

LATIN AMERICA AND SPAIN IN THE POETIC WORLD OF THOMAS MERTON

by **Stefan Baciu**

Interest in the contemporary literature of Latin America increases day by day throughout the world. The North American reading public is well aware of this fact. Yet, while in European countries like France, Italy, Germany and Switzerland this interest is being awakened and maintained by both literary critics and journalists, in the North American intellectual community it is the scholars, professors of Spanish and Portuguese language and literature, who are the most responsible for this task, enjoying a success difficult to ignore. We do not mean here those Latin American writers who have resided in the United States for a number of years and who are dedicated to the job of diffusing Latin American literature by virtue of their university positions, individuals such as Arturo Torres Rioseco, Chilean; Enrique Anderson Imbert, Argentinian; Hugo Rodriguez Alcala, Paraguayan; Luis Leal, Mexican; Roberto Ezquenazy-Mayo and Eugenio Florit, Cubans, to mention a few names too well known to require introduction.

Editors' Note: This essay, the first and to date the most definitive dealing with Merton and Latin American literature, was published originally in the French journal *Revue de Littérature Comparée* 41 (April-June 1967): pp. 288-300. An altered version, under the title "The Literary Catalyst," appeared in *Continuum* 7 (Summer 1969), pp. 295-305.

There are, however, several North American professors, who for many years have dedicated themselves with enthusiasm to the diffusion of Latin American literature: Fred P. Ellison of the University of Texas, Gregory Rabassa of Columbia University, Claude Hulet of the University of California, all outstanding for their work in Brazilian literature. At the same time, equally meritorious work is being done by Professors Seymour Menton of the University of California, Frank Dauster of Rutgers, and David William Foster of Arizona State University in the area of Spanish American literature. These scholars, in addition to being highly qualified experts, are intellectuals gifted with an artistic and literary sensitivity which facilitates their work of interpretation and criticism.

It would be difficult to lose sight of the fact that, although for commercial reasons the major American publishing houses are inclined to publish only the works of prominent authors whose notoriety essentially guarantees the sale of their books, university presses such as those of Washington (Seattle), Indiana, Texas and California regularly publish Latin American books, thereby boosting authors who would otherwise remain unknown for lacking the drawing-power of the authors of drug-store paperbacks.

It is through a pioneering effort of this sort that the works of supposedly "difficult" writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Octavio Paz, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Jaime Torres Bodet — almost all of whom are poets — were published. This is in addition to the large number of essays and studies which regularly appear in the scholarly journals like *Hispania*, *Duquesne Hispanic Review*, *Texas Quarterly* and some others. By calling the foreign reader's attention to these facts, we wish to emphasize a situation which, in our opinion, is noteworthy: a limited but nevertheless existent interest on the part of North American writers in matters related to Latin American literature.

However, one must be careful not to generalize, as any generalization only complicates matters and hides the truth. Nevertheless, generalizations do contain a nucleus of truth. Statistically speaking, there is only a small number of North American writers renowned in their own country who exercise an active interest in the literature "south of the border."

It is worthwhile, therefore, to call attention to some principal exceptions. For example, a few younger members of the "Beat Generation," which partly via Mexico and partly via the so-called "little magazines" (among which there are a few bilingual in English and Spanish in both the

United States and Latin America circulating always within the most limited circles) are dedicated to revealing to their readers the unknown face of Latin America. Among the respected poets only a few are known — Pablo Neruda and Cesar Vallejo, and even more infrequently, Nicolas Guillen and Octavio Paz. Neruda and Guillen are prominent principally for political reasons, reasons which are only indirectly at the service of poetry.

For more or less identical reasons, younger writers are acquainted with two groups: *Techo de la Ballena* of Caracas and the *Nadaistas* of Colombia. To a lesser degree, they know of the Nicaraguan movements, the latter representing an exceptional case in the panorama of Latin American poetry, in a certain sense reminiscent of the phenomenon of Ruben Dario, but still with somewhat different dimensions and implications.

