

From Clairvaux to Mount Olivet: Thomas Merton's Geography of Place

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Dakota is where it all comes together, and surely that is one definition of the sacred.

Kathleen Norris¹

The shape of the individual mind is as affected by land as it is by genes.

Barry Lopez²

Introduction

Thomas Merton could never be accused of being indifferent to place. The story of his life which he recorded so meticulously is the record of a journey characterized by place – places he either loved or hated. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton has a tendency to set up pairs of places, one good, the other bad – Montauban and Cambridge fall into the bad category while his descriptions of St. Antonin and Columbia contain virtually no bad images. In this essay I want to examine a little of Merton's attraction to place. It will begin by tracing some of the major developments in his thought beginning with his rediscovery of place in *The Sign of Jonas* after having thought it would be of no more interest to him after his entry to the monastery, through its transforming effect on him, especially in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, to some final reflections on place in his writings of 1968. Hopefully, it will become clear from this why place is important to spirituality, a topic of growing interest as seen in books like Kathleen Norris's *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, *Spaces for the Sacred* by Philip Sheldrake,³ *Place and Belonging in America* by David Jacobsen,⁴ *Landscapes of the Sacred* by Belden C. Lane⁵ or, his most recent book, *Backpacking with the Saints: Wilderness Hiking as Spiritual Practice*.⁶

1. Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993) 131.

2. Barry Lopez, *Crossing Open Ground* (New York: Scribner's, 1988) 65.

3. Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

4. David Jacobsen, *Place and Belonging in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

5. Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988).

6. Belden C. Lane, *Backpacking with the Saints: Wilderness Hiking as Spiritual*

Merton and Place – The Early Years

Merton's attitude to place was no doubt inherited from his parents, Owen and Ruth Merton. Ruth wrote that "there is no more fascinating subject in the world than the influence of surroundings on human character,"⁷ and Thomas Merton draws our attention to this aspect of his father's work in the opening pages of *The Seven Storey Mountain*: "His vision of the world was sane, full of balance, full of veneration for structure, for the relations of masses and for all the circumstances that impress an individual identity on each created thing."⁸ Clearly this thinking set the scene for Merton's own interest in place and for the influence it would have on his life.

The first half of Thomas Merton's life is marked by instability and wandering. Recall, for example, the innumerable journeys he records in his autobiography. He also imagined that with his entry into the Abbey of Gethsemani in December 1941 his geography would be limited to the "four walls" (*SSM* 372) of the monastic enclosure, imagining: "there will be no more future – not in the world, not in geography, not in travel . . . new work, new problems in writing, new friends, none of that: but a far better progress, all interior and quiet!!!"⁹ In a poem written about this time, Merton expressed a similar sentiment, writing:

Geography comes to an end,
Compass has lost all earthly north,
Horizons have no meaning
Nor roads an explanation.¹⁰

The poem offers a contrast to the "terrific sense of geography" (*RM* 456) that Merton had claimed in his journal to have developed since he was sixteen years old.

As Merton's wanderings stopped in the limited enclosure of the novitiate, an enclosure within the enclosure, so he began, for almost the first time in his life, to put down roots and to notice the world around him:

Practice (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

7. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 1; subsequent references will be cited as "Mott" parenthetically in the text.

8. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 3; subsequent references will be cited as "*SSM*" parenthetically in the text.

9. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 458; subsequent references will be cited as "*RM*" parenthetically in the text.

10. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 24.

All the hills and woods are red and brown and copper, and the sky is clear, with one or two very small clouds. A buzzard comes by and investigates me, but I am not dead yet. This whole landscape of woods and hills is getting to be saturated with my prayers and with the Psalms and with the books I read out here under the trees, looking over the wall, not at the world but at our forest, our solitude.¹¹

Biographer Monica Furlong says that for Merton, Gethsemani “began to feel like home, a deeply consoling experience to a man who had not really belonged anywhere since he was six years old; enclosure and stability were the antithesis of the wandering that had taken up so much of his young life.”¹²

Place in *The Sign of Jonas*

As a monk at Gethsemani Merton continued to chart his journey by significant places. *The Sign of Jonas*, his journal for the years 1946-1952, traces Merton’s search for the solitude he was not finding within the regimented communal life at Gethsemani at that time. Each new step on Merton’s path to a more solitary life in *The Sign of Jonas* is associated with a particular place, and his descriptions of these places are very detailed. Over the course of the book Merton gradually discovers a new geography, a very solitary geography, whereas later on, his solitude would expand to include other people and, in his final years, the whole of humanity.

