

Notes on Robert Lax

J.S. Porter

Robert Lax, like Adam and all the poets before him, walks into the garden and brings articulation to breath. He names the energy swirls of the world slowly.

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He slows the world down. He slows it down by slowing down the means by which we filter and process the world: language. He divides the word into syllables so we can hear the word and see it as if for the first time. He writes simply, purely, patiently. What may at first appear to be a broken hallelujah or a fractured psalm is often a song of wholeness and freshness. Lax's poems celebrate aliveness:

what bliss
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According to Paul Spaeth, curator of the Robert Lax Archives at St. Bonaventure University in Olean, New York, Lax's first memory of himself as a maker of things occurred in early childhood. He 'picked up a small flat stone and made a mark on it with another stone.' He returned the marked stone to the ground with the thought that someone would eventually pick it up and know that another person had made the mark. This, he told Spaeth, was his earliest remembrance 'of consciously creating a means of expression.' In your imagination, you can picture the sculptural work of Andy Goldsworthy—his broken and coloured sticks or his broken and arranged stones—as visual analogues to Lax's split words in vertical columns.

One looks in vain for Guernica-like screeches and screams underneath Lax's happy exterior. He chooses to tread lightly on the earth, chooses not to take himself too seriously. He has a light touch in his writing. His carbon footprint upon the earth is negligible. Some may be tempted to see him as a man of no account, to see his life as insignificant, and yet there is great prodigality to his life. He gives of himself abundantly. He is one of the rare ones; he has the courage to be himself. He is open to the world, receptive to whatever heaven puts in his cup. He lives in wonder. He lives with thankfulness. The world is beautiful and holy to him.

Lax is the solitary who lives on islands, the poet who writes skinny poems, the Jew who converts to Catholicism, the Catholic who, in friend Jack Kerouac's words, is at the same time 'a strange wonderful laughing Buddha.' He is also the American who develops deep and long-lasting friendships. His friendship with Thomas Merton, sustained as much by letter as by personal contact, is one of the longest and deepest between two literary figures of the twentieth century. Once Lax makes a friend, he keeps him—whether monk Merton or painter Ad Reinhardt or journalist Edward Rice or teacher Mark Van Doren. Lax approaches friendship reverently. In *journal C* shortly after Merton's death and several years after Reinhardt's and other friends' deaths, Lax records this entry: 'i remember the people i loved (who have died) or who've just disappeared—remember their traits as thought it were a sacred duty.' Lax, in 'Harpo's Progress' and 'Remembering Thomas Merton in New York,' remembers Merton 'as though it were a sacred duty.' He waits for Merton in Patmos not knowing that his friend will die from accidental electrocution in Bangkok before arriving. He remains the one indispensable commentator on Merton's life and work, the one who sees the hidden wholeness, the integrated splinters, the one who connects the wholeness with holiness. To stay within one letter of the alphabet, he sees how Merton's politics and prayers and pranks, his photography and poetry and philosophy are all interrelated. (You need a whole alphabet for a man as complex as Merton.)

Lax conjures over five hundred items in his career, many of them *things* in archival boxes: single poems, pamphlets, jour-

nals, letters, graphic art, film, video, photography and performance art. About Lax, author William Maxwell writes: 'If you placed him among the Old Testament figures above the south portal of Chartres, he wouldn't look odd.' Kerouac describes him as 'a Pilgrim in search of beautiful Innocence, writing lovingly, finding it, simply, in his own way.' His Swiss German publisher, Pendo in Zurich, presents his writings bilingually, English on the left hand page and German on the right hand page. His publisher summarizes his life this way:

Robert Lax
born 1915
in Olean, N.Y. (USA);
studied at
Columbia University
editorial collaborator at
The New Yorker (1941),
Time magazine (1945),
Jubilee magazine
(1953-1976);
lives since 1963 on the
Greek Islands Kalymnos
and Patmos

One important detail is missing: died in his sleep on September 26, 2000, in Olean, New York. He was 84.

Of his island life where he spent most of his last forty years, Lax says this in a 1986 *New York Quarterly* interview: 'I like being in a place where there is sea and sky and mountains, trees, even olive trees, and sheep and goats, shepherds. These are things which are natural, sacral, ancient...'