Little or nothing is said about or translated from Carlos Drummond de Andrade or Enrique Gimez-Correa, or other important poets, as for example Manuel de Cabral or Pablo Antonio Cuadra. All are writers who could easily be placed ahead of the more well-known and translated Guillen and Elvio Romero, at best run-of-the-mill poets of second and third rate work.

The reasons for this situation may not always be only political, although we are inclined to believe that they are the principal ones. There are, in addition, other reasons, such as pragmatic ones, that is, the possibility of receiving and presenting in the United States as "something new" material which has already appeared before under other guises; an easy propaganda which is able to put into the hands of interested parties material already absorbed, and which is then commented upon, rewritten, and transformed into something "unpublished" — in other words, into "discoveries," and finally an unawareness, often on the part of so-called experts, which is unjustified. One must, therefore, realize that it is extremely difficult to uncover the well-springs of today's literature in Latin America, a situation unalleviated by a local discouragement and a lack of confidence which no longer have any justification. This all may be used to *explain* something, but it *justifies* very little. Those who in fact attempt to present these literatures as the result of a direct contact are able to succeed even if commercial interests and the general lack of acquaintanceship must be overcome and if at the same time the voice of propaganda — albeit "poetic" — must be heard as a siren's call.

Upon analysis, the relations between contemporary North American and Latin American literature would yield, it must be admitted, discourag-

ing results, and one must emphasize that the best examples of research and creative passion come from the universities, especially from those institutions to which we have already referred as well as from several others not mentioned. As more or less important names in literature we might mention those of Lawrence Ferlinghetti (almost always associated, logically enough, with the "Beat" or similar movements), Robert Lowell, Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Bly, with his excellent little press "The Sixties," where, in impeccable and serious translations, authors such as Cesar Vallejo, Enrique Gonzalez Martinez, and Spaniards such as Federico Garcia Lorca, Antonio Machado and Blas de Otero have appeared, to name but a few.



In these circumstances, the activity of a poet like Thomas Merton deserves, not only to be mentioned, but analyzed in detail for a better understanding of both his own work and a poetic and intellectual understanding of the phenomenon which we have been outlining.

Born in 1915 in Prades, France, of a New Zealand father and a North American mother, Merton represents, not only a poetic and human instance of extremely significant interest in literature, but also, of particular importance in this context, a product of the mixture and assimilation of cultures such as occurs but infrequently in this day and age, which knows as it is enough instances that could be called extraordinary. Following a restless youth that led him to the frontiers of radical leftist movements, as he relates in his autobiography, full of admissions important for the understanding of his poetic world, and to which we will refer again, Merton discovered a religious vocation. In 1941, he entered the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani, Kentucky, where he lived a secluded life of meditation, devoted to poetry and to communion with his fellow monks through both prayer and poetry.

In a short autobiographical sketch published in an anthology, Merton affirmed: "Blake's ideas have always had a profound influence on me, also his poetry. Other influences, the metaphysical poets, Spanish modern poets especially Lorca, Altolaguirre, South American poets especially Vallejo, then also of course Dylan Thomas, Eliot."¹ In his autobiography,

1. *A Controversy of Poets: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*; ed. Paris Leary and Robert Kelly (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books / Doubleday & Company, 1965), p. 542.

referring to Lorca, always prominent in his discussion of the sources of his poetry, Merton observed: "I had been reading the Spanish poet, Lorca, with whose poetic vein I felt in the greatest sympathy: but that was not enough, in itself, to account for all the things I now began to write."² As this fragment of his testimony is pertinent in a fundamental sense to the present study, we will have occasion to return to it in order to demonstrate the profound and sturdy Latin American roots in the poetry and spiritual life of Thomas Merton, who from the forties remained faithful to his first discovery, deepening and enriching it.

