

Decoding the Anti-Letters

A Whirling Dance of Wisdom and Wit

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Introduction

One of the least appreciated, or even understood, of Thomas Merton's many books is *A Catch of Anti-letters*, a collection of his correspondence with lifelong friend Robert Lax during the years 1962-67. Although Merton tried to interest publishers in his letters to and from Lax as early as 1965, the collection didn't appear in print until 1978, when the small publisher Sheed Andrews and McMeel issued a limited run. Only then, ten years after Merton's death, did his admirers learn how deep his friendship with Lax actually was, not only during their Columbia College days together but right up to the end of Merton's life—if, that is, they could decode the book.

Many who were interested in Merton's friendship with Lax already, intrigued perhaps by Lax's significant role in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, found themselves frustrated by what often seemed to be purposely obscure, silly or even nonsensical language. *Publisher's Weekly* dismissed the book as 'a playful exchange of letters' that would appeal mainly to 'Merton enthusiasts'. And *Commonweal's* reviewer, Michael True, wrote that the 'private nature' of the language made the letters 'relatively inaccessible to the general reader'. The problem was that Merton and Lax wrote to each other in what amounted to a private language—punning, for example, on the names of books they'd read, people they'd known, or movie stars they'd liked when younger; using hybrid words with parts from French, Latin, Greek and other languages as well as English; or letting a single word or phrase stand in for past experiences, shared and unshared.

Both men changed greatly over the course of their lives and both

made friends easily. By the end, each had hundreds of correspondents. In their letters to each other, however, they remained the playful, intelligent, earnest and, yes, silly young men they were when they first met. In essence, they remained touchstones and sounding boards for each other, their communication like that of twins, requiring only a word or gesture to be understood. It would take volumes to identify all of the references and influences in their letters, but in this essay I will try to give a taste of the riches their correspondence holds and some idea of where their private language came from.

Play

Merton and Lax met and solidified their friendship while writing for and editing *Jester*, the Columbia College humour magazine; and humour was always central to their friendship. Nancy Flagg, who knew both men in their Columbia days, once said to Lax: 'It's not fair. There should be a good acceptable name for the sort of talent you...[and, by extension, Merton] have. Not for formal writing. Discipline, organization, all that stuff. But for the wonderful talk and jokes and journals and letters to friends.'

In the February 13, 1972 issue of the *New York Times Book Review*, Wilfrid Sheed, who worked with Lax at *Jubilee* magazine in the 1950s, wrote: 'An old friend says admiringly that Merton and Lax remained the most childish men he'd ever met, right to the day of Merton's death.' Poet Ron Seitz, who was fortunate enough to be with them the last time they saw each other, at Gethsemani in June of 1968, wrote of the lifelong friendship between Merton and Lax that it

created a mutual wonder-field of eye contact, glints of recognition accompanied by continual bursts of laughter and headnods of glad agreement about most everything, which I began witnessing before the handshakes hello were completed...Their conversation...wended its way in and out of various subjects, breaking off here and there to make handheld leaps to familiar territory without a pause or direct connection. I just let my ear follow along from this to that, picking up on bits that fit.¹

These few quotations tell of a playful, even child-like spirit at the centre of their relationship. A sense of play is essential to understanding the letters they wrote to one another. Above all, they were playfully saying

yes to each other.

Influences on Style

Many people and things influenced how Merton and Lax 'played' with each other in their letters. Here I focus on three I think were especially important.

The first involves comedic films, especially those of Charlie Chaplin and the Marx Brothers. In a poem he wrote about their early days together called 'Remembering Merton and New York', Lax placed Chaplin and the Marx Brothers among Merton's favorite actors, and in *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton confessed that his obsession with movies in the 1930s left him with 'a secret loyalty to the memory of my great heroes: Chaplin, W.C. Fields, Harpo Marx, and many others whose names I have forgotten.'²

Chaplin and Harpo Marx never spoke in their movies, of course, but they consistently thumbed their noses at convention and stuffy people, as Lax and Merton do repeatedly in their anti-letters. Harpo, with his cheerful face and impish manner, was a particular favorite of Merton, who looked a little like him. Lax sometimes called Merton 'Harpo', and Merton signed one of the anti-letters this way. The playful names they use to address each other are one of the joys of reading their letters: among the names are: Harps, Bischoff, Dr. Laps, Wusbeach, Pranzo, Mustwich, Pertius, Hidgen, Captain Thurston, Ludolf, Feuerbach, Pandolf, Minsky, Ambassador Philbrick, Uncle Flipper, and Mugsy.