In *The Sign of Jonas* Merton’s physical horizons expand as his abbot provides new opportunities for him to find the solitude he so desired. In June 1947 he is given a room of his own for sleeping, a rare luxury after the common dormitory (see Mott 240). Later in the year he is asked to prepare a list of manuscripts held by the monastery in its rare-book vault, and Merton found this also to be a place of solitude for him. As the monastic community expanded, largely as a result of the success of his own writings, so Merton was at the forefront of pushing the boundaries of the enclosure out further to allow for the solitude he believed necessary to the monastic life. In 1951 Dom James Fox created the position of forester to give Merton further opportunities for solitude in the Gethsemani woods.

As Merton’s physical horizons expanded, so a new place for solitude became available to Merton, a place that inspired him in a way the rare-book vault never did. Early in *The Sign of Jonas*, after noting that “landscape seems to be important for contemplation” and “I have no scruples

11. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 69 [10/12/1947]; subsequent references will be cited as “*SJ*” parenthetically in the text.

12. Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) 129.

“Spots of time,” moments of epiphany, describe “the moment of insight that transforms the soul or, less dramatically, alters the mental perspective” (Buckley 70). They are a phenomenon which recurs “throughout serious autobiography,” confirming purpose and redirecting the author’s energy. The importance Thomas Merton gives to some of the places where he was finding solitude in *The Sign of Jonas* can be described in this way and is a trait that will become more pronounced in later passages in *The Sign of Jonas*, as in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and other of Merton’s autobiographical writings.

With Merton’s growing awareness of place over the course of *The Sign of Jonas* there are frequent references to nature – to the Gethsemani woods, to the rain and the wind, to the birds and the other creatures who inhabit the woods, to the Kentucky knobs, the sky and the stars (see *SJ* 43, 62-63, 201-202, 203, 209-10, 263-64).¹⁷ These references reflect a Franciscan side to Merton’s character, a trait which was, no doubt, an element in his attraction in applying to join the Franciscans back in 1940 and to which he refers specifically again in *The Sign of Jonas*, saying, “The Franciscan side in me . . . continues to grow” (*SJ* 211).¹⁸ This “Franciscan” view of nature, though, Merton was also finding evident in the life and work of the early Cistercians whom he was reading and studying at this time.

The Early Cistercians

While Merton was making the entries in his diary that would eventually become *The Sign of Jonas*, he was also working on a history of the Cistercian order and its American foundations, a history which was published in 1949 as *The Waters of Siloe*.¹⁹ Merton’s early descriptions of the order in this book are very “Franciscan” and a far cry from the strict observance

M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979) 429, 431 (1850 version; the identical text is found in Book XI of the 1805 *Prelude* [428, 430]).

17. For a comprehensive overview of this aspect of Merton’s writings, see Thomas Merton, *When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature*, ed. Kathleen Deignan, CND (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003).

18. In his December 1967 retreat for contemplative prioresses Merton recalls wandering outside the enclosure during his April 1941 retreat at Gethsemani and thinking to himself that he could never live at Gethsemani as a monk because he would not be allowed to get out in the woods! See Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson, SL (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) 25-26.

19. Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949); subsequent references will be cited as “*WS*” parenthetically in the text. In editing the British edition, published as *The Waters of Silence* in 1950, Evelyn Waugh perceptively moved Merton’s chapter on “Cistercian Life in the Twelfth Century” from its place in the closing chapters of the American edition to become chapter two of the British edition.

followed at Gethsemani under Dom Frederic Dunne at the time Merton was writing. Merton's descriptions of the early Cistercians also mirror his own growing experience of place and nature. For example he writes in *The Waters of Siloe*: "Forest and field, sun and wind and sky, earth and water, all speak the same silent language, reminding the monk that he is here to develop like the things that grow all around him . . . even the site of a Cistercian monastery is, or ought to be, a lesson in contemplation" (*WS* 274); and: "When the monks had found their homes, they not only settled there, for better or for worse, but they sank their roots into the ground and fell in love with their woods. Indeed, this love of one's monastery and its surroundings is something integral to the Cistercian life. It forms the object of a special vow: stability" (*WS* 273).