In a letter written to a young North American poet, mimeographed and circulated among his friends, Merton said: "But the Latin Americans are better, as a whole, than the North Americans."³ When we speak of Merton's position toward Vallejo, which, in our opinion, is the clearest and most lucid in all of North American literature, we will return to this document. For the time being, however, we will limit ourselves to the following words from Merton's letter (1965) in response to our own, sent him in the course of gathering information necessary for the publication of the present study:

First of all I would like to say to you what I have said to others: that I feel myself clearly much more in sympathy with the Latin American poets today than with those of North America. I feel that though I write in English, my idiom (poetic idiom at least) is much more that of Latin America than that of the United States. To begin with I feel that the academic poets of the U. S. are simply caught in the most sterile impasse where they do nothing except play esoteric language tricks. I do of course admire Robert Lowell as a genuine poet, but he is an exception, and a notable one. As to the U. S. Beats I am more in sympathy with them but in most cases I do not respond to them fully. Whereas the Latin American poets really seem to me to be alive, to have something honest to say, to be sincerely concerned with life and with humanity. There is some genuine hope left in them, or when they are bitter the bitterness has a maturity and content which makes it respectable, and in any case I tend to share it in some ways. . . My background being to a great extent European, this probably has something to do with it. I still read a great deal of French, though not a great deal of contemporary French poetry. Also in my formative years I came under the spell of Federico Garcia Lorca and have never recovered. He remains one of my favorite poets and one to whom I respond most completely.⁴

2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1948), p. 310. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SSM*.

3. Thomas Merton, "Letter to a Poet about Vallejo." Published in Managua, Nicaragua, as "Carta a un Poeta sobre Vallejo: Comentarios y Poemas;" translated into Spanish by Jose Coronel Urtecho, *La Prensa* (18 August 1963), pp. 1B, 10B. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Vallejo."

4. Letter to Stefan Baciu, 21 May 1965, Thomas Merton Studies Center.

We do not know, not having seen similar words elsewhere, what writers of North America — or any writers at large — have uttered words so profound, not only in admiration (to admire is not enough), but in understanding and communion with the poets of Latin America, as did Thomas Merton in the extract quoted above. In order to clarify his feelings more, as if it were necessary, the poet added:

To begin with for a long time I had neglected to read North American poets except for a few like Lowell, whom of course I like very much. And until very recently I was simply ignorant of some of the best ones. I only recently discovered Louis Zukofsky for example.

We are dealing here with three different documents: selections from an autobiography, a fragment from a letter addressed to a young American poet, and finally, a statement written upon request to clarify a position toward Latin American poetry. In all three of the texts we find an exceptional purposefulness that could be called illuminated, the same point of view, the same admiration, which we will naturally want to consider in other aspects. Once again, and in order to make this idea and his poetic position absolutely clear, Merton affirmed in a letter addressed to a Mexican review that:

Doubtless I am not in a position to give a sweeping critical judgment of the poets of the United States at the present moment as I do not get to read them except for a few. Some have an unquestionable maturity and excellence, but few really say anything. In the midst of technological and scientific virtuosity we find ourselves (many of us anyway) in a spiritual stupor. My own work is, in its way, a protest against this. It is also an expression of something else again, of a dimension of life and experience in which the North American mind is not really interested.⁵

There exists in this voluntary juxtaposition a further statement clearly in favor of the poetic and creative spirit of Latin America, for, to repeat the poet's words which we believe to be essential here, "the North American mind is not really interested" in what is good and new in Latin America. It is not, as far as we can see, so much a matter of misunderstanding as it is the incapacity to ponder and to react in a similar way to the same things. In this way, *The Seven Storey Mountain* contains pages which, in support of our own position, always scrupulously faithful to the sense of the poet's affirmations, appear to be not only revealing, but definitive as well. It is the example of a moving confession from which we will transcribe a few

5. "Letter to the Editor." *El Corno Emplumado* [Mexico City], January 1965, no. 14, p. 163.

selections since Merton himself affirmed that his first real poem . . . delineating the course of many poems to follow," was written in very special circumstances in Latin America, in the Caribbean, in Cuba. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, one may read the following:

Finally in the middle of Easter week, I went to my doctor and he ripped off the bandages and said it was all right for me to go to Cuba.

