

Robert Lax

An Appreciation by Arthur W. Biddle

The American poet Robert Lax died in the family home in Olean, New York, on 26 September 2000. He was 84 years old. Until shortly before his death he resided on the Greek island of Patmos, where he continued to write his unique brand of minimalist poetry.

Lax's closest friend was Thomas Merton, whom he met when they were classmates at Columbia University in 1935. They rejoiced in each other's company in New York City and at Lax's family's cottage in Olean until Merton entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in December 1941. Although Lax visited Merton several times at the monastery, it was their frequent letters that sustained their friendship until Merton's death in 1968.

Lax and Merton appeared to be unlikely friends. Lax was born in the small city of Olean in western New York. As a youth he alternately lived and attended school there and on Long Island, New York. Merton was born in Prades, France, near the Spanish border, and was educated in France, England, and New York. Merton was outgoing and gregarious; Lax was on the quiet side, self-effacing and perhaps a bit shy with strangers. Merton's heritage was Protestant, Lax's Jewish. Despite these outward differences, the two young men found in each other a brother in spirit.

For some twenty years after graduating from Columbia, Lax sought the vocation and home that would nurture his spirit. He was an announcer and ad writer for an Olean radio station, a volunteer at Friendship House in New York, a staffer at the New Yorker, a graduate student at the University of North Carolina, a teacher of English at Connecticut College, and a script writer for Hollywood films. But from his earliest years he knew that he was meant to be a writer.

His travel with circuses in western Canada and Europe proved seminal for his poetic development. In *Circus of the Sun* (1959) Lax employs the people and day's work of a circus as a vehicle for his retelling of the Creation. The poem contains this stanza:

And in the beginning was love. Love made a sphere:
all things grew within it; the sphere then
encompassed beginnings and endings, beginning and
end. Love had a compass whose whirling dance
traced out a sphere of love in the void: in the center
thereof rose a fountain.

After spending several years in France as a roving editor for the American magazine *Jubilee*, Lax moved to the Greek islands, settling first at Kalymnos and then moving to Patmos. During these years his poetry was becoming increasingly spare, often consisting of a column of single words running down the page. American critic Richard Kostelanetz wrote that Lax was "among America's greatest experiment poets, a true minimalist who can weave awesome poems from remarkably few words." Although he received an award from the National Council of the Arts in 1969, recognition in the United States never matched the reception his work achieved in Europe, especially in Germany and Switzerland.

In his dying Lax came full circle. Olean was his place of birth and early years. It was at Olean that he and Merton spent those exquisite summers of 1939 and 1940, speed writing their novels and planning their futures. It was here too that Lax introduced Merton to the Franciscans at St. Bonaventure College – a meeting that was to lead to Merton's life at Gethsemani. On the 29th of September 2000, after a Mass of Christian Burial at St. Bonaventure Chapel, Lax's remains were laid to rest in the cemetery overlooking the college and the town.