We are what we lack. Lax lacks a wife and children. He has friends instead. Simone Weil lacks humour in her writing,

although her brother maintains that she had it in life. She sees the world as neither funny nor absurd. She's intensity and conviction and steadfastness and absolutism. We measure how far we've fallen by her erect and courageous posture. Humourless: and in that respect very un-Jewish and even un-Christian in the medieval sense of the world. There is lots of humour in Robert Lax.

What there isn't in Lax is politics. As far as I can see, none at all. Not like his friend Thomas Merton, where politics abounds. Merton spent a significant portion of his intellectual life putting into words Lawrence Ferlinghetti's 1988 oil painting, *Unfinished Flag of the United States*, where the blood red stripes extend across the globe. The image speaks louder than a thousand words on America's appetite to spread its influence and control everywhere. Can you be apolitical? It wouldn't have mattered to Lax what form of government was in power. He'd seek out the marginal people and spend time with them, the circus performers, the vagabonds. He followed a circus troupe across western Canada for a year and wrote his best known long poem about their performances and lives called *Circus of the Sun*. He spent time with the poor and the unemployed in Marseille. He befriended fishermen and sponge divers on the Greek islands of Kalymnos and Patmos. His quintessential artwork would be something like the Canadian artist Wayne Allan's installation, *Christ on the Road to Emmaus*: a plastic clown in a yellow box walking and waving with two fellow clowns. Or, maybe Allan's box of Jesus playing baseball. A holy moment leavened by humour and playfulness. Lax's sense of the holy breaks into levity

more frequently than into solemnity and seriousness. An exception is the relentlessly intense *21 Pages*.

You are what you're missing as well as being what you possess; what you lack as well as what you embrace. There is no anger in Lax. Here again he differs from his more famous friend, Thomas Merton, whose merry mind had knives in it. Maybe you need a measure of anger for politics. There's no politics in Lax, but there is loyalty, letters, friendship, appreciation, quiet, poetry, drawings, observations, memory, awe, reverence, patience, conversations, long walks, swims, extended dreams...

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When you read Lax's skinny poems, you pause, you reflect, you dream. Poet and critic Richard Kostelanetz claims that Lax sought linguistic purity the way that his friends Ad Reinhardt sought purity in the visual arts and Thomas Merton sought it in spirituality. Certainly Reinhardt had an influence on Lax's writing: 'Sometimes not specifically, but the general direction that he was working in certainly did—towards reducing the number of colours, reducing the form, and repeating the theme.' The pure point of the poem was

the single word or even the single syllable, 'the unit of which poems are made.' Was Lax searching for the Ur-sound, the sound that began the universe, that began life? He sought greater and greater purification of his art to the point where the poem verged on disappearance, the way a Giacometti sculpture threatens to disappear in its extreme thinness. He saw his art as 'an extension, a development of life...it is a further development of nature, a further refinement of processes already in existence.'

In contrast to the Catholic Jewish thinker Simone Weil, he seems untroubled, unconflicted. (One of the things Freud admired about dogs was that they were unconflicted. They were what they were, without questions and analysis. People are usually cankered with doubt, besotted by ambivalence.)

Lax seems happy in his poetry, his letters, his drawings, his journal jottings, his friendships. Un-selfconflicted. His art, in word and image, is almost always personal, directed to a particular person or composed for a particular person. That person was often his friend Merton, the Trappist monk. Lax seems at peace with the world and easy in his skin. Merton in *The Seven Storey Mountain* speaks of his friend as a kind of Hamlet, by which I think he means a questioner. (To me, Merton seems more closely tied to Hamlet in his incessant self-interrogation.) A kind of Elias, Merton says. 'A potential prophet, but without rage. A king, but a Jew too. A mind full of tremendous and subtle intuitions...And the secret of his constant solidity I think has always been a kind of natural, instinctive spirituality, a kind of inborn direction to the living God.' Lax's beautiful compliment to Mer-

ton was, '...I was most myself when I was with him.'

Lax was loved by his parents. He was also loved by his sister and his extended family, including his niece Marcia whom I had the pleasure of interviewing in Manhattan with my friend Michael Higgins. Lax's conversion didn't seem to shatter the family bond. His mother did ask him to live within Judaism for a year as a practising Jew and to think carefully about his decision. His father wrote a beautifully supportive letter but also asked that he 'not convert any Jewish boys'. My own feeling is that Merton's conversion to Catholicism had a great deal to do with Lax's. In other words, Lax's conversion to some extent was an act of solidarity with his closest friend.