I think it was in that bright Island that the kindness and solicitude that surrounded me wherever I turned my weak steps, reached their ultimate limit. It would be hard to believe that anyone was so well taken care of as I was: and no one has ever seen an earthly child guarded so closely and so efficiently and cherished and guided and watched and led with such attentive and prevenient care as surrounded me in those days . . .

But while I was sitting on the terrace of the hotel, eating lunch, La Caridad del Cobre had a word to say to me. She handed me an idea for a poem that formed so easily and smoothly and spontaneously in my mind that all I had to do was finish eating and go up to my room and type it out, almost without a correction.

So the poem turned out to be both what she had to say to me and what I had to say to her. It was a song for La Caridad del Cobre, and it was, as far as I was concerned, something new, and the first real poem I had ever written, or anyway the one I liked best. It pointed the way to many other poems; it opened the gate, and set me travelling on a certain and direct track that was to last me several years.

The poem said:

The white girls lift their heads like trees,
 The black girls go
 Reflected like flamingoes in the street.
 The white girls sing as shrill as water,
 The black girls talk as quiet as day.
 The white girls open their arms like clouds,
 The black girls close their eyes like wings:
 Angels bow down like bells,
 Angels look up like toys,
 Because the heavenly stars
 Stand in a ring:
 And all the pieces of the mosaic, earth,
 Get up and fly away like birds. (*SSM*, pp. 278, 283)

This poem, which symbolically opens the book translated by Ernesto Cardenal and illustrated by Armando Morales, is titled in Spanish "Cancion a Nuestra Senora del Cobre."⁶ These verses constitute a key with which the

6. Thomas Merton, *Poemas*; translated into Spanish by Ernesto Cardenal (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autonoma, 1961), p. 5. As "Song for Our Lady of Cobre," it appears in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 29-30.

poet is able to open the realm of Latin American poetry, with which he had one of the most profound acquaintances. Merton was for two decades one of the constant and most accurate spokespersons for this realm through a series of translations without equal in the literature of the United States, or, for that matter, in world literature.

The Cuban experience of Thomas Merton represented the first step in a long journey through the literatures of the Southern Continent, literatures which he knew as did no other among his countrypersons — their most secret details which at times escape those who cannot see the forest for the trees, to wit, the Latin Americans themselves.

The problem with understanding Cesar Vallejo's poetry, one of the most important Latin American poets of all time, and, for reasons more circumstantial than poetic, the most widely known and translated poet in the United States, constitutes an example for any foreign poet. A few have translated him for reasons which could be called *political*, reasons which we attempted to put in their proper perspective in a study published over twenty-five years ago in Brazil.⁷ Other translators have been attracted to him out of snobbery for Vallejo is both difficult and committed to the here and now. The majority devote attention to him with good intentions without ever really understanding his profound human and poetic message.

In our opinion, among all those foreigners — that is, speakers of non-Romance languages, and even, as far as that goes, those who are speakers of Romance languages — who most profoundly understand the tragic greatness of Cesar Vallejo, Thomas Merton holds first place. Already during the so-called "Cuban experience" there were indications that, via his humility, place the American poet on a par with the Peruvian. However, in his essays, in his letters, in his effort to make the literature known, there exists a series of thoughts accurate in showing how profoundly Merton identifies himself with the *true* Vallejo.

In the "Letter about Vallejo," Merton has the following sentence that is tantamount to a warning to those who would make the Peruvian poet into an instrument in a *political* or partisan struggle: "No matter what they do with Vallejo, they can never get him into anybody's establishment." This is to say that Vallejo can only be understood in his true greatness beyond the range of any and all boundaries, and that he does not fit within any one

7. Stefan Baciu, *Cesar Vallejo, Poeta Comunista?* (Rio de Janeiro: Associação Brasileira do Congresso pela Liberdade da Cultura, 1962).

contemporary pigeon hole. Even more explicitly, Merton affirmed that:

