The Meeting of Strangers: Thomas Merton's Engagement with Latin America

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From 1957, the year of Ernesto Cardenal's acceptance into the monastery of Gethsemani, the circle of Merton's Latin American contacts was growing rapidly. Though ill health eventually prevented Cardenal (Brother Lawrence) from being a professed Trappist and forced him to leave that demanding Order, both of these contemplative poets remained in close touch, exchanging letters and manuscripts; discussing poetry, politics, and spiritual matters; and collaborating on numerous publishing and translating projects. Thanks to this close friendship with Cardenal, Merton had the sense of becoming part of Nicaragua's intellectual movement.

In 1958 Merton was introduced to Cardenal's cousin, Pablo Antonio Cuadra (1912-2002), who had come to Gethsemani for a brief visit. The extensive correspondence between Merton and Cuadra that followed their initial encounter testifies to an instant mutual understanding and a panoply of shared concerns. The Trappist monk and poet was impressed by Cuadra's poems from his recent volume *El jaguar y la luna* (published in Managua in 1959) and began translating some of them for New Directions. Pioneer of a literary movement known as *la Vanguardia*, Cuadra combined his poetic vocation with those of a publisher and a Christian. He eagerly seized upon the opportunity of winning over the Trappist poet and spiritual master for "our other America."[1] Upon his return to Nicaragua, Cuadra set about spreading Merton's spiritual and poetic message "south of the border," where it was so much needed. Soon he would be sending Merton books and literary reviews to keep him updated on the work of many important poets of the Latin American continent.

In 1959, planning to launch the literary review *El pez y la serpiente*, Cuadra announced his intention to include something of Merton's work in each issue and asked the contemplative poet to become their "Maestro." "Be one of us," urged Cuadra in a letter.[2] The aim of the review whose logo pictured a fish (*pez*) encircled by a serpent (*serpiente*), symbolically uniting the Christian and In-

dian cultures was to explore Nicaragua's double heritage. It would serve to unite the voices of artists of both Americas in their Christian witness. Cuadra envisioned the journal as a rallying point for all intellectuals working towards a better world.[3] On January 4, 1960, Merton wrote to him: "I shall be delighted to collaborate in the wonderful work."[4] Soon he was sending scores of poems and essays for publication, translating Latin American poets and putting his friends from the "other" America in contact with James Laughlin (of New Directions) and other publishers in the United States. Merton's Latin American translations, accompanied by short biographical notes, were beginning to appear in the *Sewanee Review*, *Continuum*, and the annual *New Directions* anthologies.

In the meantime, Cardenal had left the Trappists and was temporarily staying in Mexico City with his former college professor, Nicaraguan priest and poet Angel Martínez Baigorri (1899-1971). There, with another compatriot, Ernesto Mejía Sanchez (1923-1985), he started working on a Spanish-language edition of Merton's selected poems. Translated by Cardenal and illustrated by the Nicaraguan-born artist Armando Morales (1927-), this was to be Merton's first collaborative volume, one that Merton thought might even surpass the original English version in artistic merit. About Morales' profoundly spiritual contribution to the work, Merton enthusiastically commented: "What luck, what grace, to collaborate with such a good artist so ready to understand the poems."[5] The understanding that was somewhat slow coming from readers in North America was instantaneous and complete in the other America. Little wonder that Merton's deeply cherished desire to prepare the advent of "the true America" through a concerted creative effort "of creators, of thinkers, of men of prayer"[6] struck a responsive chord among his Latin American acquaintances.

Frequent correspondence between Merton, Cuadra, and Cardenal, revolving mostly around translating and publishing projects, put Merton firmly in touch with the intellectual life of Central America, and before long he would be exchanging letters with new contacts. Angel Martínez was "impressed"[7] upon receiving Merton's letter with a copy of the latter's "Nativity Kerygma"; Mejía Sanchez was eager to see Merton's article on Pasternak ("The Pasternak Affair") published in Mexico. Soon the university press at Mexico's Universidad Nacional Autónoma would be issuing Spanish versions of Merton's poetry and poetic prose, and a liter-

ary supplement to *Mexico en la Cultura* would publish Cardenal's translation of Merton's "An Elegy for Ernest Hemingway."