The voice of Groucho Marx can be heard in the cadence and sometimes the words of certain anti-letters. The most obvious channeling of his love for puns and feigned outrage comes in a March 5, 1964 letter in which Merton makes fun of a printed list of pensions in Rimini, Italy, which Lax had sent him:

Now in addition to this you send me the spots and the hots of Rimini and I have studied each one with a conclusive inspection final and thorough and I am still in the airs as to whether I shall take up my sojourn at the Soggiorno Sport (most fitting since I am a sport) or at the Sombrero (since I have no hat) but maybe it is after all to be the Swinger, though for my own part I prefer the Locanda del Lup, not to mention the Sogno d'estate since it is now inverno. O bello sogno!

As to the Stadt Koeln I sneer and upon the TV I groan
with abhorrence. These are for German sailors only. To the
Tuberosa I will not go, since I know full well what a character
of establishment is this, you cannot fool me, I can tell a
bordello from a great distance even two thousand miles.
Tuberosa indeed.³

A second important influence on the friends' correspondence, as evidenced by the many reverences to him in their writings, is the 16th century Franciscan monk and writer François Rabelais (1494-1553), 'a man,' according to translator J. M. Cohen, 'intoxicated by every sort of learning and theory, who had at the same time the earthy commonsense of a peasant.'⁴ Anatole France wrote that 'Rabelais plays with words as children do with pebbles; he piles them up into heaps.' He was, according to Cohen, a 'writer who is in love with his medium, [a] man for whom words call up associations, in contrast to the man who employs them to express previously conceived notions.' This is an accurate description of what Lax and especially Merton do in the anti-letters. This is Rabelais, in chapter 59 of Book Four of *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel*:

As the Gastrolaters approached, I saw that they were
followed by a great crowd of clumpish servants carrying
baskets, punnets, panniers, pots, ladles and kettles. Then,
with Manduce conducting them, and singing some unknown
dithyrambs, crapulous anthems, and paeans of praise, they
opened their pots and baskets and made sacrifice to their god
of white Hippocras with soft dry toasts,

white bread,
soft bread,
choice bread,
common bread,
carbonados, of six kinds,
goat stews,
cold roast loins of veal,
spiced with powdered ginger,
couscous,
brawn,
fricassees of nine kinds,
small pies,

fat early morning soups,
hare soups,
round-headed cabbages in
bear marrow,
hot-pot,
salmagundi.⁵

This goes on and on, including many more lists, a way of writing Merton and Lax practiced when younger and continued more briefly in the anti-letters. Here's Merton at his most Rabelaisian, piling up words and calling up associations. This paragraph, which comes right after the riff on Italian pension names, shows how swiftly Merton's letters to Lax could shift from entirely playful and frivolous-seeming to more serious and personal:

You have made me muse, you understand. You have brought
about a flood of these surmises and poetic trains of thought.
But all is not poesy in my strange life of sadness, facts, events,
proses, newspops, flashbacks, inopportune memories,
corrections, restatements, retractions, mulling over the
weekend, saying what was never said, hearing what was
never meant to be understood. One of the saddest facts of my
factual existence is that I am in perpetual trouble with the
hoodwinks and the curials, with the bonzes and scrabs, with
the imperial tomes and the forthwith comunicado from the
Vaste Curie. It comes to me with tubes from the eternal city a
constant flood of reprehension and surveillance and I am
under the wraps, forced into the corners, smoked out of my
den, smoked back into the wrong dam den, never know
where I am next, got no more category, lost identity, forsook
my crazy number whatever it was, got three names all of
which false, forget who was my uncle Hardold, forgot
Douglaston again.⁶