This is because, as I think, he is the most universal, Catholic in that sense (the only real sense) poet of this time, the most Catholic and universal, of all modern poets, the only poet since (Who? Dante?) who is anything like Dante. Maybe Leopardi whom I never read much, of course Quasimodo has some of it too. So what I mean is that Vallejo is totally human as opposed to our zombie poets and our little girl poets and our incontinents. I have never really thought out all that must begin to be said about Vallejo, but he is tremendous and extraordinary, a huge phenomenon, so much more magnificent (in the classical sense) than Neruda, precisely because he is in every way poorer.
 ("Vallejo")

When Merton says that Vallejo is a "Catholic" poet, he is not referring to a religious allegiance. The *catholicity* to which he refers is a universality which exists above and beyond any religion. Merton goes on. As in the case of the word "Catholic," "poverty" does not refer to material poverty, but to that Franciscan *austerity*, so familiar to Vallejo, which in these so apparently simple words (also *poor* . . .) is a part of Merton's understanding.

As far as translating Vallejo's poetry goes, Merton makes the following observation: "Therefore I think that a translation of Vallejo, is not only a nice interesting venture, but a project of very great and urgent importance for the human race" ("Vallejo"). As a consequence, his translation into other languages cannot be considered a fine literary exercise, approaching the level of a possible perfection, but an understanding "of importance to the human race." Poets should not attempt to relive Vallejo's lines, no matter how attractively translated; what should be transmitted "to humanity" is the bitter voice, the profound soul of the author of *Poemas humanos*, who came closest to the voice of Christ in its humanity — that is, a voice for everyone. There exists one more extract which we cannot afford to overlook in attempting to give a complete picture of the total *vision* of the Peruvian poet.

Vallejo is a great eschatological poet, with a profound sense of the end and yet of the new beginnings (that he does not talk about). All the others are running around setting off firecrackers and saying it is a national holiday or emergency or something. Or just lolling around in a tub of silly words.
 ("Vallejo")

True, for while others "shoot off rockets" or limit themselves to saying this or that, Vallejo speaks to humans, to human suffering, and there is in this his poetry the voice of eternity which lasts but a few hours, days or years with other poets. The poetry of Vallejo will be one of the few heard at the Last

Judgment — and I believe that this is what is important to Vallejo and what is important to Merton.

Therefore, Merton has undertaken to translate Vallejo, and, in our opinion, his translations are the most truly indicative of Vallejo. Since Merton was the best one to give us his own anthology of Latin American poetry, Vallejo would have occupied the highest place in it. This is what the poet suggested:

As for me, I am not going to translate any whole book of V. but I may some day do my own anthology of L. American poets I like most, and that would mean a lot of his. But I don't think repeated translations of such a man will overlap, especially of the *Poemas Humanos*. I might work more on *Los Heraldos Negros* because I like the manifest Inca quality there. ("Vallejo")

This promise contained a hidden meaning which is accessible only to those who realize that in Merton's soul the voice of Cesar Vallejo possessed the same sounds in the same way and to the same degree of intensity as in the *Poemas humanos* — the most human of all poetry.

If the case of Cesar Vallejo is a matter of an international reputation, a "discovery" already made by others, to which Merton gave a true understanding in good measure, there is a series of Latin American poets who have scarcely succeeded in crossing the borders of their respective countries, as much as for the lack of propaganda already referred to as for the more important virtual impossibility of uncovering their sources. In order to give a few examples from this category, it would be worthwhile, we believe, to point to the example of Nicaragua.

Merton, via his friendship with the poet Ernesto Cardenal, who lived several years in the monastery at Gethsemani, was one of the few who was familiar with the poetry of that country, not content just to read it but presenting and translating it so that the barrier of isolation could ultimately be breached.

