voices that come from the Andes, from the Amazon and, more recently, from Africa and the Near East, where Merton saw light for the future, too.<sup>9</sup> Merton’s ideas about the Americas can be further considered to throw light onto contemporary cross-cultural, inter-religious, inter-continental dialogue, in order to make us aware of the inherent humanity of all peoples who, on the face of power relations, displacements and war, are so often overlooked and forgotten.

## WORKS CITED

- AGUILAR, Mario. *Thomas Merton: Contemplation and Political Action*. Londres: SPCK, 2011. Web. 7th Sept 2015.
- BEAR, Virginia. “A Woodshed Full of French Angels: Multilingual Merton”. *Merton Annual* 15 (2002): 136-154.
- CASTRO-KLARÉN, Sara. “Framing Pan-Americanism: Simón Bolívar’s Findings.” *CR The New Centennial Review* 3, 1 (Spring 2003): 25-53.
- MARTÍ, José. *Nuestra América*. Caracas: Fundación Biblioteca Ayacucho, 2005.

---

<sup>9</sup> In the “Letter Concerning Giants,” he expresses that “it is conceivable that Indonesia, Latin America, Southern Africa and Australia may find themselves heirs to the opportunities and objectives which Gog and Magog shrugged off with such careless abandon” (*Emblems* 77).

- MEADE, Mark. "From Downtown Louisville to Buenos Aires: Victoria Ocampo as Thomas Merton's Overlooked Bridge to Latin America and the World". *Merton Annual* 26 (2013): 168-180.
- MERTON, Thomas. *Emblems of A Season of Fury*. New York: New Directions, 1961.
- . *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers* Ed. by Christine M. Bochen, New York: Farrar, Straus, 1993.
- . *The Seven Storey Mountain*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948.
- MERTON, Thomas, and Ernesto Cardenal. *Correspondencia (1959-1968)*. Ed. and translated by Santiago Daydi-Tolson. Madrid: Trotta, 2003.
- MERTON, Thomas, and Ocampo, Victoria. *Fragmentos de un regalo. Correspondencia y artículos y reseñas en Sur*. Buenos Aires: Sur, 2011.
- NAVAS RUIZ, Ricardo. *Literatura y compromiso. Ensayos sobre la novela política latinoamericana*. Sao Paulo: Instituto de Cultura Hispánica, 1964.
- OCAMPO, Victoria. "Palabras Preliminares" *Sur* XIV, 113-114. March-April 1944: 9-11.
- PEARSON, Paul. "Poetry of the Sneeze: Thomas Merton and Nicanor Parra". Web. 20th Aug 2015.
- PETISCO-MARTÍNEZ, Sonia. *La poesía de Thomas Merton: Creación, crítica y contemplación*. Memoria de doctorado. Universidad Complutense de Madrid. 2007. Web. 20th Feb 2015.
- . "A Theoretical Approach to Literary Translation". *Babel* 14. 2005: 43-70.
- POKS, Malgorzata. *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices*. Katowice: Wyższa Szkoła Zarządzania, 2007.
- WILLSON, Patricia. *La Constelación del Sur. Traductores y traducciones en la literatura argentina del siglo XX*. Bs As.: Siglo veintiuno, 2004.