This attitude toward nature and place that Merton writes of in *The Waters of Siloe* is reflected in his own journal entries as he became, in words used to describe the second abbot of Cîteaux, St. Alberic, "a 'lover of the brethren and the monastery, the place,' *amator fratrum et loci*" (*WS* 273). For example in *The Sign of Jonas* Merton notes, "I found a bower God had prepared for me like Jonas's ivy. It had been designed especially for this moment. . . . There I sat in silence and loved the wind in the forest and listened for a good while to God" (*SJ* 264). Nature, place and geography were providing Merton with a new and different sense of stability, a stability not related solely to a vow but to a sense of rootedness (as opposed to rootlessness), of home and of family, a stability which had not been present in his life prior to his entry into the Abbey of Gethsemani.

Fire Watch, July 4, 1952

Merton's conclusion to *The Sign of Jonas*, "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952," is a journey through the times and places associated with his monastic life at Gethsemani and brings together the sense of place and home he has developed over the course of the book, presenting a very different image of himself than the one he'd wished to leave behind at the cloister door in December 1941. Beginning in the cellar of the monastery, Merton gradually progresses to the belfry of the abbey church and parallels once again his earlier reference to the place discovered by St. John of the Cross, the room in a church tower from where he could look out on the surrounding countryside. At the end of the fire watch, Merton is looking out from the steeple of the church at Gethsemani, thus paralleling his reference to St. John of the Cross more closely than in his earlier discovery of the "fine place" he found in the attic of the barn. Having found this new "fine place," Merton's final words at the end of *The Sign of Jonas* suggest it was a place of epiphany for him, a "spot of time," connecting

nature, time and place in a paradise, an “eternal now” (Buckley 59), and there he hears the voice of God addressing him as Jonah: “*I have always overshadowed Jonas with My mercy, and cruelty I know not at all. Have you had sight of Me, Jonas My child? Mercy within mercy within mercy. I have forgiven the universe without end, because I have never known sin*” (SJ 362).

Stability in a Peaceful Place

The effect of place and environment on Merton continues to play an important role throughout the course of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*,²⁰ his journal covering the late fifties and early sixties. Every section of this book contains frequent references to place and to the nature surrounding Merton at Gethsemani. The increasing importance of place and nature to Merton can be seen to stem from his vow of stability. In the period covered by *The Sign of Jonas*, as Merton sought to find the solitude he desired by looking at orders such as the Carthusians or the Camaldolese, stability seemed like a problem Merton had to come to terms with; by contrast, in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, it is his liberation.

The vow of stability serves the purpose of stopping the monk from running and forces him to start an inner journey.²¹ In Merton’s case his vow of stability forced him to stop running, especially the wandering of his youth, and to delve into his own inner self and to journey towards God. For much of his monastic life, paradoxically, Merton appears as fairly unstable – moving from one crisis to the next, searching for more and more solitude, or for permission to travel, or to do other things which many did not consider particularly monastic. Speaking of this side of Merton’s character, Matthew Kelty has suggested it was part of Merton’s character to be constantly coming up with new plans, and Merton needed the figure of Dom James to keep his plans under control.²² Through being forced to stop running and to face his inner self, Merton came to terms with himself and discovered a deeper inner stability.

The stability of place Merton found at Gethsemani, especially contrasted with the sense of homelessness and exile of his youth, was es-

20. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966); subsequent references will be cited as “CGB” parenthetically in the text.

21. Philip Sheldrake has suggested “an engagement with ‘place’ (as, for example, in desert monasticism’s mystique of ‘the cell’ or St Benedict’s teaching on stability) may enable a spiritual, inner journey” (Philip Sheldrake, *Living between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality* [London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995] 8).

22. See Matthew Kelty, “Looking Back to Merton: Memories and Impressions – An Interview,” ed. Dewey Weiss Kramer, *Merton Annual* 1 (1988) 63. The authoritarian figure of Dom James replaced the lack of an authoritarian figure in Merton’s youth.

sential to his development as a whole person. The Cistercian monk and writer Charles Cummings has pointed out the importance of stability to this development. Cummings writes that “reaching one’s full human and spiritual potential seems to be facilitated by some degree of stability in a peaceful place where one can be at ease, sort things out, and develop a feeling of being a fully existing, unique individual.”²³ Over the course of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* it is possible to see Merton’s growing sense of having discovered that “stability in a peaceful place” and the effect this has on Merton, making him increasingly aware of both his surroundings and the natural life he shared with those surroundings.