Alfonso Cortes saw the publication in 1965 of one of his books, *Las rimas universales*, edited by his sister Maria Luisa. The work passed almost unnoticed, unfortunately the case with almost all of the books published by Alfonso's family. This book significantly contained a preface by Merton, an essay which he had written to accompany some translations of Cortes' poetry. Merton, along with the Nicaraguan Jose Coronel Urtecho, perceived the transcendental importance of the special poetry of Alfonso Cortes, that is, of that metaphysical poetry which makes him unique among the poets of Latin America. Merton observed very perceptively that:

Yet Cortes has written some of the most profound "metaphysical" poetry that exists. He is obsessed with the nature of reality, flashing with obscure intuitions of the inexpressible. His poetic experience is quite unique. There is no explanation for its sudden appearance in an obscure Central American town-ship, at such a time, under such circumstances.⁸

Another Nicaraguan poet (like Merton, also a priest) is Azarias H. Pallais, whom after reading him and discovering him as one of the great voices of another America, Merton called "Fra Angelico of the Jungle." Merton wrote about him:

The book is fascinating and has a unique charm very much its own. There are in this work a quality and a personality that make it authentically Central American, while being linked at the same time to the European tradition of the past. It doesn't belong fixedly to any special category of any epoch; it rather maintains a timeless innocence, which is a fortunate thing.⁹

Elsewhere, in an essay published in Brazil in 1965, he came to almost the same conclusions concerning the link between Pallais, poetry and European sources.¹⁰

Concerning Ernesto Cardenal, the North American poet has the following words:

Cardenal applied for admission to Gethsemani and we received him into the novitiate in 1957. He had just exhibited some very interesting ceramics at the Pan American Union in Washington, and during his novitiate he continued modeling in clay. He was one of the rare vocations we have had here who certainly and manifestly combined the gifts of a contemplative with those of an artist. However his poetic work was, by deliberate design, somewhat restricted in the novitiate. He set down the simplest and most prosaic notes of his experiences, and did not develop them into conscious "poems." The result was a series of utterly simple poetic sketches with all the purity and sophistication that we find in the Chinese masters of the T'ang dynasty. Never has the experience of novitiate life in a Cistercian monastery been rendered with such fidelity, and yet with such reserve. He is silent, as is right, about the inner and most personal aspects of his contemplative experience, and yet it shows itself more clearly in the complete simplicity and objectivity with which he notes down the exterior and ordinary features of this life.¹¹

There is a unifying thread which runs throughout these three very

8. Thomas Merton, "Preface." In Alfonso Cortes, *Las rimas universales* (Leon: Editorial Alemana, 1965), p. 1. Originally published in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963), pp. 141-143. See also *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*; edited by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 311-312.

9. "Azarias H. Pallais," *Guion Literaria* [San Salvador, El Salvador] (June 1965).

10. *Poesia, vida e morte de Azarias H. Pallais* (Rio de Janeiro: Privately printed, 1965).

11. Thomas Merton, "Prologo." In Ernesto Cardenal, *Gethsemani, Ky.* (Medellin, Colombia: Ediciones Ferialia, 1965). See also *La Prensa Literaria* [Managua] (22 August 1965), pp. 1B, 5B and *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (1981), pp. 323-324.

differing quotations on three different poets: Merton did not restrict himself merely to reading new poetry. He tried to penetrate to its very essence, to its characteristic elements, so that he could better make it known, conscious of the fact that, as he so often showed, great poetry in our time is being written in Latin America. "Wild Alfonso" and Fathers Pallais and Cardenal, each one with his own special vision of the world, gave occasion to Merton to penetrate profoundly the Latin American soul by way of three different routes.



It behooves us now, after having sketched this background outline, to mention a few details which may serve as points of departure for the personal Latin American anthology to which Merton referred. In the above mentioned letter which he wrote us, he referred to the following poets: Jorge Carrera Andrade, several of whose poems he translated and in whose poetry he found "a Franciscan quality and a luminous simplicity which are extremely engaging;" in Chile he sympathized with "the irony and the protest which it implies" in the poetry of Nicanor Parra, whom he also translated, and referred to his preference for ("of course") "the earlier" Pablo Neruda, that is to say, the poetry which Neruda himself renounced, refusing even to authorize its inclusion in international anthologies. For Nicaragua, the names of Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Ernesto Meija Sanchez, Jose Coronel Urtecho and Father Angel Martinez appeared; as for Mexico, he manifested his "great admiration" for the poetry of Octavio Paz, "naturally." As far as Uruguay is concerned, through Gabriela Mistral, he made friends with the poetess Esther de Caceres, who acquainted him with "a beautiful, little known and profoundly spiritual poetess, Susana Soca, whom I have tried to translate a little without any success." For Argentina the names of Victoria Ocampo and the young poet Miguel Grinberg appear. Merton sent the latter a "Message for Poets," which was read at a gathering in Mexico on 19 February 1964.¹²

