

From Downtown Louisville to Buenos Aires: Victoria Ocampo as Thomas Merton's Overlooked Bridge to Latin America and the World

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In Buenos Aires in 2011, I presented a version of this paper for the book launch of *Fragmentos de un Regalo*,¹ the correspondence between Thomas Merton and Victoria Ocampo. The title of the book means “fragments of a gift.” They are fragments because, even though twenty-five letters are included, twenty of which were previously unpublished, some letters are known to be missing. The “gift” is taken from Merton’s first letter of reply to Victoria, stating that her letter was “a true gift from God.” In Buenos Aires, Merton needed more of an introduction than Victoria Ocampo, but I will try to briefly summarize her life for this essay before discussing the significance of their correspondence. (For the lecture in Argentina, I was encouraged to refer to her as Victoria rather than Ocampo because her sister, Silvina Ocampo,² received notoriety of her own as a poet and writer of short fiction. I have henceforth used Victoria when not using her full name.)

Victoria Ocampo was born in 1890 to a wealthy aristocratic 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 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. While her parents could not control her later fiscal priorities, her father, her husband and Argentine society, including peer authors, kept her in limited cultural boundaries enforced upon women of the time. Like Merton, Victoria spent much of her childhood in France. Though the girls of the family were not allowed

1. Thomas Merton and Victoria Ocampo, *Fragmentos de un Regalo: Correspondencia y Artículos y Reseñas Publicados en Sur*, introduction, translation and notes by Juan Javier Negri (Buenos Aires: Sur, 2011); subsequent references will be cited as “FR” parenthetically in the text.

2. Silvina Ocampo was married to the novelist Adolfo Bioy Casares. Robert MacGregor of New Directions Publishing sent Merton a copy of Bioy Casares’s *Plan de Evasion*, and Merton responded with his thoughts about the book: see the letter of March 6, 1958 from Merton to MacGregor in *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*, ed. David D. Cooper (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997) 132-33; subsequent references will be cited as “SL” parenthetically in the text.

formal education outside the house, they had a French tutor. Victoria's old-money family also prohibited university matriculation, but she was allowed to attend a number of 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. "[He] would later repeat: 'the day one of my daughters gets on stage is the day I put a bullet through my head.'"³ In 1912, Victoria began a largely unhappy marriage to Monaco Estrada. She was 22. During her honeymoon, Victoria discovered a letter from her new husband to her father with assurances that "all of his daughter's fantasies of becoming an actress would disappear as soon as she became pregnant. Victoria writes: 'I married a traitor'" (Gainza and Bordelois, "Chronology"). Eight years later they separated, and Estrada would die thirteen years later in 1933.

Victoria wrote and translated throughout her career, mainly writing literary critiques beginning with a book in French highlighting the female characters in the *Divine Comedy*. She wrote biographies of Virginia Woolf and T. E. Lawrence. An admirer of Indian poet and intellectual Rabindranath Tagore, his illness while on a 1924 tour of South America gave Victoria the opportunity to host him for two months of his recovery. In 1930, Victoria would curate an exhibition of Tagore's art in France. Victoria's crowning achievement was 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 for use as a cultural and educational center focusing on programs for children. Much of the land on the estate was sold during her lifetime to fund *Sur* and other literary projects.

Merton did not suffer the same gender-based discrimination as Victoria, but 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

3. María Gainza and Ivonne Bordelois, "Victoria Ocampo's Chronology: 1890-1906" (<http://www.villaocampo.org/ing/historico/victoria.htm> [accessed 9/10/2011]; subsequent references will be cited as "Gainza and Bordelois, 'Chronology'" parenthetically in the text).

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.”⁴

In 2009, Javier Negri of Victoria’s literary estate began gathering manuscripts and papers related to Merton and Victoria from *Sur*’s archive, the Merton Center, and the New Directions and James Laughlin collections at Harvard. In 2011, *Fragmentos de un Regalo* was published. It contained all extant correspondence, none of Victoria’s having previously been published. Some of Merton’s earlier letters had not been published as they were not among the carbon copies kept at the Merton Center, the primary source for Merton’s letters to Ocampo in *The Courage for Truth*.⁵ Negri also included essays by Merton and reviews of Merton’s books published in the journal *Sur*.

Beyond the intrinsic value of the correspondence of two diverse literary figures like Victoria and Merton, I believe their correspondence is greatly significant to Merton studies in the following ways. It has been widely noted that Merton’s Fourth and Walnut experience in downtown Louisville⁶ 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

4. Ivonne Bordelois, “Villa Ocampo in the Arts: Her Essays” (http://www.villaocampo.org/ing/historico/cultura_10.htm [accessed 9/10/2011]).

5. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 207-12; subsequent references will be cited as “CT” parenthetically in the text.

6. See Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 181-82 [3/19/1958] (subsequent references will be cited as “SS” parenthetically in the text); Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140-42.

like William Shannon have noted that not long after this experience, Merton entered into dialogue with people from outside the monastery, from various places globally, and from religious and cultural traditions quite different from his own.⁷ Not all have linked Merton's contact with intellectuals of the world to his experience in Louisville, but I think the newly 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 in the midst of 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.

Both Victoria and Merton 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 by 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*.⁸ 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 entitled "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

7. William Shannon, *'Something of a Rebel': Thomas Merton: His Life and Works: An Introduction* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005) 35-38.

8. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 363.

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.⁹

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."¹⁰ 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.

