

# THOMAS MERTON & WALT WHITMAN

## Seekers of the “Passage to India”

by **Bill Koch**

I come as a pilgrim who is anxious to obtain not just information, not just “facts” about other monastic traditions, but to drink from ancient sources of monastic vision and experience.

Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, p. 312

Passage O soul to India!  
Eclaircise the myths Asiatic, the primitive fables.

Not you alone proud truths of the world,  
Nor you alone ye facts of modern science,  
But myths and fables of eld, Asia’s, Africa’s fables,  
The far-darting beams of the spirit, the unloos’d  
dreams,  
The deep diving bibles and legends,  
The daring plots of the poets, the elder religions; . . .

Walt Whitman, “Passage to India”<sup>1</sup>

Though poets of different centuries, Thomas Merton and Walt Whitman share a number of remarkable coincidences, from the mundane to the sublime. Merton spent several childhood years on Long Island, and Whitman was born on the last day of May in 1819 in West Hills, Long Island, not far from Merton’s grandparent’s home in Douglaston. Both men loved the big city of New York, where Whitman scratched out a living as an editor for several local newspapers and began his poetic career. His opening lines to “Starting from Paumanok [Long Island],” could just as easily describe Merton’s biography:

Starting from fish-shape Paumanok where I was born,  
Well-begotten, and rais’d by a perfect mother,  
After roaming many lands, lover of populous pavements,  
Dweller in Mannahatta my city, . . . (p. 11)

In other uncanny ways Merton’s life seemed not only to echo Whitman’s life but, when we look at “Passage to India,” Thomas Merton practically fulfilled Whitman’s more mystical vision. “Passage to India,” completed in 1869, is considered one of Whitman’s most important poems. The poet of democratic idealism opened this famous poem:

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1. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose*; introd. by Sculley Bradley (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1949). All quotations from “Passage to India” are taken from this edition.

Singing of my days,  
Singing the great achievements of the present,  
.....

In the Old World the east the Suez canal,  
The New by its mighty railroad spann'd,  
The seas inlaid with eloquent gentle wires; (p. 339)

Whitman's delight chiefly rested not in these material achievements only, but in their ability to bring the modern world back to "The past — the infinite greatness of the past! / For what is the present after all but a growth out of the past?" Furthermore, with the present united to the past, humanity could find the inspiration to live in peace together:

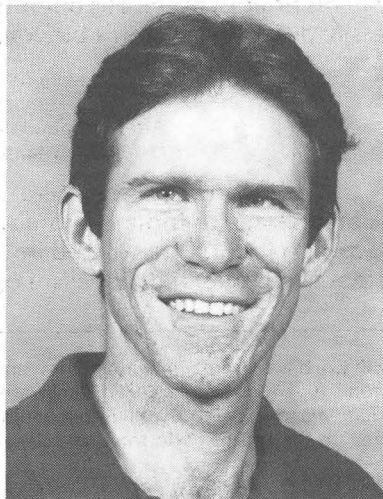
Passage to India!  
Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?  
The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,  
The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,  
.....  
The lands to be welded together. (p. 340)

The poet of American Democracy was now embracing the entire world in a profound human love, envisioning a future social millenium that, while not Christian by name, was rooted in religious sentiment and conviction. After imaginatively projecting his soul to the sights of the Suez Canal and the transcontinental railroad, giving poetic expression to the way technology had contracted both space and time, Whitman came to the central section of "Passage to India" (written as a separate poem in December of 1868). The questions asked and the answer given are Mertonian in their vividness and intensity:

Ah who shall soothe these feverish children?  
Who justify these restless explorations?  
Who speak the secret of impassive earth?  
Who bind it to us? what is this separate Nature so unnatural?  
.....  
Yet soul be sure the first intent remains, and shall be carried out,  
Perhaps even now the time has arrived.

After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd,)  
After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd their work,  
After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,  
Finally shall come the poet worthy of that name,  
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.

Then not your deeds only O voyagers, O scientists and inventors, shall be justified,  
All these hearts as of fretted children shall be sooth'd  
All affection shall be fully responded to, the secret shall be told.  
All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and hook'd and link'd together,  
The whole earth, this cold, impassive, voiceless earth, shall be completely justified,  
Trinitas divine shall be gloriously accomplish'd and compacted by the true son of God, the poet,  
(He shall indeed pass the straits and conquer the mountains,  
He shall double the cape of Good Hope for some purpose,)  
Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more,  
The true son of God shall absolutely fuse them. (pp. 342-3)



**BILL KOCH**

The eschatological perspective of hope in this section is reminiscent of Romans 8, "The whole creation is eagerly awaiting the revelation of the sons of God." Indeed Whitman had closely read both the Old and New Testaments. But whether Whitman considered himself "the true son of God" has been a continuous matter for debate. Gay Allen, in an authoritative biography of Whitman, points out that Whitman was not, in any case, setting himself up as a Messiah in competition with churches and religions. Rather, Whitman believed that the poet's aesthetic intuition and creation could have religious influence. Besides, "the solution of both sons of God was the same — love" (Gay Allen, *The Solitary Singer*, p. 412).