For obvious reasons, politics was an area of concern in 1959, the year of both the Cuban revolution and the Nicaraguan insurrection against Luis Somosa Debayle. The news of the Cuban revolution was greeted by Merton with cautious optimism at first, for he viewed it as offering a chance for a new type of democracy to emerge, one that would represent a "third force" beyond the Gog-Magog alternative, the opposition between the two super-powers about which he had already written. But he soon grew discouraged when he saw how the fear of communism that characterized the US government and the institutional Church forced Castro actually to *choose* communism against Western imperialism, and so the chance was lost. The Nicaraguan insurrection, on the other hand, involved Merton more personally and more directly. Managua's outspoken newspaper *La Prensa*, dedicated to the service of truth and justice[8] and co-edited by Pablo Antonio Cuadra and Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, was suppressed by the Nicaraguan dictator. Cuadra managed to escape repercussions, but many insurgents, Chamorro included, were imprisoned and feared tortured. On July 4, 1959, Merton broke with his "bystander" status and wrote letters to the Nicaraguan president and the Organization of American States to intercede on behalf of these insurgents. His religious superiors were soon to forbid him to make any public statements on political issues, but he would find a way to circumvent the ban by writing personal letters with social and political content, true to his understanding of genuinely "Catholic" action. Over a hundred "Cold War Letters," bound together in a self-edited, mimeographed volume, testify to the scope of Merton's concern.[9]

In September 1961 Merton sent Cuadra a "statement of where I stand, morally, as a Christian writer,"[10] for inclusion in *El pez*. Although he later upbraided himself for the rashness of some of his opinions, "A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants" was an important event, and not only in Nicaragua. Republished in several other magazines (e.g., the influential *Sur* of Buenos Aires), Merton's open letter to Cuadra was widely read and discussed by Latin American intellectuals, many of whom were moved to write to the author. Cuadra himself called it "one of the great documents of our time."[11] Esther de Cáceres of Uruguay recognized Merton as the only living spiritual master in both Ameri-

cas, and wrote about her admiration for his integrity as a writer and witness to truth.[12] The stir the article caused would be matched by the publication of *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963), the volume of poetry and prose that includes the letter "Concerning Giants"; Merton's translations of five Latin American poets, three of whom are Nicaraguans; and his original poem dedicated to Alfonso Cortés.

When *Emblems* appeared, Cardenal felt "honored" at being published in such a good company,[13] and Cuadra was enthusiastic about the whole volume. Stefan Baciu, a professor of Spanish and Portuguese languages at Washington University,[14] told Merton he was reading *Emblems* with profound emotion.[15] He had already sent Merton his article on César Vallejo, inscribing it with the words: *"A Thomas Merton, grande poeta, amigo de meu amigo Ernesto Cardenal."*[16]

Emblems testified to Merton's growing understanding of the "other" America. Its author was rapidly becoming a rallying point for an ever growing number of Latin American poets, publishers, and intellectuals, who sent Merton their work and busied themselves translating his, while also asking Merton to put them in touch with North American publishers, begging him to contribute to their little magazines, looking to him for spiritual guidance, and, above all, showering him with letters impatient for a reply and urging him to write more and more frequently. The contemplative Merton, ever more attracted to the solitary life of a hermit, could barely cope with the demand these requests put upon him, yet he felt they were an important, even if paradoxical, part of his vocation. The importance he attached to his correspondence with Latin American authors can be gleaned from his effort, beginning in the mid-sixties, to respond to them in Spanish rather than English, though this was much more difficult for him and put an extra demand on his already strained use of time.

Occasionally Merton felt ambivalent about certain magazines publishing his material, preferring not to be identified with their political affiliation. This was the case with the bilingual review *El Corno Emplumado,* or *The Plumed Horn.* Co-edited by Margaret Randall and her husband Sergio Mondragon and published in Mexico, the journal tended to be hostile to the Church, leftist, and sometimes artistically uneven. On January 28, 1963, reflecting on his involvement with *El Corno Emplumado,* Merton jotted down in his notebook: "I am to some extent in sympathy with them and

some of their poets are fine but much of it is crass and gross."[17] So he decided to limit his contribution to poetry only, while allowing no private correspondence with Randall to be published. Half a year later he added, with concern for dialogue so typical of him: "Ambivalence about certain poetry magazines. I really think I have no business at all in *El Corno Emplumado*, but still I doubt, like good stuff from Cuba there, and communication must remain open —is this a delusion?"[18] Randall's next letter seemed to prove Merton right. Appreciating Merton's unique contemplative understanding of the world's problems, Randall was eager to discuss important social and political issues with him. Besides, her belief in the New Man of America bridge-builder, constructor of peace, and redeemer of the world coincided with Merton's deepest hopes in the dawning of the new American consciousness which would include both continents. Even though she was soon to see the New Man incarnated in the Cuban proletarian, Merton remained "part of the Corno family,"[19] even allowing Randall to publish more of his letters, which she regarded as "so relevant."[20]