The third and most important influence I want to focus on is James Joyce. Merton and Lax had a deep, abiding love for the works of Joyce. In a 1940 journal entry, Merton called him 'the best writer in this century'⁷, and Lax felt such reverence for his story 'The Dead' that he disliked John Huston's fine filmed version only because some of Joyce's words were changed near the end. It is unclear when Lax first encountered Joyce but Merton

already knew of him at the age of seventeen, when he tried to read *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. A year later, he carried a copy of Joyce's *Ulysses* on his trip to Rome. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he credits a re-reading in 1938 of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* with helping him decide to join the Catholic church.

Much as they liked Joyce's earlier works, however, the book Merton and Lax loved above all was *Finnegans Wake*, which had appeared in serialization over fifteen years and was finally published in full by Faber and Faber on May 4, 1939, just days before the two friends moved into Lax's family cottage near Olean, NY, to spend the summer there. In a journal entry of late 1939, Merton calls the publication of *Finnegans Wake* one of the 'three important things' that happened that year. The other two were 'The War in Europe' and the Picasso exhibition, featuring *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and the recently painted *Guernica*, that had opened at the Museum of Modern Art four days before.

Throughout their time at the cottage that summer, Merton, Lax and their friends read *Finnegans Wake* out loud, reveling in Joyce's humor and word play, his allusions to myth and literature, and his use of 'macaronic' writing—a mixing of languages and creative punctuation to form thought-provoking puns, neologisms and referential prose that eddied and flowed like the river at the book's center. In his influential biography of the author, Richard Ellmann quotes Joyce as saying, 'I'd like a language which is above all languages, a language to which all will do service. I cannot express myself in English without enclosing myself in a tradition.'⁸ *Finnegans Wake*, Ellmann says, was Joyce's attempt to 'mix history and fable in a comic leveling'⁹. It was this feeling of freedom and immense scope, of working beyond traditions and yet drawing from all of history and myth, that inspired Merton and Lax.

Whereas Joyce had concentrated on what the eye sees in *Ulysses*, he was more interested in what the ear hears in this larger, more difficult book. He meant it to be read out loud, exactly the way Merton and Lax enjoyed it. Here is an example of Joyce's method, using 'macaronic' writing and making allusions to literature and other cultural subjects. If you read the following passage out loud, you can hear the secondary meanings they evoke:

—Greek! Hand it to me! Shaun replied, plosively pointing to the cinnamon quistoquil behind his acoustrolobe. I'm as afterdusk nobly Roman as pope and water could christen me. Look at that for a ridingpin! I am, thing Sing Larynx, letter

potent to play the sem backwards like the Oscan wild or in shunt Persse transluding from the Otherman or off the Toptic or anything off the types of my finklers in the draught or with buttles, with my oyes thickshut and all.¹⁰

The influence of this and other Joycean methods will be apparent in the samples from the anti-letters that follow.

Approach

Merton and Lax's letters to each other are like the vibrant sounds of the jazzmen they once liked to listen to, jamming in the early hours of a Manhattan morning. They are full of blowing and riffing, soloing and chasing, pattern setting and then breaking out in new directions. Sometimes they riff on a subject in a single letter and sometimes they make repeated references to the same subject over weeks or months, turning it into a recurring motif, usually in a humorous way.

Here are two short letters that show what I mean. In the first letter of the collection, Lax asks Merton to recommend him for a Guggenheim fellowship and tells him he has moved to Greece:

Here is a short note from the Insuls of Greichland to say that I have applied for a yo-ho-ho-erie from the Guggenhaus—that I have named you as my luckiest staretz and have given them right to ask you a frank appraisal of my staves.

Be frank, it is the only thing to be with the googenhows. (If you are not allowed to write, then leave it to Bro. Hilarion and if he not, to Brother Cellarer and if he not, Brother Barnabus, or anyone you like among the tigers.)