Interestingly, at the conclusion of his informal talk at the Temple of Understanding Conference in Calcutta, Merton sounded very much like the poet who had fused together the gaps and separations, and could justify and soothe the restless explorers and feverish children. Merton was concerned with the quality of communication between monks of Eastern and Western tradition. He noted:

... [T]he deepest level of communication is not communication but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.

(*Asian Journal*, p. 308)

Ironically, the craftsman of words was saying that the most satisfying communication was speechless. The poet worthy of that name finds that he (or she) must remain mute to be a poet.

After another procession of images of Asia and Europe, culminating in a picture of Columbus, who thought he had found the passage to India, Whitman asserted that the real passage is

... to primal thought,  
Not lands and seas alone [O soul], thy own clear freshness,  
.....  
... the voyage ...  
To reason's early paradise,  
Back, back to wisdom's birth. to innocent intuitions,  
Again with fair creation. (p. 344)

Mystic that he was, Whitman could have had no idea of Merton, and it is unlikely that Merton conceived of his trip as a conscious "Passage to India" (though he had just read Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East* in Alaska in late September 1968). Still, how remarkable that Merton was actually in India, at Mahabalipuram, and in Sri Lanka, when he came in touch with humanity's "elder religions" and "primal thought." The description of his experience at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka is remarkably similar to Whitman's vision:

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, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious . . . . All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear . . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.

(*The Asian Journal*, pp. 233-234)

Merton used the image of "exploding" in two important eschatological passages in earlier works. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton described the importance of the "eschatological secret" in the life of Julian of Norwich. This secret is a hope, mysteriously at work in human affairs, by which "all manner of things shall be well," because in Christ creation and God are already united. Merton pointed out in this central passage of *Conjectures*: "It is not just that 'He comes,' but He comes with this secret to reveal [notice the similar image in Whitman] . . . not a

deed of destruction and revenge, but of mercy and of life, all partial expectations will be exploded and everything will be made right” (pp. 211-212). The consciously eschatological essay in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, “The Time of the End is the Time of No Room,” begins with a vivid, almost Fourth of July, image: “When the perfect and ultimate message, the joy which is The Great Joy, explodes silently upon the world, there is no longer any room for sadness” (p. 65). It would seem that the eschatological secret of The Great Joy exploded silently in the heart of Thomas Merton, amazingly, as the Cistercian monk gazed upon the giant statues of Buddha. Having fully utilized his own monastic and Christian tradition, consciously defining them in eschatological terms in the last years of his life, Merton could find the “unexpected kingdom” (*Conjectures*, p. 124) even in supposedly odious “paganism.” With the revelation at Polonnaruwa, Merton felt that “my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for” (*Asian Journal*, pp. 235-236). Gazing upon these massive ancient statues, Merton seemed to fulfill the vision of Walt Whitman:

. . . the voyage done,  
Surround, copest, frontest God, yieldest, the aim attain’d,  
As filled with friendship, love complete, the Elder Brother found,  
The Younger melts in fondness in his arms. (p. 346)

Ten days later, Merton was “suddenly . . . forcibly jerked clean out” of human existence by a faulty modern technological wonder. There is a line in “Passage to India” which jumps out at the Merton reader: “Passage, immediate passage! the blood burns in my veins!”

Having achieved the “Love complete,” or as Merton said, a sense of emptiness and compassion, it is unlikely that he would have had any thoughts of suicide or even death. For all his limitations, Thomas Merton was just reaching an amazing depth of Christian maturity, an “unheard of vision of truth,” as he had described the Christian hope (*The New Man*, p. 42). One can imagine his exhorting those he left behind in Bangkok, indeed exhorting the entire earth (“O vast Rondure, swimming in space”) as the Apollo 8 astronauts saw her two weeks after his death, with the concluding lines of “Passage to India”:

Away O soul! hoist instantly the anchor!  
Cut the hawsers — haul out — shake out every sail!  
Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?  
Have we not grovel’d here long enough, eating and drinking like mere  
brutes?  
Have we not darken’d and dazed ourselves with books long enough?  
.....  
O brave soul!  
O farther farther sail!  
O daring joy, but safe! are they not all the seas of God?  
O farther, farther, farther sail!

What Whitman had to visit in fantasy, Merton was able to visit in fact. Whitman could envision a social millennium even in the midst of the confusions and controversies of Reconstruction. In turn, while the war in Vietnam raged a few hundred miles away, and aware of civil strife in India and Sri Lanka, Merton was still able to tap the ancient wellsprings of hope. He was just developing a monastic perspective for social and cultural criticism that drew upon the best of humanity’s Great Religions. He left us before he could share entirely his unheard-of vision of truth. Even so, the power and immediacy of Merton’s writings allow us to grasp that profound vision of life, and be swept away to the further intellectual visions of the human future to which he was travelling when he died, exactly one hundred years to the month after Walt Whitman had recorded his vision of “the true son of God, the poet.”