Merton's Cuban contacts are a story in themselves. After the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, Merton received a letter from a Cuban refugee woman whose husband had participated in the landing and been captured by the Castro army. She was seeking spiritual guidance from Merton, and her letter initiated a two-year correspondence between them (1961-1963). Merton seemed the right person to whom to turn. In 1958 he had read Czeslaw Milosz's *The Captive Mind*, and the ensuing correspondence with the Polish poet, as well as Merton's involvement with "the Pasternak affair," made him familiar with "ascesis for survival under totalism."[21] This familiarity also explains his caution in contacting his Cuban poet-friends. Merton had no way of knowing whether his letters would even reach them. Mail was censored, and one had to be careful not to arouse the censors' suspicion by an opinion that might be interpreted as critical of the revolution and the new regime. Such a letter would almost certainly implicate the recipients as political subversives. By 1962 Merton had been in correspondence with "a whole little group of most charming people"[22] in Havana converging on Cintio Vitier (1921-), poet, novelist, essayist and literary critic. In addition to Vitier, the poetic circle consisted of his wife Fina Garcia Marruz (1923-), Eliseo Diego (1920-1993), Roberto Friol (1938-), and Octavio Smith (1921-1987). Along with José Lezama Lima (1910-1976) they constituted the core of the *Orígenes* group

of Cuban writers. Having been cut off from the world by the Castro regime, this group was hungry for Merton's letters and friendship, his essays and poetry, immediately translating into Spanish everything he sent them. In their political and artistic isolation, these Christian writers depended on Merton's word as well as his contemplative silence to guide and strengthen them. In their letters to Merton they frequently expressed gratitude for his attempts to embrace the entire American hemisphere, and they thanked him for opening, by his work and the exchange of letters, a way of communication between Cuba and the rest of the hemisphere. Merton's own Cuban experience of 1940, which he recorded in *The Secular Journal* and which they apparently knew, allowed them to treat him as part of the spiritual life of Cuba.[23]

Emblems of a Season of Fury was received by this literary group as testimony to Merton's determination to listen to the stranger and to make his voice heard and understood in the larger world. "Charity listens to the voice of the stranger," Vitier wrote on October 4, 1963, unmistakably identifying the volume's "sophianic" leitmotif. Vitier proved to be not only an enthusiastic but also a perceptive and concerned reader of Merton's verse. The letter, along with the enclosed translations into Spanish of some recent verses by Merton especially close to his heart, moved the Gethsemani monk deeply and elicited this telling comment: ". . . the meeting of the strangers. I feel they have profoundly understood everything and I love them."[25] Some years later the Cuban poets meditated deeply on Merton's poem "With the World in My Bloodstream," likening its anguish to something expressed only by Vallejo in the Castilan language, and appreciating in Merton's painful honesty the absolute sincerity of a child. But, Vitier's letter of November 1966 cautiously continues, they could not help detecting something else there, something resembling bitterness and frustration at having chosen a way of life that seemed to permanently close off other choices.[24] They could not have known that this most famous Trappist of the century had just been in love with a woman and in crisis over his vocation.

In Merton's vocabulary, "the stranger" was synonymous with the monk-poet, that is, a person alienated or estranged from the prevailing technological culture of the Western world and from the death and violence that so often underpin it. Merton considered it essential for poets to maintain the attitude of a stranger with respect to the society they lived in, in order to preserve their

freedom and innocence. Merton's sense of being "a bramble among the flowers"[26] in his own powerful, successful, and highly industrialized country had the additional advantage of making him feel close to "whole nations of strangers"[27] inhabiting the poorer regions of the world, Latin America in particular. When asked by the Venezuelan poet and publisher Ludovico Silva (1937-1988) to submit an essay describing his typical day for inclusion in an anthology consisting of similar contributions from other writers, Merton gave his essay the title "Day of a Stranger." Published in *Papeles* in 1966, this deeply contemplative essay presents Merton the hermit as free to be his own self beyond any collective illusions, and living in harmony with the natural world. In the silence of his hermitage, the voices of birds fuse with some other voices that "choose themselves" to be heard: these are the voices of poets and writers, which together create a "living balance of spirits."[28]

Among those voices, Ludovico Silva's was not the quietest. Author of *Boom!!! Poema*, he was as preoccupied with the imminent atomic cataclysm as was Merton. Silva's apocalyptic poem about the atomic destruction of the world is a visual shout, its pages dotted with exclamation marks and words written in capital letters. In its content it obviously resonates with Merton's meditation *Original Child Bomb* (1962); in its form it is a telling condemnation of the meaningless "magic of words," the sheer incommunicability of the language of escalation. The exclamation of the atomic apocalypse, Merton stated in a letter to Silva, must be counteracted with the "silent exclamation" of dissent.[29] Naturally, it was the stranger's dissent he had in mind. Silva's poem, published in 1966, was preceded by a prologue (*prológo*) written by Merton. Their joint publication was another reason for Merton to feel included in the Hispanic America's poetry scene.