In one entry contained in the pivotal section of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* entitled “The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air,” dating from the very early sixties, Merton begins by describing “the ‘way’ up through the woods” and how he “appreciate[s] the beauty and the solemnity” of it, going on to describe the sunrise before stating: “It is essential to experience all the times and moods of one good place. No one will ever be able to say how essential, how truly part of a genuine life this is” (CGB 161) – to experience all the times and moods of one good place.

Merton’s statement about “one good place” seems to be brought about by the effect upon him of his natural surroundings and by being allowed to spend a limited amount of time in solitude at the hermitage. The influence of these two factors on Merton can be seen in an entry in his personal journal from December 1960 in which Merton records, in words I would describe as a “spot of time” (Buckley 52), one of the first evenings he spent at the hermitage:

Lit candles in the dusk. *Haec requies mea in saeculum saeculi* [This is my resting place forever] – the sense of a journey ended, of wandering at an end. *The first time in my life* I ever really felt I had come home and that my waiting and looking were ended. A burst of sun through the window. Wind in the pines. Fire in the grate. Silence over the whole valley.²⁴

In this passage Merton combines the natural surroundings and the solitude of the hermitage to give a sense of having at last found a home. Merton’s

23. Charles Cummings, *Monastic Practices*, Cistercian Studies Series 75 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1986) 177; subsequent references will be cited as “Cummings” parenthetically in the text. For a more detailed exploration of the relationship between journey and stability in Merton’s life, see Paul M. Pearson, “The Whale and the Ivy: Journey and Stability in the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton,” *Cithara* 54.2 (May 2015) 18-32.

24. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals*, vol. 4: 1960-1963, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 79-80.

vow of stability allowed him to notice the physical space around him, space that, as he said elsewhere, he never noticed when he was in the world and more mobile. Dwelling “for long periods in one place among familiar, congenial surroundings”²⁵ was essential for Merton to come to know God and to know himself; it was integral to his spiritual quest.

In September 1962, after returning to the monastery following a spell in hospital, Merton records his feelings towards Gethsemani:

Once again I get the strange sense that one has when he comes back to a place that has been chosen for him by Providence. I belong to this parcel of land with rocky rills around it, with pine trees on it. These are the woods and fields that I have worked in, and in which I have encountered the deepest mystery of my own life. And in a sense I never chose this place for myself, it was chosen for me. (CGB 234)

Merton’s reflection here is very much in line with Cummings’s comments on the effect of “stability in a peaceful place” and the way it enables a person to “be at ease, sort things out, and develop a feeling of being a fully existing, unique individual” (Cummings 177).

It is in the same section of *Conjectures*, the section called “The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air,” that Merton records one of his most famous “spots of time” – his experience in Louisville on the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets (CGB 140-42). This epiphany has been discussed by a variety of commentators on Merton, so I will not explore it further here except to suggest that it came about as a result of Merton’s new-found sense of stability and its effect on his spiritual development.

The “Night Spirit and the Dawn Air” section of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, like *The Sign of Jonas*, concludes with Merton once more on the Fire Watch at the monastery. In *The Sign of Jonas* Merton’s reflections as he patrolled the monastery are introspective and related to the events of his own monastic life and to his spiritual development. The Fire Watch at the end of “The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air” is vastly different. As he passes through the novitiate, it “no longer speaks to” him of his “own past” but “more of the present generation of novices.” He found that “their love and their goodness had transformed the room and filled it with a presence curiously real, comforting, perfect: one might say, with Christ. Indeed, it seemed to me . . . that He was as truly present here . . . as upstairs in the Chapel” (CGB 193). Having found a stable place, Merton is now able to turn outwards to others and to the world. “The Night Spirit and Dawn Air” section of *Conjectures* describes a truly

25. James McMurry, “On Being ‘At Home’: Reflections of Monastic Stability in the Light of the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel,” *Monastic Studies* 4 (1966) 82.

pivotal moment in Thomas Merton's life, transforming his soul, confirming his purpose, and redirecting his energy for the remainder of his life.

