

Acknowledging the Other: Thomas Merton's Poetic Translations

By **Marcela Raggio**

No priest and no poet is really mature until he is everybody.

Thomas Merton¹

Presentation

Thomas Merton was born in France, grew up there and in England, and later settled in the USA, where he would turn out to be one of the major twentieth-century writers and thinkers. His autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*² and his mystic writings are widely known. Yet his writing is not confined to the religious ground. Even from the cloister, Merton was actively involved in the civil and social movements of the late 1950s and 1960s, and through more than two decades he hosted and kept up a lively correspondence with writers, intellectuals and personalities from all over the world. Particularly interested in Latin America, which he considered the continent of the future, he approached and made efforts to have other Americans reach out to Latin American literature. His efforts were directed in the line of poetic translation. Far from considering it a mechanical activity, Merton established fruitful dialogues with several of the poets he translated, and on occasion he reflected with other translators upon his own versions. In this essay I wish to concentrate on Merton's implicit poetics of translation, which can be read from the perspective of Antoine Berman's traductology, as expressed in *La Traduction et la Lettre, ou l'Auberge du Lointain* (1999). According to Berman, translation implies an ethical act: "The ethical act consists in acknowledging and receiving the Other as Other."³

An Ethics of Translation

Berman's notions are helpful in trying to understand the role Merton assigned to poetic translation and the way he carried it out. Berman suggests a binary definition for translation, which involves at the same time experience and reflection: "the reflection of translation upon itself, from its nature of experience."⁴ In her study of Berman, Maria Oliver Mancuello states: "estrangement is intrinsic to literary translation."⁵ This implies one's own self's estrangement in order to apprehend the other – as other – not to adapt the other to what we know, but instead to make room for him through translation, understood as reflection.

Opposed to the traditional Western idea of translation – ethnocentric, hypertextual and platonic – Berman proposes a triple dimension: ethical, poetic

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and reflective (Berman 26-27). This conception of translation has its own tradition, which Berman says starts with St. Jerome, then is found in Fr. Luis de Leon, in Hölderlin, in Chateaubriand, and closer to us in time, in Klossowski and Meschonnic. According to Berman, their translations “are not models, but *sources*.”⁶ Based on these sources, Berman builds his critique of translation, which is not modelic or prescriptive, but instead allows us to understand translation as a reflection upon the letter, in its *literary, poetic* truth.

The real passage implicit in all translations can be fully appreciated in an ethical translation, that is, where estrangement is produced in order to receive the other: “translation means not only the inter-language ‘passage’ of a text but – together with that first ‘passage’ – a whole series of other ‘passages’ which concern the act of writing and, even more secretly, the act of living and dying.”⁷

Estrangement implies denying the “I” and assuming the other. In poetic translation there is a self-donation which is deeply connected to life and death. If the translator favors the ethical position, adapting the other to what is known becomes impossible: the other has to be translated/understood for what he or she is, in all its otherness. Berman equates translation with desire: “Desire to open the Foreigner as Foreigner to its own language space.”⁸ And he defines “ouvrir [open]” as “révéler, manifester [to reveal, manifest]” (Berman 76). Thus, translation may be understood as creation: by revealing (through reflection) what was hidden, the translation creates (through practice) in a space that is part of the literary work itself. Outside this ethical consideration, translation is impossible, according to Berman.

Latin American Poetry according to Merton: Reflection and Experience

Reflection

Merton’s contact with Latin American literature originated in several cases through the South American novices that came to Gethsemani. A special role was played by Ernesto Cardenal. As Paul Pearson points out, “Cardenal, with his own literary and political interests, was influential in introducing Merton to the writings of a wide variety of literary figures from Latin America.”⁹ Merton was aware of the richness of Latin American poetry, and of its vitality and connection with the social upheavals of the continent. In fact, the connection between literature and politics has been a constant trait in Latin America, as stated by Ricardo Navas Ruiz.¹⁰ Navas Ruiz’ hypothesis implies that in unstable political circumstances, literature becomes “engagé” because the context requires platforms of action. Literature, then, cannot be separated from the circumstances in Latin America, especially in the twentieth century, when political instability, dictatorships and foreign interventionism marked the socio-political agenda.