Ludovico Silva, like a number of Merton's friends by correspondence, was impressed by the Trappist contemplative's knowledge of Latin American poetry[30] and struck by his mystical approach to faith and religion, which was so close to the Latin American heart. He invited Merton to collaborate with him and his friends, first on the magazine *Sol cuello cortado*, and then on *Papeles*, which he was just starting; for a time he even considered publishing a little Merton anthology in Spanish. Heir to the surrealist imagination, Silva was deeply interested in Merton's late poems, wanting to publish in Spanish *Cables to the Ace* and the "epic of madness,"[31] as Merton described *The Geography of Lograire*. Despite

all the madness of history, in response to Silva's concern about the future of poetry Merton remarked: "My reaction is totally positive . . . the poets will triumph. We will triumph. God is with the poets. That is why I am especially happy to know that *Boom* has some success with those who know how to read."[32] It was Merton's acquaintance with Latin American poets and poetry that, to a large extent, warranted this optimism.

It is also symptomatic that, while claiming pan-American identity and Latin American sensitivity, Merton should always have seen himself affiliated most closely with the Nicaraguan movement in poetry. Nicaragua was to him "a wonderful land which I love and which I inhabit in spirit. The land where I have many friends I have never seen."[33] In the mid-twentieth century Nicaragua was experiencing a massive outpouring of creative energy in the arts, and a poetic fervor was sweeping the country, testifying to the Nicaraguans' ardent search for authentic spiritual values and their longing for life, truth, and hope amid the wasteland of destitution and abusive politics. Symbolically placed at the center of the hemisphere, the country seemed predestined to be at the spearhead of a global movement toward a more lucid consciousness, which would loosen the grip of inauthentic, habitual patterns of thought, pious attitudes of shallow religiosity, and submission to corrupt power. The independence of Nicaraguan publishing from big institutions, literary movements, and the mass media was another inspiring and hopeful sign of intellectual freedom. Merton interpreted the Nicaraguan *sui generis* poetic revolution as the stirrings of a new consciousness, and the awakening of the New Man of America. Merton's Nicaraguan friends: Napolean Chow, Ernesto Cardenal, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, José Coronel Urtecho, Angel Martínez, Alfonso Cortés, and Ernesto Mejía Sanchez were a living proof that the Nicaraguan intellectual was committed to bringing about a real change of consciousness and life through literature as well as through participation in the democratic process.[34] At the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), Merton dared to believe that the Christian intellectual in Nicaragua, with his broadminded, far-ranging interests, was most predisposed to attain to the goal of the conciliar revolution, namely, to authentic catholicity understood as a truly catholic openness to the world, purged of the narrowly Catholic ideology, which had become merely one more crippling pattern of thought synonymous with European culture.

While the natural alliance of the arts, religion, and politics so characteristic of Latin American countries could bring the whole of Nicaragua closer together in the work for a common goal (the overthrow of the dictator in this particular case), it also carried a risk of its own: that of restricting the artists' creative freedom. Some of Merton's Nicaraguan contacts considered it their duty to turn their backs on Cuba in protest against its growing Stalinist absolutism. When Cardenal declared his and several other poets' determination to boycott the leading Cuban literary magazine *Ventana*, Merton kept encouraging them not to "adopt a policy of withdrawal" so as to avoid letting the magazine "fall completely into the hands of Communists."[35] The Gethsemani contemplative understood his Nicaraguan friends' legitimate apprehension of "guilt by association," but he feared that their protest would seal off the vital avenues of dialogue with the Communist "brother." It was the lay Christian intellectual, he thought, who was best predisposed to shoulder the burden of maintaining the dialogue. To Napolean Chow, a Nicaraguan poet actively involved in the Latin American Christian Democratic Movement, Merton confided in 1963, in the spirit of the recent papal encyclical
(1961):

> Politics are of vital importance. The Catholic in Latin America who refuses a priori to have anything to do with politics of any kind, is doing more to destroy the faith than the Catholic who does not refuse, if necessary, to make common cause with the most radical elements.[36]

Chow had written Merton that the Hispanic Christian Democrats, following the social teachings of Jacques Maritain, were trying to unite all the South American countries, Cuba included, in working toward the common good. "If the Christians will not do politics," Chow contested, "others will do it for us."[37] Just as Christian intellectuals should not be afraid to cooperate with people of good will on both sides of the political divide, so poets should not limit their concerns only to "Christian poetry," he believed. In response Merton assured him of his "profound agreement," writing, "Keep sending *Ventana* . I feel that the work you [Christian Democrats] are doing is of great importance."[38]