Lax continued to draw inspiration from the prophets throughout his life, continued to immerse himself in Kabbalah. 'The Hebrew word *kabbalah* has to do with receiving, how to better receive and perceive holy wisdom in the world,' he tells S.T. Georgiou in Georgiou's *The Way of the Dreamcatcher. Spirit Lessons with Robert Lax: Poet, Peacemaker, Sage*. Lax doesn't let go of things; he gathers them. He is at home in multiple religious traditions including the Buddhist and the Native. His immediate roots were in Austria and Poland. 'And I think it's been discovered that our family was of Sephardic Jewish ancestry, so the roots go back to Spain...There are Laxes in Spain and Laxes even in Turkey...,' he says in conversation with Georgiou. He writes a poem mindful of his heritage. The poem is playfully entitled 'Shorter History of Western Civilization'. The following words, thrust into a litany of names including Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians

and Christians, are repeated like a mantra:

Greeks &
Jews

Greeks &
Jews

Strangely, he omits the Chinese in the poem, but not in an entry from *journal D* where he acknowledges, 'to be a greek, as to be a jew, or an arab, or a chinaman/is to be quite an old thing.' To some extent, Lax lived on his Greek islands as a Jew among Greeks, a Catholic among the Orthodox, a stranger in a community.

Epiphanies visit Thomas Merton in abundance. His life periodically trembles from Pauline blasts of light whether in an old Cuban church in Havana, on the corner of Walnut and Fourth in Louisville, Kentucky, or by the Buddhist statues of Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka. Simone Weil is also prone to dramatic turnings-around. She reads a poem by George Herbert and feels herself being physically gripped by Christ. Before this ultimate epiphany she experiences three lesser ones: once entering a Portuguese village in 'a wretched condition physically,' she witnesses the wives of fishermen carrying candles and singing in procession around ships in a harbour. 'There,' she says, 'the conviction was suddenly borne in upon me that Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others.' Alone in Assisi inside 'the little twelfth-century Romanesque Chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli, an incomparable marvel of purity where Saint Francis often used to pray, something stronger than I was compelled me for the first time to go down on my

knees.' Then in Solesmes, France, at Easter, with a splitting headache, she finds 'a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words.' She understands for the first time divine love in the midst of affliction. The Passion of Christ enters into her head 'once and for all.'

Lax's spirituality seems quieter, calmer, less spectacular; it seems built by everyday occurrences in everyday experience. Small gestures, small rituals, small objects: these seem central to his spiritual life. 'Prayer,' Georgiou quotes him as saying, 'is a way of sending out love in all directions.' If he is whom admirers say he is—a poet, a juggler, a holy acrobat, a drawer and doodler, a saint, a mystic, a journal keeper, a letter writer, a luftmensch—he is these things naturally. He falls into grace. It's not something he aims at and hits.

Lax has no Revelation in his island life, but he has a series of important revelations. In his introduction to *journal C* he writes:

when i left new york for greece i had hoped only to find a quiet place to live for a while and write some poems...quiet. i thought i needed it for my work, as a photographer needs a dark room. quiet, a place to get away from people? bright light, loud noises and a constant presence of people (& of birds, goats, fish) is more the style. you are never alone in greece.

He lives frugally on his savings and family money. He eats simply. He does his work. 'ah, he likes to write, likes to get writing done, likes to get things on paper...' he

says to himself in the third person in *journal C*. He breaks the day 'into discrete particles and puts them back together again. lets him know where he is & what he is doing, and prepares him for whatever new thing comes along. gets him ready with his cups and categories to contain whatever new thing <falls from heaven>.' He wants to make a thing—that's what he calls his poems, they're things, as if stones—that will stand, a thing that will bear (that will sustain) repeated contemplation: a thing that will sustain long contemplation, and that will (in a <deep> enough way) reward the beholder.' This is Lax recognizing both the physicality of his poetry and its spiritual durability. He doesn't refer to his work as either minimalist or concrete as his critics do. Lax makes words. He breaks up language, breaks up words, and rearranges words in new ways so that the reader can both see and hear the words afresh. He gives his work to friends. Some of his things get published. Most don't.

