

THOMAS MERTON IN PANAMA:

A Commentary on Tobias Diaz Blaitry's

Cuatro Poemas de Thomas Merton

by **Stefan Baciú**

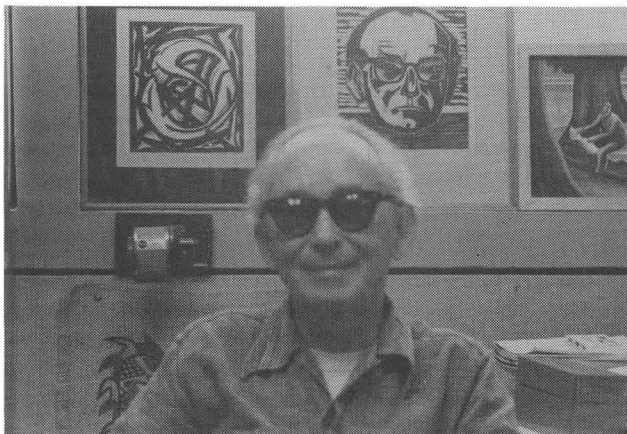
Already forty years have passed, if memory is "not betraying me," since the poetical oeuvre of Thomas Merton started the process of "penetration" in Latin American literature which the monk of Gethsemani in Kentucky knew, better than all others of his colleagues from the United States.

I still remember the decade of the 1950s when the Brazilian poet and translator, Manuel Bandeira, and the essayist and Catholic leader, Alceu Amoroso Lima, started writing essays, critiques and book reviews and translated several of his poems and short essays. At approximately the same time, in Nicaragua where Pablo Antonio Cuadra was one of his first "discoverers" and exegetes and "via" Pablo Antonio the poet, Cuadra and Ernesto Cardenal distinguished themselves as his first serious researchers and publishers.

The rest is already a page of literary history. I was not surprised when, through the years, I found more and more frequently translations or reviews of Merton, sometimes in Mexico, and later in El Salvador, in Argentina and in Chile. I believe that it is still a necessary task for both Anglo and Latin American writers (and translators) although it is somewhat difficult because of the almost non-existent circulation of Latin American books. The situation today makes it more difficult than ever to organize anthologies of Thomas Merton's poetry, *based on translations*, which we just mentioned.

Here is an idea! The work remains to be started and accomplished.

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STEFAN BACIU

One of the most recent contributions which arrived on my desk from Latin America is a leaflet * which was sent to me by the great Panamanian poet, Ricardo J. Bermudez, one of the few intellectual persons of his country who understands how to pursue actively the work of international rapprochement.

Tobias Diaz Blaitry (born in 1919) is one of the best poets of the "Panamanian Vanguard," a movement which started in the literature of the Isthmus around 1930. One member of the movement who should be mentioned is the poet Roque Javier Laurenza who was both the most Panamanian and the most universal and who distinguished himself as a poet, critic, essayist and diplomat. He died prematurely, but he was one of the finest translators, a bridge builder from one nation to another. At the same time, we should not omit the names of other "Vanguard" authors such as Rogelio Sinan, Estela Sierra, Rosa Elvira Alvarez, Eduardo Ritter Aisian, to mention only a few among a notable group.

Diaz Blaitry was for many years a professor at the University of Panama and the author of a poetical work which can be described as both *solid and original*. Now, through this booklet in which he brought together four representative poems by Merton ("Miercoles de Ceniza;" "Abril;" "Tropicos;" and "Ariadne"), the poet appears to be a notable interpreter of English language poetry. His work is under no circumstance "treason" as he modestly writes on page five in his introductory note. On the contrary, it presents the characteristic aspect of Thomas Merton's poetry: the spiritual. I truly believe that Merton was principally a spiritual poet. This should not be confused with the notion of "religious" poetry. The author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* modernized the universal, the tropical and the mythological in a most personal and spiritual way.

The leaflet from Panama is an open window in the always new and renewed Mertonian cosmos. The name of Diaz Blaitry should be mentioned among the most distinguished translators of Merton's poetry. Unfortunately, many other translations remain buried or lost in the yellowed pages which are consumed by the *insistent* Central American termite.

As the Chinese proverb says: "The first step may be the beginning of a long way," and so I consider this initial Merton publication by Tobias Diaz Blaitry. The great Brazilian Manuel Bandeira used to say in Rio de Janeiro that a good amount of the most original Latin American poetry came from Panama. This recent work of Diaz Blaitry is proof that translators, too, are still active and of high quality in the Republic of the Isthmus.

*. *Cuatro Poemas de Thomas Merton*; Nota introductoria and traduccion de Tobias Diaz Blaitry, Panama 1989, 12 paginas sin pie de imprenta. The four poems are: 1) Ash Wednesday; 2) April; 3) Tropics; and 4) Ariadne.