

Two Continents in Dialogue

Review of

*From the Monastery to the World:
The Letters of Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal*

Translated and edited by Jessie Sandoval

Introduction by Robert Hass

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Reviewed by **Malgorzata Poks**

Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal are legendary figures whose paths crossed at Gethsemani, Kentucky in 1957. Merton was 42, and his reputation as spiritual master, poet and writer was reaching its peak. Ten years his junior, Cardenal was just discovering his poetic style when he became Merton's novice. Between 1959, the year Cardenal left Gethsemani, and 1968, the year of Merton's death, the two exchanged 92 extant letters, which have just been published in English as *From the Monastery to the World*. This volume, the result of the editing and translating efforts of Jessie Sandoval, an American with Nicaraguan roots, is a long-overdue version of the Spanish original, *Del Monasterio al Mundo*, which came out nineteen years ago. An exciting dialogue between icons of the two Americas, who inspired and learned from each other, it is a much welcome publication.

At the time they were corresponding, Cardenal may have been overwhelmed by Merton's fame, but since then he has gained world-wide recognition for his poetry, as well as for political and cultural activism, acquiring a status comparable to Merton's. This duet of poet-activist voices is joined by a third giant of contemporary poetry and political engagement, Robert Hass, whose introduction provides much appreciated biographical information and places the correspondence against the cultural and political background of the "American century."

The correspondence is truly expansive. At the beginning it was mostly about Merton's spiritual guidance to his former novice trying to discover his religious vocation "in the world," but it gradually developed into a dialogue of two continents seeking to understand and embrace each other. In these letters, religion, politics and poetry intermingle on a regular basis: they register both correspondents' musings on the dramatic political climate of the Cold War and its tragic reverberations in the Ibero-American context, their enthusiasm about poetry's potential to redeem the world, and a deepening solidarity with Latin America's indigenous populations. In the course of some two hundred pages we witness the development of both correspondents' vocations to solitude, the blooming of their poetic talent, the radicalization of their politics.

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In his first letter Cardenal famously proclaims that “the world . . . is unlivable” (12). What he seeks is solitude and God’s will for himself; what he regrets is a loss of the sense of spiritual elation he experienced in the monastery. The letters are initially filled with news from Gethsemani and accounts of Cardenal’s whereabouts, but they increasingly focus on the creative endeavors of both correspondents, their publishing prospects and literary friendships. Yet, the “unlivable” world keeps clamoring for Cardenal’s attention, if only with news of the volatile political situation in Latin America and Cardenal’s closest family’s involvement in the Nicaraguan underground. The political turmoil of Latin American history which frames the correspondence has been helpfully catalogued in the Notes section at the end of the volume. Readers vaguely familiar with Ibero-American politics will be able to navigate the historical references with greater ease.

Knowing as we do that Cardenal was to become Nicaragua’s Minister of Culture in the Sandinista government, it is intriguing to note that in the 1950s and 1960s he still sees communism as the ultimate threat to the American continent, more serious than that of nuclear annihilation, although his emerging ministry of listening to the voice of impoverished peasants, coupled with his admiration for indigenous spiritualities and communal values, already foreshadows his lurch to the radical left. Judging by the drift of their correspondence, Merton would have understood, even welcomed this later transition. Indeed, in their epistolary exchange it is Merton that strikes the reader as much more radical, even militant. In a sense, he is rearticulating his observations expressed in the open letter to Cardenal’s cousin, fellow Nicaraguan poet and editor Pablo Antonio Cuadra, which was also included in Merton’s 1963 poetry and prose collection aptly entitled *Emblems of a Season of Fury*.

Juxtaposed with Merton’s ravings against the crimes and stupidity of the West, Cardenal’s letters appear more peaceful, balanced, serene. Searching for his place in the Church, struggling with health problems, and uncertain about his and his country’s future, the author of *Zero Hour* manages to remain interiorly happy throughout his ordeals, focused solely on God and God’s will, as he searches for deeper solitude on the shores of Lake Nicaragua, delights in the beauty of both human and nonhuman nature, and explores the spiritual riches of Indians. With childlike trust he accepts the headaches and ulcers that made him leave Gethsemani until they gradually cease to bother him.

It is interesting to note that while Cardenal is progressing towards an inner and outer healing, his North American correspondent complains about declining health: Merton reports stomach problems and a back condition, which lead to a series of hospitalizations. It is as if raving against the crimes of the West and the explosive racism of the U.S., Merton is metaphorically bringing upon himself the same sickness he denounces. How true it is that we become what we contemplate! No matter how hard Merton distanced himself from the “sins” of the West, he still was part of it, shaped by its imperial/colonial mindset. The realization that he lived in Magog country, and even more to the point, that he was part of a big monastic-industrial complex hostile to authentic contemplation, exasperated him. With the failure of his dream to become a Carthusian, Merton was now fixated, with the same desperate attraction, on joining Cardenal in the primitive monastic foundation the latter planned to establish in a remote area of Nicaragua. Misunderstood by his superiors, forced to remain silent about his most intimate problems (in the whole batch of letters there is not a word about Margie), he was being eaten up by unresolved conflicts.

Merton’s dis-ease, frustrations, rebelliousness and compulsive activism are a striking contrast to Cardenal’s humility and serene acceptance of his condition. As befits a citizen of a world power whose politics affect the entire globe, Merton is concerned with the big picture: he fears a nuclear

catastrophe and sounds an alarm against various “criminals with enormous power” (122). What he sees is apocalyptic. Cardenal, on the other hand – a person formed by a humbler epistemic code of a country peripheral to the world at large – seems to be more trustful and more focused on the small picture, on the here and now. In contrast to Merton, he is filled with a “peace that passeth all understanding,” and this peaceful disposition, along with faith in the intercession of saintly women – such as Sor María or the bed-ridden Odilie Pallais – literally works miracles for his health. Clearly, without realizing it, both Merton and Cardenal speak from distinct geopolitical locations characterized by different epistemologies. Against the (Western) myth of the supposedly neutral point of observation, the world viewed from the global South and the global North respectively – or from both sides of what Gloria Anzaldúa theorized as “the colonial wound” – looks different.

Where the two meet, however, is mystical spirituality and the monastic practice of listening to the stranger. In a letter from 1964 Merton observes: “The confusion, hatred, violence, misinformation, blindness of whole populations come from having no one to hear them” (168). Together with his friend Cardenal, he was determined to listen to the voices of those who are situated on the opposite sides of modernity, because, as he admits in the same letter, “We begin already to heal those to whom we listen” (168). Inspired by Merton, Cardenal too dedicates his poetic and spiritual vocation to building bridges between the ancient wisdoms of premodern peoples and the world of Western modernity. Situated on the border between the First and the Third World, Cardenal and Merton think from the standpoint of the excluded, identify with victims of the colonial/imperial matrix of power, depict in their letters a world composed of multiple worlds. All in all, they offer us a glimmer of hope amidst the current spectacle of nationalist-separatist revivals. Through their letters Merton and Cardenal engage and transcend the deepest fears of the twenty-first century and point the way to a better future. In sum, *From the Monastery to the World* is both timely and wise.