As Merton began to spend longer periods of time at the hermitage, his rituals and the rhythms of life and nature around him led him to ponder further his stability, writing how "One has to be in the same place every day, watch the dawn from the same window or porch, hear the selfsame birds each morning to realize how inexhaustibly rich and diverse is this 'sameness.' The blessing of stability is not fully evident until you experience it in a hermitage."²⁶ By the end of *Conjectures* Merton conveys a very strong sense of being at home with himself, of having found a stability that enabled him to truly know himself and to go out to others and to the world.

Place on a Journey

Merton's sense of place continued to develop through the final years of his life and is especially noticeable in the entries in his personal journal as the Merton Room at Bellarmine College was being set up, an event that coincided with his reading of Gaston Bachelard's book *The Poetics of Space*.²⁷ Merton's sense of place is also evident, in this same period, in some of the writing in his epic poem *The Geography of Lograire*²⁸ and, lastly, in his journal entries recalling his travels of 1968. It is to those journal entries, specifically entries from his time in Asia, that I now want to turn.

In *The Asian Journal*,²⁹ place, geography and journey are central motifs for Merton, and a number of times his spiritual journey and his physical journey come together in an important way for him, which he describes in considerable detail. This integration of the inner and outer journeys happens a number of times, and I would like to draw the reader's attention to four occurrences where Merton relates it to a specific place on his travels.

Firstly, at Dharamsala, in northern India, where many Tibetans were living in exile around the mountain on which the Dalai Lama had made his home, Merton "instinctively [saw] the mountain as a mandala, slightly

26. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988) 185 [5/28/1965].

27. See in particular his journal entry for October 2, 1967 in Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 296-98.

28. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969).

29. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973); subsequent references will be cited as "*AJ*" parenthetically in the text.

askew no doubt, with a central presence and surrounding presences more or less amiable” describing it as a spiritual mountain and as the “‘mandala awareness’ of space” (*AJ* 105-106). Up until Merton’s visit to Dharamsala in November 1968, he had been pondering the meaning of the mandala concept, yet feeling, he writes, that “all this mandala business is, for me, at least, useless” (*AJ* 59). But by the end of October, Merton’s understanding of the mandala is changing. He sees everything he thinks or does as entering “into the construction of a mandala” (*AJ* 68) and records advice given to him by Sonam Kazi that “one meditates on the mandala in order to be in control of what goes on within one instead of ‘being controlled by it’” (*AJ* 82). Gradually Merton moved from an approach to the mandala that was theoretical to one that touched on his own personal development until, in his encounters with the Tibetans at Dharamsala, he came to an experiential understanding of the mandala through the geography of the mountain on which the Tibetans were living “clinging precariously to a world in which they have no place” (*AJ* 93).

Secondly, there is Merton’s fascination when he is in Darjeeling with the mountain Kanchenjunga. Merton had come across pictures of Kanchenjunga before he left for Asia, and he saw it for the first time from a plane in October 1968. In mid-November, when Merton was at Darjeeling, Kanchenjunga was also visible, or not visible depending on the cloud cover. He found the sight “incomparable,” saying he needed “to go back for more” (*AJ* 135) and over the following ten days he made frequent references to the mountain in his journal. He found himself tired of it, “tired of icebergs 30,000 feet high” and of a “28,000-foot post card” (*AJ* 146, 148). For a few days at the Mim Tea Estate, within sight of Kanchenjunga, Merton had the use of a bungalow for a time of quiet. As he argued with Kanchenjunga he also had time to reflect on his Asian trip up to this point and felt he was not called to settle in Asia but in either Alaska or near the Cistercian convent of the Redwoods in California and acknowledged his desire to remain a part of the Gethsemani community. In this time of quiet Merton could reassess his Indian experience as “Too much movement. Too much ‘looking for’ something: an answer, a vision, ‘something other.’ And this breeds illusion” (*AJ* 148). In his bungalow at the tea estate Merton realized he could be anywhere; everything he had found in Asia, so far, he could have found anywhere – except for one thing, his own “illusion of Asia,” which, he questions, “needed to be dissolved by experience? *Here?*” (*AJ* 150). After having made this entry in his journal Merton had a dream that night of Kanchenjunga in which he realized “there is another side of Kanchenjunga and of every mountain” (*AJ* 153).