12. For brief sketches of Jorge Carrera Andrade and Pablo Antonio Cuadra, see *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (1981), pp. 318-322. Translations from the Spanish of Rafael Alberti, Jorge Carrera Andrade, Ernesto Cardenal, Alfonso Cortes, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Miguel Hernandez, Nicanor Parra and Cesar Vallejo and the Portuguese of Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Fernando Pessoa appear in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977). A discussion of Victoria Ocampo appears in *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), pp. 283-284. "Message to Poets," originally subtitled "For Miguel Grinberg," is in *Raids on the Unspeakeable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 155-161 and in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (1981), pp. 171-174.

We have thus a veritable mosaic, names of the greatest variety. However, what is more important, they are names exclusively from the vanguard, even if the limits of this vanguard were at times in opposition or different, as is the case with the Argentina reviews: Victoria Ocampo's *Sur* and Miguel Grinberg's *Eco Contemporaneo*, in whose pages, so different from one another, Merton spoke with one voice to Latin American readers.

For anyone familiar with the contemporary poetic scene in Latin America, there is little doubt that these poets represent widely differing traits, and for the lover of poetry it is basically important that, within Merton's understanding of poetry, they find room under the same roof.



If for Spanish American poetry there exists, as we have had the opportunity of seeing, several notable interpreters in North American culture, those who have shown an interest in Brazilian poetry can be counted on the fingers of one hand. In the first place, we might mention the name of John Nist, a patient translator of the poetry of *Modernismo* and of the newer writers. His work is of indisputable service to Brazilian culture. Alongside Nist, with a profoundly original vision along the same lines is Thomas Merton, who wrote the following concerning Portuguese:

It is a language I delight in, and it has really become the one I like best. It is to me a warm and glowing language, one of the most human of tongues, richly expressive and in its own way innocent. Perhaps I say this speaking subjectively, not having read all that may have enlightened me in some other sense. But it seems to me that Portuguese has never yet been used for such barbarities as German, French or Spanish. And I love the Brazilian people. I keep wanting to translate Jorge de Lima. I have the poems of Manuel Bandeira and Carlos Drummond de Andrade and several others. I like them and read them all.¹³

Analyzing the broad scope of Brazilian poetry, Merton wrote:

The Brazilian poets: a whole new world. To begin with, Portuguese is a wonderful language for poetry, a language of admiration, of innocence, of joy, full of human warmth and therefore of humor: the humor that is inseparable from love, that laughs at the uniqueness of each individual being not because it is comical or contemptible but because it is unique. Uniqueness, the innocent self, is always surprising, and surprise is humorous as well as

13. Letter to Alceu Amoroso Lima, November 1961. Included in "Cold War Letters" (unpublished mimeograph in the Thomas Merton Studies Center), p. 3.

wonderful, on this human level. I find the Brazilian poets different from the other Latin Americans. Their mild temper, their Franciscan love of life, their respect for all living things, is fully reproduced as far as I know only in Carrera Andrade of Ecuador and Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua. There is in the Brazilian none of the hardness, none of the sour, artificial, doctrinaire attitudes which you find in so many of the Spanish American poets, wonderful as they are. What a difference between Manuel Bandeira, or Jorge de Lima, whose love is for men, and some of the Marxist poets writing in Spanish whose love is for a cause.¹⁴

This is one of the most acute and at the same time one of the most basic critical annotations made concerning the human and poetic world of the Brazilian poet as he relates to his Hispanic-American brothers and sisters. Following through on his evaluation, Merton said: "I am moved by Alfonso Reyes, and Neruda, both of whom are deeply human, and Neruda remains so in spite of the unutterable banality and pompousness of his party-line exercise books — the later poems" (CGB, p. 5).