Here it is absolutely capital. The breezes, the landscapes & above all the people themselves, though Greek.¹¹

The second is Merton's response after sending in his recommendation:

And so, my Dear Waldo,

It turns out that you are among the Greeks. This is clearly educational, especially as you refer to your Guggenhappy fellowspot, which is of an educational nature. And education is, I feel, what most interests the Guugenspit. What then shall I tell them in my frank appraisals? Shall I not conceal how you hoot at the educations? Fifty dollars. Shall I

not make hidden your scorn of the university? Fifty dollars. Shall I not bury in oblivion your contempt for the Greed's eppig Homware, Suffoelits, Europates, Askils? All you have contemned and spurned. Fifty dollars. Apart from that I will make light of Goggenball and fling reservtion to the winds. How do you send me the sheets, the pencils, the carbons, the erasers and the microcards with which I am to inform of your spirits? Hath a high spirit, is indomitable, kicked over the traces at Columbia U., flouted Dean Hawkes, thumbd nose at Prexy Butler, a man of indomitable energies and corruscating Russian humors, burned all the books of the Greeks, smiled only at John O'Hara.¹²

Merton's letter, in particular, shows the playful alterations, repetitions and inventiveness they delighted in.

Content

Current events and thoughts are the most frequent subjects in these letters, but Merton and Lax also refer to previous events and people in their lives, and draw from books they have read, whether high or low. The letters are full of satirical depictions of piety and conventional thinking, often based on advertising and newspaper clippings they sent each other. Among their favorite targets is a Californian evangelist named Miss Velma.

Miss Velma (1919-2004), with her husband, O. L. Jagers, founded the Universal World Church. According to the church's website: 'In 1966, Miss Velma recognized a need within the church to minister to the "older members" of the congregation. It was at this time that God granted her the ministry of the restoration of youth'—a 'ministry' Merton and Lax had plenty of fun with. The website goes on to say: 'Miss Velma is also well known for her powerful preaching accompanied by impressive theatrics often incorporating "soaring above the congregation" on horseback, in a chariot, spaceship, or dressed as an angel.' Although advertising in the 1960s lacked Miss Velma's levitating claims, Merton and Lax viewed it as equally phony and much more damaging since it used and abused the words they held dear. In a typical riff, Merton uses the language of advertising as a way of satirizing the inanities of American culture. Enclosed with the letter was an ad for a doctor's guaranteed method of dog-training:

Here is Towser conducting the symphony. Without force or threat, he never threatens his master's voice, he never snarls and snaps like dogs not well trained. He appreciated natural reflex. He was humane. He is humane. He conducts the symphony of man. That is the secret. The symphony of man is more jolly when conducted by Towser without humane threats whips or dog medicines.

Your dog wants to be trained by Dr Towser Whitney: he loves the method. That is the trouble with most people, they don't love the method. All the people should learn from Towser.¹³

These anti-letters are more than playful nonsense. In addition to lighthearted commentary on American society, they include serious support the two men offered to each other, with praise for each other's work, and a sharing of the darkness and difficulties each man faced.

For example, both men had to deal with censors of one kind or another. All of the letters in the collection were written after January 20, 1962, when Merton was forbidden to publish on war and peace. After the Colonel's coup on April 21, 1967, Lax was living under martial law in Greece. Censors became a running joke, but censorship was serious, especially for Lax, who could have been jailed or deported. This is how he conveyed the news of the Colonels' coup to Merton four days after it took place:

Dear Uncle Flipper,

Well, we have finally heard from Aunt. Sandor & Vashti have been giving her a lot of trouble & she finally decided to lock them both in the closet & to sit outside with Grandpa's (you remember Grandpa)'s slingshot to more or less keep them both in place. it is only understandable. Aunt's nerves had been strained to the breaking point & that is what happened.

Everything else is quite all right. There is something wrong with the radio now—it is down to only one station & only plays music all day long. I am going to Patmos, the isle of the saints for a week or so, & then right back to Kalymnos, where I know my way around.¹⁴

[Reading between the lines the gist of this can be read as follows: The coup has happened, people have been locked up, and the guns are out, but I'm okay, though the radio plays only martial music all day long; I'm going somewhere quieter and more holy but I'm known here and I should be fine.]