In Kanchenjunga Merton sees an answer to his questions – the mountain holds paradoxes together, a theme central in Merton’s own work. It has a side that is seen and a side that is not seen; it is a “palace of opposites in unity . . . impermanence and patience, solidity and nonbeing, existence and wisdom.” Developing his reflection on the mountain Merton adds: “The full beauty of the mountain is not seen until you too consent to the impossible paradox: it is and is not. When nothing more needs to be said, the smoke of ideas clears, the mountain is SEEN” (*AJ* 156-57). After this passage Merton appears to have resolved his argument with Kanchenjunga and subsequently makes only a couple of minor references to it.

Thirdly, Merton is impressed with a visit to Mahabalipuram near Madras, where he finds “a sense of silence and space” (*AJ* 202), a sense he records in his journal:

Mahabalipuram is the remains of a culture such as I have not seen before. A complex of shrines carved out of, or built into, a great ancient rock formation – not cliffs but low rambling outcrops and boulders, smoothed and shaped by millions of years. Caves, porches, figures, steps, markings, lines of holes, gods and goddesses – but spread around without too much profusion. (*AJ* 198)

In *The Asian Journal* Merton recalls in particular the sea temples at Mahabalipuram and the Shiva lingam:

I’m curious to read again after so many years [D. H. Lawrence’s] “Virgin Youth” when today I have seen the Shiva lingam at Mahabalipuram, standing black and alone at the edge of the ocean, washed by spray of great waves breaking on the rocks.

He stands like a lighthouse, night churns
Round his base, his dark light rolls
Into darkness, and darkly returns.

Is he calling, the lone one? Is his deep
Silence full of summons?

There is no “problem,” however, in the black lingam. It is washed by the sea, and the sea is woman: it is no void, no question. No English anguish about Mahabalipuram. How right the “lighthouse” stanza of Lawrence is, though, for this lingam on the rocky point! Night and sea are the same: so they are transferable. (*AJ* 197)

A few days later, Merton refers to Mahabalipuram after his visit to a fourth important place for him, Polonnaruwa, and says of them both:

“Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for” (*AJ* 235-36).

At Polonnaruwa Merton experienced the ancient giant carved statues of the Buddha at the Gal Vihara as a “Zen garden,” a place of unity in his life, where stillness and movement, geography and journey, came together: “the great figures, motionless, yet with the lines in full movement.” As described in his *Asian Journal*, Merton’s visit to Polonnaruwa reads like a moment of illumination for him. Only a couple of days later did he feel he could write about his experience there, in which he found “All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion” (*AJ* 235). A week later Merton was dead.

Conclusion

It is impossible to reach any conclusions from reading *The Asian Journal* about where Merton was headed. His time in Asia seemed to be affirming his own experience of solitude; affirming he had made progress in the solitary life and was recognized as having done so by people whom he went to see, somehow believing they had something he did not have; affirming that Asia did not have any more answers than North America and that all he needed for a solitary life could be found in his monastery. He also affirmed his movement from a place of solitude out towards others in love and compassion. If anything, Asia helped Merton once again to break through the illusion that the answer he was looking for was elsewhere. This was a message Dom James had been trying to tell him for many years; it is part of the message of the vow of stability and was something Merton had learned many times in his life but needed to learn in new and different ways. Writing to John Howard Griffin, just two days before his death, Merton said: “I have not found what I came to find. I have not found any place of hermitage that is any better than the hermitage I have . . . at Gethsemani, which is after all places, a great place.”³⁰

There is a great contrast between the travels of Merton’s early years and those he undertook in the final year of his life. His early travels were an aimless wandering from place to place, unlike his travels of 1968, which were a part of his journey into solitude, his spiritual pilgrimage in search of the next stage on his spiritual journey. The major difference between Merton’s early travels and those of 1968 is that by the latter year,

30. John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (Fort Worth, TX: Latitudes Press, 1983) 206.

Merton had attained an inner stability and a sense of home, of rootedness, which allowed him to travel in a new way: “It was because he had by now found a home that he was ready to go out. He knew that he belonged at Gethsemani, and that this rootedness gave him a place from which to set out and to which to return.”³¹ Place, and stability in a peaceful place, enabled Merton to overcome his early alienation from self and from the world and to see the Divine manifesting itself in all times and places.

31. Esther de Waal, *A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1992) 29.