But it was the Nicaraguans' love for the poor indigenous inhabitants of Ibero-America as well as their commitment to the contemplative dimension of life that was a constant cause for joy for

the Trappist writer, and the chief unifying factor between him and his Nicaraguan friends. Contemplatives by nature, they were strangers *par excellence* in the modern world of hectic activism. The literary movement *la Vanguardia* that Pablo Antonio Cuadra had helped launch in 1927 was dedicated to recovering the indigenous, contemplative roots of the Nicaraguan culture, a concern to which Merton could not but wholeheartedly subscribe. Another founder of *la Vanguardia*, José Coronel Urtecho, had abandoned the busy world of urban centers and lived an almost eremitical life in the solitude of Rio San Juan, on the border of Costa Rica. There, as Cardenal reported in his letters,[39] he was reading the Rule of St. Benedict and studying the history of Hispanic America. Around the same time (1962), Ernesto Cardenal was studying theology at La Ceja seminary in Medellin, Columbia, visiting the Cuna Indians on San Blas Islands, and publishing articles about Indian spirituality. Both Cuadra and Cardenal made frequent retreats from their busy lives into the silence of Rio San Juan, where together with Coronel Urtecho they would read Merton's poetry and prose and discuss literature, spirituality and politics. They would also collaborate on various publishing projects involving Merton. Little wonder that Urtecho considered the Gethsemani Maestro a "mysterious link"[40] between them and credited Merton with helping Nicaraguan poets become the most united community of writers in all of Latin America. The communion of poets is a reality, he assured Merton on March 31, 1964, despite their dispersion in diverse places. Cuadra was based in Managua, Cortés was in a sanatorium, Padre Martínez and Carlos Martínez Rivas lived in Mexico, and Cardenal was studying in Colombia, and yet, said Urtecho, they felt united and considered themselves "Merton's disciples in Christ."[41]

In 1964 Cuadra, Cardenal, and Urtecho were busy translating works by Merton for a Latin American Merton Reader that the Rio San Juan poet was planning to publish. Urtecho was convinced it would be "a little book of great importance"[42] for Latin America, hoping it would address the tremendous need of his fellow Americans for the living experience of God. Merton kept sending Urtecho material to include in the anthology and found it moving that Urtecho should "respond to it so completely."[43] The author of *Emblems* rejoiced in this "generous and understanding" reader.[44] Every book or article he sent would be welcomed by Urtecho as "magnificent" or "profound," and Urtecho would thank Merton

with a phrase used by the Nicaraguan poor upon receiving charity: *Dios se lo pague*, "God reward you."[45] Merton responded in kind, feeling a debtor to both Urtecho and Cardenal for making him part of a lively and comprehensive community of poets.[46] Though the Merton Reader was never published, the work on it brought the four poets closer together in a communion of minds, which Merton considered much more important than the end product.[47]

When, still in the same year of 1964, *La Prensa* dedicated a special section to Merton, with articles contributed by Cuadra and Urtecho, Merton felt he was really "engaged in the work in the literary movement which is so alive and so important in Nicaragua."[48] For Merton, his collaboration as a priest with lay Catholics in the literary sphere seemed to be a manifestation of true Catholic action, prophetically initiating a new era in the life of the Church. In a letter to Cuadra dated June 30, 1964, he expressed his belief that the real life of the Church was not in the hierarchy but in people who still knew how to listen and who were open to an exchange of ideas as opposed to a mere defense of a particular doctrine. "It would be wonderful to participate to some small extent in the beginnings of the awakening,"[49] he confided, referring to the dawning of the new, transcultural consciousness that he hoped would soon reach maturity. He may have participated in it more actively than he dared believe, and the Argentine Miguel Grinberg had a vital part to play in extending Merton's influence further south and to Latin Americans who might have felt disaffected with the Church.

A poet, publisher, and translator of North American poetry, editor of the literary review *Eco contemporáneo: Revista Inter-Americana*, Miguel Grinberg (1937-) first contacted Merton in 1963. In contrast to Merton's Nicaraguan friends, Grinberg never openly referred to religion in his letters; his religion was life. He had just founded an organization called Acción Interamericana. Presided over by Henry Miller, it was dedicated to promoting cultural exchange between both parts of the hemisphere. "My group is preparing literary revolt in Argentina," Grinberg declared pointblank in his first letter. "Are you interested?"[50] Merton was. The two men immediately found a common language. Merton's first contribution to Grinberg's inter-cultural initiative was an article "Answers on Art and Freedom," written in response to nine questions asked by readers of *Eco contemporáneo*. This was followed by Grinberg's

request that Merton draft a message for the first inter-American encounter of the New Solidarity Movement of poets he had just launched. The meeting was to take place in Mexico City in February 1964. By that time Grinberg had already started two printing houses, the Angel Press and Poesia Ahora, with the objective of disseminating the new American poetry written in all the republics of the hemisphere. His literary revolt was assuming the shape of a full-blown revolution.