Thus the Spanish and Latin American circle of Thomas Merton closed in upon itself harmoniously, an example worthy of being followed by other writers, an example of love and understanding in the best sense of the two concepts: poetry and life.

14. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1966), pp. 4-5. Hereafter referred to in the text as CGB.

Appendix

Thomas Merton

Letter to a Poet about Vallejo

It takes time to get to a letter like yours, from among the other letters of editors, and of crazies, and of the hurt, and of the rich with propositions, and of the fanatics with accusations.

I have translated only half a dozen poems of Vallejo (I think all were in *Poemas Humanos*) four will be in my new book this fall, so I am not exactly digging in and getting anything done. I am glad to hear you are. I think all the poets in America could translate Vallejo and not begin to get him.

In a way I see what you mean about Japan, and you are right about the rocks and wood. You do not mention sand. But that does not exclude any place as a right one in which to read and understand Vallejo. This is because, as I think, he is the most universal, Catholic in that sense (the only real sense) poet of this time, the most Catholic and universal of all modern poets, the only real poet since (Who? Dante?) who is anything like Dante. Maybe Leopardi whom I never read much, of course Quasimodo has some of it too.

So what I mean is that Vallejo is totally human as opposed to our zombie poets and our little girl poets and our incontinents. I have never really thought out all that must begin to be said about Vallejo, but he is tremendous and extraordinary, a huge phenomenon, so much more magnificent (in the classical sense) than Neruda, precisely because he is in every way poorer. No matter what they do with Vallejo, they can never get him into anybody's establishment. (Neruda walled in very easy without giving the slightest trouble.)

Editors' Note: "Letter to a Poet about Vallejo" was written by Thomas Merton in June of 1963 in response to a letter of inquiry from poet Clayton Eshleman. Eshleman's selected translations of the poetry of Pablo Neruda, *Residence on Earth*, had been published by Amber House Press in 1962. Merton's translations of Vallejo appeared in *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, published by New Directions in December of 1963.

Therefore I think that a translation of Vallejo, is not only a nice interesting venture, but a project of very great and urgent importance for the human race.

However I would like to see your translations of Neruda.

In terms of volume I have not read all or even most of the fine Latin American poetry. There is too much. I don't think any of them that I know even come close to the stature of Vallejo, but they are fine in less profound ways. Nobody could be so direct, and go so far into the heart of it, and never stop going. But the Latin Americans are better, as a whole, than the North Americans. Cid Corman I don't know. So many of the others, even when they are most sincere, give the impression of posing even, especially, in their sincerity. They just don't have anything to say, even when they are indignant one feels that their indignation (in a good sense of course) has not yet got over being just indignation with themselves and with the fact that they are not liked by everybody yet.

Vallejo is a great eschatological poet, with a profound sense of the end and yet of the new beginnings (that he does not talk about). All the others are running around setting off firecrackers and saying it is a national holiday or emergency or something. Or just lolling around in a tub of silly words.

Hays I don't know, N[ew] D[irections] 15 I did not see, and I am not up on what is being published.* I am not well informed, you understand.

As for me, I am not going to translate any whole book of V. but I may some day do my own anthology of L. American poets I like most, and that would mean a lot of his. But I don't think repeated translations of such a man will overlap, especially of the *Poemas Humanos*. I might work more on *Los Heraldos Negros* because I like the manifest Inca quality there.

Do send me something of yours: I do not know you, though your name is familiar. I seldom really read magazines, even when I get them. I have probably been in something with you and not known about it.

* Hoffman Reynolds Hays (1904-1980). His essay, "The Passion of Cesar Vallejo," and translations of several poems by Vallejo had appeared in *New Directions 15; International Issue* (New York: New Directions, 1955), pp. 22-44. His own *Selected Poems* was published by Kayak Books in 1968 and he was the translator of *12 Spanish American Poets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943) and *Selected Poems of Bertolt Brecht* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947).