Merton’s attitude towards Latin American poetry is explicitly expressed in his letters to writers, in which he reflects upon the literary value and the ethical element in such texts. By expressing his views, Merton positions himself in the poetic and linguistic map, and sees translation as a creative act and as part of his own ethical engagement. In a letter to Margaret Randall, he states:

I am personally convinced that the best American poetry is written in Latin America. . . . One feels that in Latin America the voice of the poet has significance because it has something to do with life. . . . My own work 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. (CT 215 [1/15/1963])

This assessment of Latin American poetry is repeated in letters to many other writers (Ernesto Cardenal, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Clayton Eshleman, Ludovico Silva *et al.*) Merton uses the word “American” to signify not only U.S. citizens, but all *Americans*, in the continental sense (the sense the word “americano” has in Spanish). In addition to this appreciation of Latin American poetry as “the best American poetry” – which could be considered subjective – Merton places his own poetry, written in English, in the map of Latin American poetry, with which he finds a closer vital and experiential connection. Merton suggests his poetry is not North American; it does not transmit North American values. Instead, he feels part of Latin American expression. This is why the versions of Latin American poems included in *Emblems of a Season of Fury*¹¹ do not seem out of place: in fact, the whole volume feels part of the “inter-language passage” – from Spanish into English in the versions; and from North American into Latin American expression in Merton’s own poems.

Merton’s path to and from Latin America is replicated in other aspects. Just as Berman suggests translation implies the act of living and the act of dying (an intrinsic paradox), Malgorzata Poks states that Merton’s understanding of 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.”¹² Merton wants to learn about South America, to be guided by the admiration the South provokes in him; and at the same time, he assumes the role of guide, manifested, for instance, in the “Message to Poets”¹³ he wrote for Miguel Grinberg of the New Solidarity Movement, to be read at the Meeting of Poets in Mexico in 1964; and in the letters encouraging Latin American writers to continue traveling, writing, editing journals and collaborating in their countries’ struggles against dictators.¹⁴

Experience

Merton’s versions of Latin American poetry can be considered part of his engagement in the social movements of the 1960s, guided by his humanism. In a letter to Polish writer Czeslaw Milosz, Merton affirms, “In any case it is unbearable to me to feel that I may have let myself get too far away from the actual problems of my time in a kind of pious detachment that is an indefensible luxury” (*CT* 56). The translation task he undertakes, then, could be placed within the humanistic perspective he assumed after the Fourth and Walnut experience of March 18, 1958, the revelatory awareness of his oneness with all humanity, as Mark C. Meade suggests in his article on Merton and Victoria Ocampo.¹⁵

A careful reading and hermeneutics of such translations is fully developed by Malgorzata Poks in her path-breaking 2007 work *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices*. The aim of the present essay is to concentrate on how Merton preconizes his ideas about Latin American in the choice of poems, and how his practice of translation acts as a complement to his ideas on South America and humanism. In a letter to Jacques Maritain, Merton explicitly refers to the poignant contemporaneity of *Emblems of a Season of Fury*: “there are poems in it about the world today” (*CT* 37). The volume contains poems on obviously contemporary (twentieth-century) events, such as “The Moslems’ Angel of Death (Algeria, 1961)” (*ESF* 5-6), “Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces” (*ESF* 43-47); “A Picture of Lee Ying” (*ESF* 20-22); and “An Elegy for Ernest Hemingway” (*ESF* 13-14), among others. There are poems in which the archaic quality takes a universal turn and permits an interpretation in direct contact with modern, seemingly anachronistic facts: such is the case of “What to Think When It Rains Blood” (*ESF* 57-60), “Advice to a Young Prophet” (*ESF* 36-37) or “Macarius and the Pony” (*ESF* 15-16). The book also includes Merton’s “Letter to Pablo

Antonio Cuadra concerning Giants” (*ESF* 70-89), a most appropriate paratext to the translations that come right after it. In the letter Merton gives form to his ideas about Latin America, the future role he foresees for it, and the admiration he feels for the peoples of the “landmass south of the Equator” (*ESF* 77). The last third of the book is devoted to his translations which, except for Raïssa Maritain, are all of Latin American poets. The versions can be read in the light of what Mario Aguilar states: “what drove Merton was the construction of an image in which he perceived Latin America as a paradise and Latin American writers as courageous and creative people.”¹⁶