Merton's "Message to Poets" (1964) was one of his most important contributions to the realm of Latin American poetry. Although initially he automatically signed the "Message" with his monastic name (Father Louis), Merton decided to change the signature to Uncle Louis[51] in the essay's later versions, so as not to make anyone uncomfortable with his religious affiliation: there were non-Catholics and disaffected Catholics among its addressees. First read at the Mexico meeting of poets, and excerpted in *Américas* in April 1964, Merton's essay was on everybody's lips. To Miguel Grinberg it was "a prophetic anticipation of the things that were to develop."[52] The North American monk and poet realized that, despite the violence of Latin American politics and the threat of a global nuclear conflict, poets all over the southern continent were spontaneously affirming life and searching for signs of hope. They were the long anticipated New Men, and theirs was the only revolution capable of changing the world. "Violence changes nothing," Merton declared, "but love changes everything. We are stronger than the bomb."[53] The "we" of solidarity was already a pledge of victory. Poets-dervishes "mad with secret therapeutic love" were urged to enter the Herakleitan river of life to dance in it.[54] In his journal Merton wrote: "I think the *Nueva Solidaridad* is one of the most hopeful signs of life in the hemisphere."[55] Hispanic America seemed predestined to be the redeemer of the modern world.

When in March 1964 Grinberg visited Merton at Gethsemani, the latter could appreciate how profoundly they were in harmony. They spent two days together "exchanging ideas and addresses."[56] On the morning following their first encounter, Merton made copious notes from his guest's "remarkable"[57] "Message to the Cronopios," which Merton had just finished reading. There he was discovering resonances beyond expectation with his own way of thinking: he was struck by Grinberg's concept of poetry as "a proposition of solidarity with the weaker brothers" and by his

definition of a poem as "an act of love," but above all by his belief that life itself is the ultimate poetic act.[58]

Some time later, in a pamphlet entitled "Poesia y revolución," Grinberg would call poets "total revolutionaries" and "new people" who sometimes live their poems instead of writing them.[59] The whole of Latin America, he claimed in the same essay, is straining towards the new beyond the merely novel. In a private letter, Grinberg assures Merton: "The revolution of the heart keeps growing and growing."[60] The letter closes with truly revolutionary greetings: "Joy and Tulips." Merton responds by affirming joy as "the sustenance of the New Man," and finishes the letter with a revolutionary challenge: "Down with importance... Up with the revolution of tulips."[61] In another letter Merton predicts: "The new consciousness will keep awakening. I know it."[62]

The encounter with Grinberg opened up to Merton the literary wealth of the Andean countries. His mind was filled with names of new writers—"people I must find out about like Julio Cortazar and Witold Gombrowicz"[63]–titles of new poetry magazines and new books to read. He was discovering Nicanor Parra and reading Peruvian poets. To the Buenos-Aires-born Alejandro Vignati (1934-), Merton wrote: "You are in Rio, you see other skies than I and hear different harmonies and rhythms, but we seek the same innocence."[64]

The Argentine Rafael Squirru (1925-) was another important discovery for Merton. In 1964 the Pan American Union published his book under the symptomatic title *The Challenge of the New Man*. Merton was reading it with a mounting conviction that the salvation of America and of the whole Western world depended on "hearing the voice of the new man who is rooted in the American earth... especially the earth of South America."[65] Moved to write to the author to express his gratitude, he assured Squirru of his dedication to the task of inter-American dialogue. "It seems to me that this little book represents a vitally important trend of thought,"[66] he stated. Merton hoped that it would generate some interest in things Latin American among readers in the United States, or at least challenge some existing stereotypes. The meager number of reliable publications on the "other" America available in North America was a depressing sign, and more Pan American Union books were badly needed. But the individual effort counted most in correcting this imbalance of interest. Merton's determination to become an expert in Hispanic America's literature and his-

tory was a case in point. "I must read, read, and read. It is my vocation," he emphasized. But his understanding of the Latin American literary and political scene was sufficient not to downplay the possibility of all the creative energy of the continent being misdirected and misspent, so he added with exasperation: "They are looking for a Savior and will take *anyone* as one."[67] Hence his expertise in Latin America was to serve a double purpose: on the one hand, it was to be a reparation for North American neglect; on the other, Merton was taking seriously his role of *maestro* and spiritual guide for South American intellectuals. Ultimately, then, his hope was to help the whole hemispheric America become a "great living unity."[68]

It was the Argentine feminist intellectual Victoria Ocampo (1891-1979), writer and director of the literary review *Sur* and a publishing house under the same name, who was for Merton a living symbol of American unity. Envisioned as a bridge between continents and peoples, her magazine and publishing house had been disseminating the thought of outstanding writers from Europe and the Americas, and incorporating the wisdom of the Old and the New World within the larger frame of a universal culture. In an article for a commemorative volume of articles published by Ocampo's friends, Merton honored her as the embodiment of "America in the broad sense, the only sense, in which I am proud to be numbered among Americans."[69]