For Merton, 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, this is commonly seen as a shift for Merton away from an insular

9. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 218; subsequent references will be cited as "FV" parenthetically in the text. This essay, written in March 1965 and originally published as the preface to the Japanese edition of *Seeds of Contemplation*, was later expanded and appeared under this title in the Indian journal *The Mountain Path* 2 (October 1965) and subsequently in *Faith and Violence*.

10. Doris Meyer, *Victoria Ocampo: Against the Wind and the Tide* (New York: G. Braziller, 1979) 64.

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.

I affirm this prior analysis of this 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 of 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.

What I am proposing is a link between this event 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 on the subject of nuclear war, e.g., his mimeographed circulation of the "Cold War Letters,"¹¹ 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 (*CT* 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.

As a clarification, 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 Ecuador¹² 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 entered into dialogue, the Andrade correspondence was deepening into issues regarding global solidarity and

11. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).

12. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 107-109, 111-12, 113-15, 248.

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 of 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 as a novice with Merton, 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 that Merton gained access to the poets of South America and fell in love with their writings. 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.¹³ 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 (see SS 188 [4/4/1958]). Merton may not have realized that Victoria had by this time included reviews of three of his books in *Sur* 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*.¹⁴

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" (CT 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 (CT 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

13. See MacGregor's November 18, 1957 letter to Merton (SL 134).

14. FR 41-57; Victoria was one of the founders of the publisher *Editorial Sudamericana* in 1939, but had left the venture by the time Merton's books were published.

Merton had been in contact with English author Evelyn Waugh following the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (CT 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 (CT 22-53); however, Maritain wrote first to Merton. Merton initiates contact with Erich Fromm, the German-born psychoanalyst and philosopher living in Mexico.¹⁵ 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 (see *HGL* 311-12 [3/18/1955]). 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.

Besides being a rare example of an international contact that Merton initiated and that was begun primarily for the sake of communication before late 1958, Merton's letters to Victoria 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 pretence 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" (*FR* 59-60). Merton called his first response to this letter, "*un vrai don de dieu*" ("a true gift from God") (*FR* 69).¹⁶ Unfortunately, Victoria's first letters to Merton have not been discovered and likely will not be; yet, a few things are apparent. She was

15. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 308-24; subsequent references will be cited as "*HGL*" parenthetically in the text.

16. Merton wrote his first letter to Ocampo in English, but wrote most subsequent letters in French as both were fluent in this language; translations from the published letters from French to English are by Mark Meade, with the original texts in the footnotes.

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?”¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

Merton sent two poetic essays with his initial letter, “Prometheus: A Meditation”¹⁹ 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” (*BT* 51-64), an essay in the form of an open letter. Merton named the 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

17. “Comment vous remercier de la simplicité et de la confiance avec lesquelles vous me dites si franchement ce que vous pensez?” (*FR* 69).

18. “[N]e croyez jamais que je suis un être différent de vous, que je suis ici dans un monastère bien tranquille, avec aucun problème comme le vôtre. Bien au contraire, je vis au coeur même de l’Eglise. Je ne me croirais pas vraiment moine, vraiment prêtre, si je n’étais pas capable de sentir en moi même toutes les révoltes et toutes les angoisses de l’homme moderne” (*FR* 70-71).

19. Thomas Merton, *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 15-23; subsequent references will be cited as “*BT*” parenthetically in the text.

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. 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 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”²⁰ to neutralize certain clerical language.²¹ 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 of 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” (*FR* 60). Merton would many times revisit this style of dialogue that he first exhibits with Victoria. Such letters to friends and some writ-

20. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 155-61.

21. Miguel Grinberg, “Thomas Merton and the New World Kairos,” audio recording from the Fourth General Meeting of the Thomas Merton Society (Boulder, CO: Sounds True Recordings, 1995).

ten 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” (*FV* 205-14), an attempt at respectful dialogue between the monk and the atheist or agnostic. Another is his “Letters to a White Liberal,”²² 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 business-woman Coco Chanel and the world of high fashion that she revolutionized:

Although she admired and shared the writer Susan Sontag’s positions of the rights of women, Victoria diverged from her North America counterpart with regard to fashion. Sontag maintained that the dictates of style were frivolous, and advised women to stop worrying about their physical appearance. Victoria, in contrast, reflected that ‘it would be a shame for them to do away with the spectacle of a well-dressed woman.’²³

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*.²⁴ Despite the title, I do not find evidence he

22. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 3-71; subsequent references will be cited as “*SD*” parenthetically in the text.

23. María Gainza and Ivonne Bordelois, “Villa Ocampo in the Arts: Fashion” (http://www.villaocampo.org/ing/historico/cultura_8.htm [accessed 9/10/2011]).

24. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson, SL (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) 161-76.

actually 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" (*SD* 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."²⁵ 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."²⁶ 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

25. "Si Bebita est morte, c'est que nous sommes tous malades, d'une façon ou d'une autre" (*FR* 123).

26. "Cette morte imprévue (miséricordieuse pour elle) a été cruelle pour nous, pour mes soeurs" (*FR* 300).

something as natural as birth? It is still incomprehensible and horrible.”²⁷

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.²⁸

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. 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.

27. “Pourquoi est-ce qu’on ne peut pas comprendre ni accepter la mort comme une chose aussi naturelle que la naissance? Elle est toujours incomprehensible et affreuse” (FR 306).

28. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 321-23.