

Robert Lax on Thomas Merton

J.S. Porter

Harford: Can you comment on the popular conception of Merton?

*Lax: A lot of (people) leave out the possibility of his sense of humour...Most of them lack a human touch, a sense of humour, which was essential...He never wrote me a letter that wasn't funny.*¹

Robert Lax reads the life and character of Thomas Merton personally, impressionistically, intimately. He reads him playfully, generously, holistically. He emphasizes Merton's physicality as much as his spirituality, his humour as much as his theology. Lax writes from a position of friendship and intimacy, and in so doing, takes us as close to the flesh and blood of Merton as we're likely to come. Lax shared with his friend an active funny bone, an embracing heart and a free spirit. His *21 Pages* belongs with *Hagia Sophia* as one of the great spiritual classics of the twentieth century.

To be fully understood and appreciated by a reader is a rare thing; to be understood and appreciated by a friend who reads discerningly, I suspect, is even rarer. Lax pitches words about Merton's final book, *The Asian Journal*, that can be applied to much of the monk's work: 'best book of Merton's I've read: he's most himself, most keen & observant, witty, lost, (found) erudite, enlightened, clean, natural, free, mature...'² The supreme compliment Lax paid to Merton was that he was most himself when around him.³

Lax didn't write a book about Merton,

as their mutual friend Edward Rice did, but he exchanged letters with him, published posthumously in their joint correspondence, *A Catch of Anti-Letters*, made notes on him in his journals, wrote prose-poetry medleys on his life and work, responded to questions on his character and wrote a final poem on his death. His vision of Merton is fresh and his phrasing is fresh; you find neither cliché nor platitude in Lax.

In *Journal C*, written shortly after Merton's death and several years after Ad 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 though it were a sacred duty.'⁴

He remembers Merton in his prose poem, 'Remembering Merton & New York', as though it were a sacred duty. He catalogues their haunts in the city, the bars they drank in, the streets they walked, the writers he liked, the movies he went to, the music they listened to—Ellington, Basie, Armstrong, etc.—the bongos he played.

He recalls Merton in his personality as being a mix of English, French and Mediterranean traits: English in his moral in-

terests, French in his aesthetics and Mediterranean in his

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He celebrates particular aspects of his Merton's personality:

Bright?
Quick?
Sensitive?
Yep.

Funny?
Yep.⁶

One of Merton's self-coined pseudonyms was Harpo, one of the Marx Brothers. Harpo was the silent comedian whose comedic style was influenced by clown and pantomime traditions. He communicated by means of a whistle or a harp. Lax recounts in 'Harpo's Progress' the full range of Merton's projects: 'What were his works? Tracts, translations, poems, fables, drawings, photographs, dancing and drumming. So many works and all of the spirit? So many works, and all from a single source, toward a single end.'⁷

Lax remembers Merton's physicality:

he moved:

with speed &
direction

certainty
& joy⁸

In *Journal C*, Lax talks about Merton's commitment to write in simple language, his 'certainty of tread', and his explosive walk: 'he did walk with joy. he walked explosively: bang bang bang, as though fireworks, small & they too, joyful, went off every time his heel hit the ground... he walked with joy, bounced with joy: knew where he was going.'⁹ With such acute attention, Lax brings Merton to life in loving detail.

Lax remains the one indispensable commentator on Merton's life and work, the one who sees the hidden wholeness, the one who connects the wholeness to holiness. To stay within a single 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.) He sees how Merton:

...grew to be
the person

he knew
he was¹⁰

Merton and Lax constantly encourage each other in *A Catch of Anti-Letters*, their quirky correspondence which, to some extent, resembles the baby talk of Jonathan Swift's *Journal to Stella* and James Joyce's shenanigans in *Finnegans Wake*. They boyishly toss verbal Frisbees at each other, joking, punning, spoofing. They take keen and sustained interest in each other's work. Merton believed that *Circus of the Sun* was one of the great

book-length poems of the century, and Lax believed that Merton's work was unparalleled in its depth and reach. Lax's October 12, 1963 letter exhorts his friend to produce more art, visual and linguistic, and clearly sees the interconnectedness of everything he does:

write more poems and make more calligraphies:
the poems help the calligraphies,
the calligraphies
help the poems; the poems and
the calligraphies
help the manifestos; you will see,
you will see.¹¹

Lax's use of the verb *help* is interesting here. Merton's worlds—the artistic, the poetic and the political—entwine and draw strength from each other. Each part of Merton's production helps us to see the whole.

According to Lax, Merton's chief characteristic is liveliness.

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Merton's work and personhood are 'superabundantly alive'.

That liveliness and superabundance, accompanied by friendliness, come into Lax's extended comment on Merton in Paul Wilkes' compilation of tributes in *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best*. Lax remembers meeting Merton in a dining room at Columbia University:

'Merton looked up and shook hands, and it was really an amazing meeting right away. It was the friendliest look, the friendliest handshake I'd ever remembered. You know, there was no question in my mind that we were friends from that moment on.'¹³ All the seeds were there early on according to Lax—the political and social concerns, the mysticism, the love of literature and art—they just needed time to grow. What Merton was after in the monastery 'was to become

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himself. He found a 'freedom in which he could grow and become fully the thing that he must have felt he was potentially'.¹⁴

In 'Poem for Thomas Merton', Robert Lax recorded his last published remembrance of his friend. The occasion was an anthology of remembrances and tributes in 1981 by Merton's friends called *A Merton Concelebration*, edited by Deba Prasad Patnaik. The poem is reprinted in

Harford's joint biography of Merton and his friends. In words evocative of Ad Reinhardt's manifesto on art—one art, one history, one evolution—Lax honours Merton's uniqueness and wholeness in customarily simple language.

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star

sin

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cloud

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hill

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one

hill

one

cloud

one

star¹⁵

Dreamcatcher: Spirit Lessons with Robert Lax: Poet, Peacemaker, Sage (Ottawa, Novalis, 2002), p.217.

4. Robert Lax, *Journal C*. Edited by David Miller (Zurich: Pendo Verlag, 1990), p.66.

5. Robert Lax, "Remembering Merton & New York," *The Merton Annual 5*, 1997, p.58.

6. *ibid.* p.52.

7. Robert Lax, "Harpo's Progress: Notes Toward an Understanding of Merton's Ways," *The Merton Annual I*, 1988, p.35.

8. *ibid.* p.49.

9. *Journal C*, op. cit., p.92.

10. "Harpo's Progress," op. cit., p.46.

11. Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *A Catch of Anti-Letters*, (Kansas City, MO., Sheed & Ward, 1994), previously published 1974, p.24.

12. "Remembering Thomas Merton & New York," op. cit., p.55

13. Robert Lax in *Merton By Those Who Knew Him Best*, edited by Paul Wilkes (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1984), pp.65-66.

14. *ibid.* p.69.

15. Harford, op. cit., pp.195-196

Notes

1. James Harford, *Merton and Friends: A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton, Robert Lax, and Edward Rice* (New York, Continuum, 2006), p.260.

2. *ibid.* p.207.

3. S.T. Georgiou, *The Way of the*

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