Inter-American relations were also an issue in the epistolary dialogue Merton maintained with Hernan Lavín Cerda (1939-), a Chilean poet and writer of Marxist orientation, who contacted Merton in 1965. Cerda considered the cooperation of poets and the dissemination of new poetry written on both continents of the hemisphere a matter of the greatest importance for American unity. He asked Merton for names and addresses of interesting North American poets, and, naturally, for material for inclusion in the magazine *Punto Final* he was editing. Merton's "way of seeing the world" as Latin Americans do, Cerda wrote in a letter, made him a natural ally on the continent that "does not listen" to South America.[70] In the same letter, while voicing his and his compatriots' admiration for the people, values and culture of the United States, Cerda complained that they felt betrayed by the American government. "Our principal enemy is called the USA," he stated, citing the history of US interventions in South America, the Monroe Doctrine, and the US government's Big Stick policy. Merton

agreed that North American civilization had become a "barbarity."[71] In 1967 the Chilean writer and publisher invited Merton to answer a set of questions on technology, politics, and society for his magazine. Merton embraced the invitation as an opportunity to reach his "brothers from Chile."[72] The result was "Answers for Hernan Lavín Cerda,"[73] which appeared in the form of an interview in the September issue of *Punto Final.* Merton must have found the concern for brotherhood that Cerda repeatedly expressed in his correspondence very moving, for he signed his letter of October 20, 1967, "*tu hermano lejano,*" "your distant brother."

This brotherhood was distant in spatial terms only. Forbidden by the abbot of Gethsemani to travel any distance away from his monastery, Merton had to content himself with spiritual solidarity with the New Men of America. But the distance melted on December 10, 1968. Ernesto Cardenal, having waited for more than a decade, could finally welcome his friend and spiritual master to the experimental monastic foundation he had launched in Nicaragua in 1966. "At last you have reached Solentiname"he wrote in his fine long poem "Death of Thomas Merton"[74]"you are here . . . and in all places"[75] because

> dying is not to leave the world
> but to dive into it
> to reach . . .
> the *underground*
> out of this world's *Establishment.* [76]

After years of traveling vicariously throughout the world, Merton could finally arrive in the land he had so long inhabited in spirit.

Editor's Note: "Unpublished" letters by Merton are included here for scholarly use and are within "fair use" procedures.

Notes

1. Pablo Antonio Cuadra, letter to Merton, 1958. Unless noted otherwise, all references to letters to Merton are to unpublished material researched at the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.

2. Cuadra, letter to Merton, Dec. 1959.

3. Cuadra, letter to Merton, 22 Feb. 1961.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers,* ed. Christine Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), p. 187.

5. Merton, letter to Cuadra, 8 Jan. 1959, *Courage for Truth*, p. 183.

6. Merton, letter to Cuadra, 4 Dec. 1958, *Courage for Truth*, pp. 182-83.

7. Cardenal reports it in his letter to Merton, 9 Aug. 1959.

8. "Al servicio de la verdad y la justicia" was its mission statement.

9. See Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, eds. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

10. Merton, *Courage for Truth*, p. 189.

11. Cuadra, letter to Merton, Christmas 1961.

12. Cáceres, letter to Merton, 1961.

13. Cardenal, letter to Merton, 29 Feb. 1964.

14. In 1964 Stefan Baciu was forced to transfer to the University of Hawaii for political reasons.

15. Baciu, letter to Merton, 19 Nov. 1963.

16. "To Thomas Merton, great poet, a friend of my friend Ernesto Cardenal." This dedication, dated June 30, 1963, can be read on Merton's copy of Baciu's article "Cesar Vallejo, Poeta Comunista?" Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.

17. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, ed. Victor A. Kramer, journals, vol. 4, 1960-1963 (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 295.

18. Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, p. 345.

19. Randall, letter to Merton, 30 Mar. 1967.

20. Randall, letter to Merton, 31 May 1967.

21. Thomas Merton, "Pasternak's Letters to Georgian Friends," *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1985), p. 88. The article was written in 1968, and first published in the *New Lazarus Review* in 1978.

22. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* (ed. Robert E. Daggy, journals, vol. 5, 1963-1965; San Francisco: Harper, 1997), p. 39.

23. Vittier, letter to Merton, 31 Dec. 1962.

24. Vitier, letter to Merton, 13 Nov. 1966.

25. Merton, *Dancing in the Water*, p. 39.

26. Merton, letter to Silva, 10 Apr. 1965, *Courage for Truth*, p. 224.

27. Robert E. Daggy, introduction, *Day of a Stranger*, by Thomas Merton (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), p. 15.