The notes with which Merton introduces each of the poets he translates (notes which were later included in the *Literary Essays*¹⁷) are as adequate paratexts to the versions as the Cuadra Letter. He says that “Cuadra’s verse owes its vitality . . . to its roots in a grim and vital Indian present” (*ESF* 94); as proof to this statement, Merton chooses to translate poems from Cuadra’s *The Jaguar and the Moon* (*ESF* 96-103).¹⁸ He declares that Cardenal’s poems truly evoke “the sounds of rare cars and trains that accentuate the silence and loneliness” of the monastery (*ESF* 115), and translates texts from *Gethsemani, KY* (*ESF* 117-23). Merton finds himself in a “secret country . . . a country of loneliness and of a kind of hunger, of silence, of perplexity, of waiting, of strange hopes” (*ESF* 128), and gives his version, his echo, of Jorge Carrera Andrade’s “A Man from Ecuador beneath the Eiffel Tower” (*ESF* 131-32). Of César Vallejo, Merton says, “He was too conscious of the suffering and the tragedy of twentieth-century man” (*ESF* 135), and chooses to keep in Spanish the title poem “Estáis Muertos” (*ESF* 136-37), reverberating in the language he so much loved. Merton sees Alfonso Cortés obsessed with “the nature of reality” (*ESF* 142), and he aims at showing through translation the prophetic quality of the “mad” poet (*ESF* 143-49).

Each of these biographical notes reflects Merton’s admiration of the other, his understanding of the poetics behind each volume of work he translates and, in most of them, the connection between poetry and reality, Latin American reality in all its richness coming from the past and distress originated in the present. Translating such poems meant to Merton a practice of the task in a language he felt close to his heart and in which he was so fluent. Virginia Bear states that “Merton’s competence in Spanish was second only to his fluency in French.”¹⁹ But together with the practice, Merton was making a reflection upon Latin American culture and literature, and upon his fellow writers’ concerns. In his Introduction to his Spanish edition of the Merton-Cardenal correspondence, Santiago Daydí-Tolson says:

This admiration for the disciple’s work is complemented with Merton’s idea about poetry, especially that by young Latin American writers; to him, this poetry reaches an authentic spirituality, deeper and more effective than that of religious men regarding the exercise of influence in the much-needed, urgent change of the world.²⁰

Merton’s versions of poems by Latin American writers, then, are prompted by the desire to show the lively status of poetry in the south of the hemisphere, a status which is provoked by the social and political movements in difficult times, as he advises Grinberg: in times of trouble, it is better to be a secret priest, one of words, a poet (*CT* 203 [3/11/1966]).

As noted above, *Emblems* includes, in Merton’s own words, “poems about the world today.” In his letters to Latin American writers, he is clearly aware of the troublesome present South America is confronting and recommends that “The exploration by poetry is the kind most needed now” (*CT* 199 [7/12/1964]). Such an exploration can be understood in the light of humanism. If in the “Letter concerning Giants” Merton sees that the southern races he admires possess “a spiritual outlook which is not abstract but concrete, not pragmatic but hieratic, intuitive and affective rather than

rationalistic and aggressive” (*ESF* 78), in the versions that he presents, he wishes to show a poetry that vibrates with such human values.

In *Emblems* we can see the four “passages” Berman associates to translation: the inter-language passage, the passage concerned with the act of writing, with living and with dying. The first two are quite evident: Merton translates from Spanish into English, and writes the versions, re-writes the poems, gives them a new existence so they can reach another (English-speaking) public. The other components, related to living and dying, are intertwined with the fact that Merton receives “the other as other.” His ethical decision consists of attempting to give voice to those who speak for the south of the hemisphere. When there is no room for those voices elsewhere, he does not doubt, but makes room for them in his own book: “the translations will make the book better. . . . The rest of the book will include my own new poems So you see you will all be involved in a book that will almost be a collaboration. I hope it will turn out very well. The title is ‘Emblems of a Season of Fury’” (*CT* 138 [2/25/1963]).

Merton’s original poems and those by the Latin American writers he translated appear side by side, in a sort of dialogue, of respectful collaboration, of friendly atmosphere. The reflection and practice that led to those versions can be found in some of the letters (especially those to Cardenal). Merton lives in those works, and he gives up his own ego, his individualism, in the collaborative work that makes space for his Latin American friends. The silence that emerges from self-denial (definitely a monastic trait) allows for South American voices to emerge. In a way, what Merton wrote to Esther de Cáceres about his not having translated Susana Soca, could well read as a poetics of translation that sustains the versions he did manage to write in *Emblems*: “I have never yet had a moment to translate some of her poems, and I would not want to do this in a rush. Precisely, it would have to be a new creation emerging from communion in the same silence” (*CT* 166 [1/9/1965]).

