

# THOMAS MERTON IN CUBA & CEYLON:

## In His End Is His Beginning

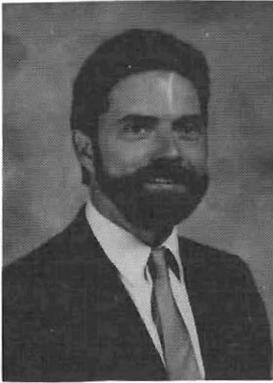
By **Gregory J. Ryan**

After twenty years of reading Thomas Merton's work, I still find that he is full of surprises. Much has been written, and will be written, on the style, the meaning, and the development of his work. This brief article attempts to point up just one instance where Merton's mature writing was foreshadowed, even strikingly so one might say, in his early writing.

Everyone by now is familiar with the much celebrated and oft-quoted entry in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* concerning his very moving "aesthetic experience" as he stood before the exquisitely carved stone Buddhas at Polonnaruwa, Ceylon. It is a beautiful and evocative piece of writing. After declaring that he may have "spoiled it by trying to talk of it at a dinner party, or to casual acquaintances . . .," he made an attempt to capture the experience on paper. Since the publication of *The Asian Journal* in 1973, this passage ("Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity . . . became evident and obvious") has been frequently cited in Merton

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GREGORY J. RYAN

studies, and quite rightly, as a significant signpost alongside his early spiritual experiences in Rome described in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and the Louisville “Fourth and Walnut” episode found in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* which was, similar to the Polonnaruwa passage, written only on reflection sometime after the actual event.

The description of a much earlier, though similar, “peak experience” may be found in a letter to his friend, Robert Lax, which is included in the recently published second volume of Merton’s correspondence — *The Road to Joy: Letters to New & Old Friends*. It was written from Camaguey, Cuba, in April 1940, the year before Merton would join the Trappists. What is additionally striking about the letter, as we shall see, is the use of a vocabulary remarkably like that found in the Asian journal entry. (The context is best appreciated by a careful reading of both complete passages.)

From Camaguey he told Lax of having enjoyed the music of a particularly talented Havana flamenco singer named Angelillo. The enthralled audience responded with high-spirited yelling and foot stomping. As for Merton: “. . . I was knocked clean out of my seat about twenty-eight times.” Later, on a stopover during his bus ride to Camaguey the tourists were entertained by local flamenco performers, but Merton himself had been more impressed by local monasteries and the conversations he had had with various priests, especially a Carmelite and a Marist. The Carmelite monastery was full of statues of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa. In the same letter to Lax he writes:

There is a Church here called La Soledad which has in it a miraculous image, and when I walked into the place I was picked up by my feet off the floor and seen not a ring of pure and endless light but rather a great ring of nothing which was absolutely real, indescribable and also a little frightening. It was clearer than if I had seen it with my eyes, . . . and anyway I was on the edge of it like on the edge of an abyss.

Then, recalling an earlier happening in a Havana church: “It wasn’t anything like seeing anything with your eyes, but it was a sudden apprehension of a clear and absolute truth so completely certain that I went clean through the roof of the church like a rocket.”

While twenty-eight years separate these two incidents, they are so close to each other in mood, spirit, and vocabulary that they could easily be interchangeable. Yet, our interest in such intriguing textual similarities should never blind us to the great lesson we learn from Merton. After all, it was what lies beyond words that was (is) most important to him. And to us, we should not forget. As he sums it up himself in his Asian journal entry:

The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no ‘mystery.’ All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.

The “emptiness” of St. John of the Cross was seen by Merton to be the “compassion” of the Buddha. It is no small wonder that Latin America and Asia held such primacy of place for him.

In Merton’s beginning was his end. In his end was his beginning.

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