28. Merton, *Day of a Stranger*, p. 35.

29. Merton, letter to Silva, 10 Apr. 1965, *Courage for Truth*, p. 225.

30. Silva, letter to Merton, 24 Apr. 1965.

31. Merton, letter to Silva, 19 May 1967, *Courage for Truth*, p. 231.

32. Merton, letter to Silva, 27 Apr. 1967, *Courage for Truth*, pp. 230-31.

33. Merton, letter to Urtecho, 17 Apr. 1964, *Courage for Truth*, p. 173.

34. In a letter to Merton, dated March 4, 1962, Cardenal speculated about the chances of Pedro Chamorro, "un Fidel Castro cristiano," win-

ning the next year's presidency. Chamorro's enormous popularity with the common people encouraged Cardenal to bet on Pablo Antonio Cuadra becoming the Minister of Culture in the future Chamorro-led government. Unfortunately, despite favorable prognosis, the election results were rigged and Anastasio Somosa, Jr. became Nicaragua's next president-tyrant, pledged to continue his father's and brother's line of military dictatorship, terror, and abuse of human rights, until, sparked off by the assassination of Pedro Chamorro in 1978, a full-blown Sandinista revolution would depose him from power. By an irony of fate, in 1979 Ernesto Cardenal would become the Sandinista government's Minister of Culture, estranged by politics from his friend and cousin Pablo Antonio Cuadra. But in the 1960s nothing foretold these dramatic changes or rifts within the movement.

35. Merton, letter to Cardenal, 29 May 1963, *Courage for Truth*, p. 140.
36. Merton, letter to Chow, 26 Dec. 1962, *Courage for Truth*, p. 170.
37. Chow, letter to Merton, 22 Apr. 1963.
38. Merton, letter to Chow, 14 May 1963, *Courage for Truth*, p. 171.
39. Cardenal, letter to Merton, 4 Mar. 1962.
40. Urtecho, letter to Merton, 31 Mar. 1964.
41. Urtecho, letter to Merton, 30 Apr. 1964.
42. Urtecho, letter to Merton, 31 Mar. 1964.
43. Merton, letter to Urtecho, 30 Jun. 1965, *Courage for Truth*, p. 175.
44. Merton, *Courage for Truth*, p. 175.
45. Urtecho, letter to Merton, 10 Jun. 1965.
46. Merton, letter to Urtecho, 17 Mar. 1966, *Courage for Truth*, p. 176.
47. Merton, letter to Urtecho, 15 Mar. 1964, *Courage for Truth*, p. 171.
48. Merton, letter to Cuadra, 28 Oct. 1964, *Courage for Truth*, p. 192.
49. Merton, *Courage for Truth*, p. 192.
50. Grinberg, letter to Merton, 5 May 1963.
51. Grinberg mentions this incident in his talk "Merton and the New World Kairos," given at the Fourth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society in 1995. Recording available at the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Ky.
52. Grinberg, "Merton and the New World Kairos."
53. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 374.
54. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 374.
55. Merton, *Dancing in the* Water, p. 89.
56. Merton, *Dancing in the Water*, p. 89.
57. Merton, *Dancing in the Water* 87. Grinberg's "Mensaje a los Cronopios," distributed at the Mexican conference of poets, was published as "A Mis Hermanos de la Nueva Solidaridad" in the Buenos Aires journal *Primo* 2 (May-June 1964).
58. Merton, *Dancing in the Water*, p. 88.

59. Miguel Grinberg, "Poesia y revolución," Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Ky. "Poesia y revolución" was later published in an Argentine literary magazine *Sol Calmo* 1 (Summer 1967/68).

60. Grinberg, letter to Merton, 26 Jul. 1964.

61. Merton, letter to Grinberg, 16 Aug. 1964, *Courage for Truth*, p. 200.

62. Merton, letter to Grinberg, 28 Oct. 1966, *Courage for Truth*, p. 204.

63. Merton, *Dancing in the Water*, p. 89.

64. Merton, *Courage for Truth*, p. 234.

65. Merton, letter to Cardenal, 12 Jul. 1964, *Courage for Truth*, p. 146.

66. Merton, letter to Squirru, 12 Jul. 1964, *Courage for Truth*, p. 232.

67. Merton, *Dancing in the Water*, p. 124.

68. Merton, letter to Cardenal, 1 Aug. 1963, *Courage for Truth*, p. 141.

69. "To Friends of Victoria Ocampo," published in Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, 1964), pp. 283-84.

70. Cerda, letter to Merton, 7 Sept. 1965.

71. Merton, letter to Cerda, 6 Oct. 1965, *Courage for Truth*, p. 206.

72. Merton, letter to Cerda, 12 Aug. 1967, *Courage for Truth*, p. 206.

73. Thomas Merton, "Answer for Hernan Lavín Cerda," *The Merton Annual*, 2 (1989), pp. 3-12.

74. Ernesto Cardenal, *Marilyn Monroe and Other Poems*, trans. Robert Pring-Mill (London: Search, 1975), p. 133.

75. Cardenal, *Marilyn Monroe*, p. 134.

76. Cardenal, *Marilyn Monroe*, p. 130.