Conclusion

Merton’s interest in Latin America has been discussed thoroughly elsewhere (particularly by Poks) and his involvement in social, civil and political causes as well (for example by Aguilar). What I have wanted to suggest here is that both concerns were conjoined in his poetic translations. Together with the aesthetic aspect, Merton wants to make the Latin American voices heard; he wants to awaken his fellow North Americans to voices from the South which were long overlooked. Merton’s versions have to be read in the light of his own words, as a call of attention and as reparation for past misgivings: “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. . . . rooted in a past that has never yet been surpassed on this continent” (*ESF* 85-86). Merton’s cry echoes in the poems he translates. They are not only literary exercises, but represent an ethical commitment to a language he loved, a culture he admired, and friends he respected and valued so much that he silenced his voice to let them speak in poetic versions. Merton’s translations reveal, manifest the other(s), let them speak and, in so doing, create in a literary space from an ethical perspective. Merton assumes the other(s), not to transform them, but to let himself be transformed in what the strange/foreign language, culture and literature have to say to him.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 228; subsequent references will be cited as “CT” parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).
3. “L’acte étiqúe consiste à reconnaître et à recevoir l’Autre en tant qu’Autre” (Antoine Berman, *La Traduction et la Lettre, ou l’Auberge du Lointain* [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999] 74) (subsequent references will be cited as “Berman” parenthetically in the text) (all translations by the present author).
4. “la réflexion de la traduction sur elle-même à partir de sa nature d’expérience” (Berman 17).
5. “el extrañamiento es consustancial a la traducción literaria” (María Oliver Mancuello, “Antoine Berman y el Giro Ético en Traducción: Una Apuesta In-audita,” *Anales de Filología Francesa* 12 (2003-2004) 330).
6. “ne sont pas des ‘modèles’, mais des *sources*” (Berman 27) (emphasis in the original).
7. “la traduction signifie non seulement le ‘passage’ interlangues d’un texte, mais – autour de ce premier ‘passage’ – toute une série d’autres ‘passages’ qui concernent l’acte d’écrire et, plus secrètement encore, l’acte de vivre et de mourir” (Berman 21).
8. “désir d’ouvrir l’Étranger en tant qu’Étranger à son propre espace de langue” (Berman 75) (in French, the word *étranger* – foreigner – is connected both to the idea of foreignness and to that of strangeness and estrangement).
9. Paul M. Pearson, “Poetry of the Sneeze: Thomas Merton and Nicanor Parra,” *The Merton Journal* 8.2 (Advent 2002) 7.
10. Ricardo Navas Ruiz, *Literatura y Compromiso: Ensayos sobre la Novela Política Llatinoamericana* (Sao Paulo: Instituto de Cultura Hispánica, 1964).
11. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963); subsequent references will be cited as “ESF” parenthetically in the text.
12. Malgorzata Poks, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices* (Katowice, Poland: Wyzsza Szkola Zarzadzania Marketingowego, 2007) 67.
13. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 155-61.
14. See Merton’s letters to Cardenal, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, José Coronel Urtecho, Rafael Squirru, Ludovico Silva, Miguel Grinberg and Cintio Vitier, among others (CT 110-243).
15. Mark C. Meade, “From Downtown Louisville to Buenos Aires: Victoria Ocampo as Thomas Merton’s Overlooked Bridge to Latin America and the World,” *The Merton Annual* 26 (2013) 173.
16. Mario Aguilar, *Thomas Merton: Contemplation and Political Action* (London: SPCK, 2011) 76.
17. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 310-12, 318-24.
18. See also *The Jaguar and the Moon* by Pablo Antonio Cuadra, trans. Thomas Merton (Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 1974).
19. Virginia Bear, “A Woodshed Full of French Angels: Multilingual Merton,” *The Merton Annual* 15 (2002) 147.
20. Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal, *Correspondencia (1959-1968)*, ed. and trans. Santiago Daydí-Tolson (Madrid: Trotta, 2003) 23 (“Se complementa esta admiración de la obra del discípulo con la idea que Merton tiene de la poesía, en especial la de los poetas jóvenes de Hispanoamérica; para él esta alcanza una auténtica espiritualidad, mayor y mucho más efectiva que la de muchos religiosos en lo que respecta a ejercer alguna influencia en el necesario y urgente cambio del mundo”).