

Thomas Merton and Robert Lax

A Friendship in Letters

by
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The name of Robert Lax will be familiar to readers of Thomas Merton's autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The two men met as students at Columbia University in 1935. After graduation they spent the summers of 1939 and 1940 together at Lax's family cottage in Olean, New York. Apart from that, their paths led in different directions.

While Merton was teaching English at Saint Bonaventure University in Western New York State in 1940 and 1941, Lax worked at the *New Yorker* magazine and did volunteer work at Friendship House, a Catholic social ministry in New York City. He continued at this when Merton entered the Abbey of Gethsemani. In 1943 he was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church. He began teaching English at the University of North Carolina, where he also studied for, but did not complete, a Ph.D. in philosophy. In the late 1940's he wrote film reviews for Time magazine, then travelled to Hollywood, California, where he laboured as a scriptwriter at Samuel Goldwyn Studios, a job he detested. Throughout this decade and for the rest of his life, whatever else he was doing to earn a living, Lax's calling has been poetry.

In 1949 he met a family of circus acrobats – the Cristianis. He fell in love with the extended family and with their work, which he saw as acts of pure grace. During the summer of 1949 he traveled with the circus through western Canada and recorded his impressions in his journals. These writings were to be reworked into the long poem, *Circus of the Sun*.

During the decade of the 1950's he alternated living in France and in New York, where he edited *Jubilee* magazine and *Pax*, a poetry broadside. He also published several books of poetry.

Except for a year as Poet-in-Residence at the University of South Dakota, Lax spend most of the decade of the 1960's in Greece writing poetry. He was living on the island of Kalymnos in 1968 when he learned of Merton's death.

Since then Lax has continued to reside in the Greek islands, presently on Patmos, and to write and publish his poetry. Although he has a number of admirers in the United States, his work seems to be best known in Europe.

Despite twenty-seven years of separation, Merton and Lax appear to have remained each other's best friend. How that friendship continued to develop and the impact it had on their lives and work are questions that intrigue me. For answers I look to their correspondence.

For the last several years I've been conducting research for a book of letters between Merton and Lax. Through visits to archives at Columbia University, the Merton Study Center at Bellarmine College, St. Bonaventure University, and the

University of Kentucky, I've collected more than 350 letters. Of these 196 were written by Merton, 121 of which are previously unpublished. Lax's letters number over 150, only 33 of which were published in *A Catch of Anti-Letters*. The earliest letter was written by Merton to Lax on 17 June 1938 on TM's return to New York City after his first visit to Olean, New York, where he spent a week with Lax's family. The last letter was written by Lax to Merton on 5 December 1968. Merton never received it.

From the very beginning of this project I knew I wanted to talk with Bob Lax about their friendship. Bob lives on the Greek island of Patmos, where I had met him on two earlier trips. In May 1992 I returned to Patmos for a week-long series of interviews, which will form an important part of the book.

Those are the basic facts of the project. Now I'd like to share with you just a couple of things I've discovered about these two men and their remarkable friendship.

They met as undergraduates at Columbia College, probably in February or March 1935, and soon became fast friends as part of a larger group that included Ed Rice, Ad Reinhardt, Bob Gibney, Seymour Freedgood.

Lax talked to me about the group dynamics of the Columbia days. He interweaves his ideas about art, music, and friendship. (interview 5; tape 5a, 19 May 1992):

Lax: . . . it goes together with all this business about jam sessions too. At the top of a jam session when things are really going good, it's as near as a group like that can get to being perfectly in *act*, perfectly in *realization*, not in *potentia*, but right there. . . . A real jam session is likely to start at 3 in the morning and get good by 5, and by that time all the customers have left, it's only the musicians playing for each other, to each other, with each other, and they just are astonishing each other by these felicitous turns they find in the music . . .

B: And talking back and forth to each other musically?

L: With their instruments, but they're talking and they're playing and it isn't a competitive thing except in the very best way. I mean it's just telling each other better and better jokes

B: And the other night you were saying that when your crew was together, that you were kind of like a jam session. You and Merton and Gibney or Slade or Reinhardt or whatever.

L: Right, because I guess it was a room full of people who were trying to have a good time, in which all of them were included. I think that that was it and we all knew that if we swung right we would. We all knew each other's riffs in a sense.

That is one element that under pins their thirty year friendship: knowing each other's riffs.

In an early letter to Merton, dated 19 April 1939, Lax explains his concerns as a correspondent:

Paragraph two concerns my shyness about writing letters since that bitter Freedgood took that last one and did Chroust knows what with it. Later in this same paragraph the repeated warning not to expect no fine sentences please, but for style and sentiments alike have, if you can, an articulate or suspended forgiveness.