What Lax does most of in his island life is wait:

the face of one
waiting & waiting

waiting & waiting

waiting for a
good he knows
he cannot
make

He waits in 'holy receptivity'. In this short poem, the repetition, the empty space, make the waiting real to the reader.

Both Judaism and Christianity are, ac-

ording to John Updike, religions shaped by waiting. Judaism waits for the Messiah. Christianity waits for the return of the Messiah. The Buddha waits under a tree. Jesus waits at the door.

Waiting is also the central part of Lax's masterpiece *21 Pages*, a work that belongs on the same shelf as Merton's *Hagia Sophia*. Lax's holy wisdom is to know that waiting and paying attention are forms of prayer. *21 Pages* in the book *33 Poems* edited by Thomas Kellein (New York: New Directions, 1988) is an extended prayer, a prose poem, a deep meditation. In meditative prose, prayerful

Lax's holy wisdom is to know that waiting and paying attention are forms of prayer

and poetic, the narrator waits for *you*, the unnamed, the distant intimacy. William Maxwell offers these words about the masterwork: 'I don't know any religious writing that moves me as much or is as persuasive as the prose communication with the unseen, unknown, unanswering but felt fountain-source of his belief, which begins: "Searching for you, but if there's no one, what am I searching for? Still you..."'

This work of strange beauty reminds me a little of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or Simone Weil's short prose work *Prologue* and her collected thoughts called *Waiting for God*, and even Paul Tillich's sermon 'Waiting' in *The Shaking of the Foundations*, but neither these

works nor any others with which I'm familiar, speaks more secretly and poignantly to the soul than Lax's prose poem.

To enter some works of art you need to take your shoes off, the way Merton took his shoes off in his approach to the Buddha statues of Polonnaruwa. You need to bow your head. You need to fall on your knees. If you're lucky enough to find a copy of *21 Pages*, throw away analysis, criticism, your schooling, your prejudices, your opinions. Enter the pages as if you too had lost someone precious and didn't know where to find her. Enter the pages the way a child would enter an apple orchard for the first time or a barn full of animals for the first time. Prepared to wait, enter the pages, like the speaker, not knowing precisely for whom you're searching or why you're waiting. There is only the searching. There is only the waiting. The rest is not our business.

A voice speaks rapidly in the prose poem (for the most part Lax speaks very slowly in his writing), and asks itself questions... 'Would I know you if I saw you?' Whatever the voice asks, there is no immediate answer forthcoming. More voice than personality, the speaker in *21 Pages* waits for... 'Some person, some moment, some atmosphere, that I'd recognize as very much mine...' The speaker waits because he was made 'to go on waiting. Made, put together, invented, born, for that single, singular purpose: to watch, to wait.' The speaker seeks the 'beloved... my sought-after-being, my remembered-one...the one I'd looked for, the one I'd sought without any clear idea of who he or she might be, of what he or she might look like...' This nameless, invisible one is 'you'. And the speaker confides, 'A readiness to recognize you; that's all I've

brought, that's what I bring to the encounter.' The speaker has grown accustomed to waiting on corners, on benches, in forests, in parks. The speaker confesses to himself: 'sometimes if you came, and I saw you, and I knew you were there, I'd continue to go on waiting.'

These lines continue to haunt me:

And back to nights of looking,
outward and in; not knowing
which way I'm looking, but wait-
ing and looking. Back to the
night-watch. Day-watch and
night-watch. Dusk to dawn, dawn
to dusk. Mid-day to midnight...I
didn't give up because I couldn't. I
didn't, because I was made to go
on waiting. Made, put together,
invented, born, for that single,
singular purpose: to watch, to
wait. There is no giving up on the
thing you were made to do.
There's no giving up on being
who you are.

There are no lines elsewhere in Lax comparable to these. Nothing of this depth and intensity and beauty and pain. Lax the waiting one, Lax in heartbreaking longing, what the Portuguese enfold in a word, *saudades*, the homesickness that can never be satisfied, the subject moving through time and space without hope of an object to feed the hunger or quench the thirst. I hunger, I thirst, I wait, says Robert Lax, and in so saying, speaks for us all.

J.S. Porter is the author of the recently published *Thomas Merton: Hermit at the Heart of Things* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2008).