

Out in the Open: Meeting Merton in Mendoza

By **Marcela Raggio**

I teach American and British Literature at Cuyo National University (UNCuyo), in Mendoza, a province at the foot of the Andes in Western Argentina. Some years ago I came across Thomas Merton by sheer chance. Ernesto Cardenal was coming for a poetry reading in Mendoza's foremost cultural center, and as I read the announcement, it said that he had been a novice under Thomas Merton's direction in the 1950s. This caught my attention, because in my research work I always try to find connections between Latin American and North American writers. Thus I found out about the ITMS, the *Seasonal* and the *Annual*, and started reading and doing research on Merton's works, always kindly helped by Dr. Mark Meade and Dr. Paul Pearson at the Thomas Merton Center.

That was in 2012. From then onwards, I started including some pieces by Merton in my American Literature syllabus and in some graduate classes I teach. So Merton has been "loitering" in UNCuyo's classrooms for some time now. But once, almost two years ago, Merton was with us in a public class.

In Argentina, National Universities are based on the principles of autonomy (each can have its own internal laws), freedom of teaching (as long as professors teach certain basic contents, they can use their own methodology), lack of tuition fees, lay teaching and co-government based on autarchy. The university president and the deans are elected at "general" elections in which all members of the university community – professors, undergrads, graduates and administration – are able to vote. Because there are no fees, in theory anyone who passes admission exams can attend college, regardless of their economic possibilities (of course there are factors that make it difficult for some students to graduate, like having to work while they study, living far away from the university, lacking connectivity these days when virtual classes are relevant, etc.). But in any case, with the help of scholarships and a lot of effort, anyone could access a public university and receive the best-qualified teaching in Argentina. Because there are no fees, all these universities are financially supported by the state. And at some points, when the government decides to decrease the budget for education, this may mean trouble.

So when such situations arise, professors and teachers alike march, or organize sit-ins, or manifest their discontent with the circumstances in different ways. This happened in 2018, when universities across Argentina were under a straining moment. There were marches throughout the country, sit-ins at various universities, teachers' strikes supported and accompanied by students, and open classes in streets, plazas and parks.

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Marcela Raggio

(I would like to mention that because universities are public and state-funded, classes are also public – if anyone wanted to attend a class, theoretically they could.) But an open class is taking this idea a step further: the class moves out of the classroom, into a public space downtown, where the wider public will be able to appreciate the work professors do, how hard students study, and so everyone will realize how important it is that the state goes on supporting public universities.

Most teachers will teach in their public classes what was scheduled for that day. But sometimes, professors choose to teach an off-the-syllabus topic, something that might be relevant to the context or bring a new light into what is being discussed in society. For example, in 2017, I gave an open class on *The Great Gatsby*, because that was the topic for that day in my schedule. But in 2018, marches, sit-ins, strikes and other forms of protest had been going on for almost a month (a long period for these activities), and on the second Friday in September, the government finally answered our claim. My open class was to be the last of that week and of the whole protest. I usually teach in English, since my students are all English majors. But that Friday, September 8, 2018, I decided to teach in Spanish. And I chose as a topic: “Thomas Merton’s Contemporary Value: Literature and Commitment.” I had a small volume with translations of Merton’s texts into Spanish, which Miguel Grinberg had sent me at the beginning of the year. From that volume, *Hermana América*,¹ I marked with bright green post-its “Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants,”² “A Picture of Lee Ying” (*ESF* 20-22; *CP* 322-24), “Peace and Protest”³ and “Message to Poets.”⁴



Students majoring in different areas, colleagues from several departments (some of whom had been teaching open classes earlier in the week, and in the semester) and a few other people met on one of the university's esplanades. It was early spring, and the warm afternoon helped create a friendly atmosphere in which we discussed various aspects of the selected texts. As I wrote above, public universities are secular, but of course each person brings their religious views with them. I know for certain that in that open class there were people of different religions, all showing their surprise for the beautiful ecumenical voice they heard in Merton's writings. Some students who had preconceptions about international relations between North and South America read joyfully: "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 Bolivar" (*ESF* 85; *CP* 387). Their reaction was so positive that around the same time I used the very same paragraph with a group of American students who had come to Argentina as part of their study abroad program to learn Spanish. I found it so rewarding that Argentine students on the one hand, and Americans on the other, had such a warm welcome for these words by Merton.

But going back to that open class, we went on to read the supporting "Message to Poets," which young writers had felt so deeply in 1964 Mexico City. Now, 55 years later, this Argentine group who had been marching and sitting for over a month, found also the power and need for engagement in the idea that "We stand together to denounce the shame and the imposture of . . . calculations. . . . For the poet there is precisely no magic. There is only life in all its unpredictability and all its freedom" (*RU* 158-59). And Merton's idea of solidarity called the attention of this audience that had gathered, precisely, over that value: "The solidarity of poets . . . is something that cannot be organized, it can only happen. It can only be 'received.' It is a gift to which we must remain open" (*RU* 156-57). Ties and memories were formed among the people sitting under the blue Andean sky that afternoon, ties of solidarity that would keep us together in times to come.

We also reflected together upon the words in "Peace and Protest," highly relevant to a group that had been protesting, as thousands had done across the country: "There is . . . considerable danger of ambiguity in protests that seek mainly to capture the attention of the press, to gain publicity for a cause, . . . more concerned with their impact upon the public than with the meaning of that impact. . . . What is needed is a constructive, consistent and clear dissent that recalls people to their senses, makes them think deeply, plants in them a seed of change, and awakens in them the profound need for truth, reason and peace which is implanted in man's nature" (*FV* 43). Everyone agreed that for the first time in years most professors and students had peacefully taken part in the protests that wanted a change for higher education, so that universities were considered as institutions preparing for social change.

Almost two years have passed since those days. Some of the students who attended that class in the esplanade are graduating now. They are taking their graduating examinations on-line, amidst a pandemic that has changed further our circumstances. I am still in contact with them, and I know the seed of change is out there. Also, looking back from 2020, I wonder if taking the

class out of the classroom was not somehow prefiguring the current on-line classrooms where we keep trying to think deeply and awaken in our students, and deep in our hearts, too, the need for truth.

1. Thomas Merton. *Hermana América*, ed. Miguel Grinberg (Buenos Aires: Mutantia, 1993).
2. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 70-89 (subsequent references will be cited as “*ESF*” parenthetically in the text); Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 372-91 (subsequent references will be cited as “*CP*” parenthetically in the text).
3. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 40-46; subsequent references will be cited as “*FV*” parenthetically in the text.
4. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 155-61; subsequent references will be cited as “*RU*” parenthetically in the text.