For I have taken no pains to write this letter. I would have it clear so that you can read it, but to make it clearer so that all could read it would be to take pains, to be busy at a business I don't love, because the letter is addressed to you and why should it talk out of the side of its mouth to the unknown guy leaning over your shoulder. I would not take pains for the sake of taking pains. Pain may be for punishment or instruction, but by what talent can I instruct myself or by what right punish myself. What's good is to love yourself and your neighbor as yourself and love both and all in the love of God. For if you love one wholly you love all wholly and if you love any partly you love all only partly, and a man who can beat down the heathen in himself can beat down the heathen in Tahiti as well. Now no more balanced sentences.

You and I, of course, are the "unknown guy looking over your shoulder" for whom the letters are definitely *not* written. We are at best eavesdroppers who try to learn from the absolute trust and understanding that existed between these two friends.

The letters of those early post-Columbia years established the themes that would dominate their correspondence until the end. News of their friends of college days: Sy Freedgood, Ed Rice, Ad Reinhardt, Nancy Flagg, Jinny Burton, Bob Gibney, among them. Their current writing projects. Problems with their bosses: editors, movie producers, abbots. What I find so striking is the unqualified support they offered each other. In 1959 for instance Merton responded to Lax's picture poem, "Oedipus" this way:

Listen, I think your Oedipus is without compare the masterbox of all latest works. It excels without question almost even the originals though this is hyperbole. Much impact hath this Oedipus. Picture, poem, picture poem, leave reader swimming in existentialist realization of what is this Oedipus.

He continues in this vein for two more paragraphs. Merton's tongue in cheek tone does not detract from the sincerity of his praise. Such unalloyed support and steadfast loyalty was the hallmark of their friendship.

With Lax, Merton could be as frank as with a beloved brother. In a fascinating letter written on December 29, 1956, he takes up two matters very much on his mind that year – his reaction to reaching “middle age” and his most disturbing encounters with the noted psychiatrist Dr. Gregory Zilboorg, whom he met first at the Collegeville, Minnesota conference in July. You'll recall from the biographies that Zilboorg flayed Merton. Two days before this letter was written Zilboorg visited Gethsemani.

Dr [Gregory] Zilboorg he came all the way down here to give me the following directives, “If YOU get analyzed you will ruin the business and all the analysts will have to hide in the bushes, for fear of the Index.”

“Furthermore you ought to get a great big overcoat ten sizes too big and wear it with dark glasses and pretend you are somebody else.”

“In addition to this it is essential that you buy a rowboat and go to the south pole. You will be of the greatest assistance to psychoanalysis by staying as far as possible from New York.”

* * *

Into the middle of all things, at the depth of my ancient life for which I am sorry, there has descended from God a great healing cloud in which I dwell. Forgetful of all things, past, present and future, sustained only by the dew of the healing cloud (otherwise fasting on beefsteaks) smiling in a great peaceful silence artificially produced by the absence of industry, I settle myself down to learn afresh the old truths of the ancient sages which I am sorry not to have learnt for so many years. It is now my forty first or ninth summer I forget which (in reality of course it is winter) and the time has come for me to settle down in peace to a ripe old middle age and flout the rains of a worse season as though they had not sprung. In the springs of this warm quiet fruitful rain I abandon myself to the rivers of grace which wash forth with bland mild thoughts lucky for all the fellows.

What else did they write about? Their reading, to some extent their spiritual lives, their latest adventures – the things that friends usually talk about over a meal or a drink. Interestingly, this friendship that spanned more than three decades was based on only a very few years of actual face-to-face companionship. For a friendship to flourish in our lives, it seems to require a continual sharing of experiences and an ongoing investment of time. Merton and Lax seldom saw each other after December 10, 1941. Yet their friendship in letters deepened over the years.

I asked Bob about that at the end of our last interview in 1992.

B: The question I'm leading is to what sustained your friendship from December 6, 1941 on, for the next 27 years?

L: My first impression that day at lunch. I don't know. No, I think one thing I'm thinking as we talk is that what we shared, a lot of what we shared was stuff that could be put into words and that we were putting into words. Communication really was happily, a lot of it was verbal.

B: So it wasn't that you were tennis partners, or it wasn't that you were fishing buddies, or you played on the same baseball team or something like that?

L: Exactly, I really think that's it.

B: And these letters then were your expressions of friendship and love?

L: They were, I think that's really it, yeah, good, good book, that's right, I think that's it. Somebody asked me, I heard this lately, I think it must have been on some interview or something, maybe [?] quoted it. He asked me you know how I felt after Merton died and I said I certainly felt as though I'd lost a correspondent. I can understand it today. It wasn't that I felt I'd lost a friend because I don't feel that now either. He's there in that sense, the friend is there. But as a correspondent he's hard to get to.