These were dark times both in the world and in the lives of these two men. In addition to the dictatorship in Greece, the war in Vietnam was going on and the threat of violence, even nuclear war, seemed everywhere. When the Six Day War broke out between Israel and the Arab states, Merton suggested respectfully that maybe Lax should move from the Mediterranean to a safer region. The darkest news the two friends received during the period covered by the letters was that two of their closest Columbia friends had died: Ad Reinhardt and John Slate. For the first time on September 5, 1967, when he informed Lax of Reinhardt's death, Merton didn't use a playful salutation. Here's the beginning of that September 5 letter—notice how his seemingly playful language cuts through the clichés we tend to use at such times:

O Lax:

Do you know the great sorrows. Just heard today by clipping from Schwester Therese about Reinhardt. Reinhardt he daid. Reinhardt done in. He die. Last Wednesday he die with the sorrows in the studio. Just said he died in a black picture he daid. The sorrows have said that he has gone into the black picture for he is dead. All I read was the clip. Very small clip. Say Reinhardt was black monk of the pix and he daid. Spell his name wrong and everything. Dead none the less.¹⁵

For the first time, Merton signed his letter 'Lv'. In his reply of September 13th, Lax wrote:

Oh Chauncey,

You were right. It is sorrows for old Reinhardt. One could weep with out let for old Reinhardt. The clipping is fall to me from Rice. I read it the last of many letters (offers of millions in every one). I sit near the sea & almost fall into it from sorrow.¹⁶

For the first time, Lax ended his letter simply 'Lv, Lax'. When Slate died just a month later, Merton sent Lax a telegram that came back with no forwarding address. Alarmed, Merton called Lax's sister, who told him he had only gone to Yugoslavia to renew his visa. 'I am full of relief heartfelt,' Merton wrote, 'let us be careful not to lose any more of the fellows because now is scarce the old friends.'¹⁷ Lax replied:

Oh, alas, oh Merton,

now indeed we are all undone; it is our undoing now, everyone. with the passing of Dom John Slate is our generation all dissolved, resolved. whatever is left gentle in the world, gone up in a fume. we are only left (& in no shape, either) to tell each other the story.¹⁸

Just over a year later, Lax would face Merton's own death alone. When asked in an interview if he felt he'd lost a friend, he said no, but he did feel he had lost a correspondent. 'If I had something funny I wanted to tell him about,' he said, 'it would be a little more difficult now...'¹⁹

Conclusion

Underneath it all, what Merton and Lax were expressing and celebrating in these so-called anti-letters was a deep supporting friendship—a friendship that, through letters alone, provided comfort, advice, wisdom, memories, and, above all, a joyous approach to life that lifted them above their very real concerns and sorrows. As Merton wrote to Lax in 1963: 'Let all the glad abandon vain hopes and laugh until silly. There is little else to do. But plenty to laugh at.'²⁰

Notes

1. Ron Seitz, *Song for Nobody: A Memory Vision of Thomas Merton* (Ligouri, MO: Triumph Books, 1993), pp. 59-60.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* - 50th Anniversary edition (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), p. 165.
3. Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *A Catch of Anti-letters* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1994), pp. 34-35.
4. Among the books Merton left at St Bonaventure when he entered the religious life were two editions of Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, the first a French edition with the autograph 'Tom Merton, November 1936', and the second an English edition with the autograph 'Thomas Merton, N.Y. 1938'.

5. François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* - Trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1955), pp. 574-575.
6. *A Catch of Anti-letters*, pp. 35-36.
7. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume One 1939-1941* - Edited by Patrick Hart (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), p. 153.
8. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Penguin, 1999), p. 397.
9. *Finnegans Wake*, p. 544.
10. *Finnegans Wake*, p. 419.
11. *A Catch of Anti-letters*, p. 3.
12. *A Catch of Anti-letters*, p. 4.
13. *A Catch of Anti-letters*, p. 106.
14. *A Catch of Anti-letters*, pp. 115-116.
15. *A Catch of Anti-letters*, p. 118.
16. *A Catch of Anti-letters*, p. 121.
17. *A Catch of Anti-letters*, pp. 122-123.
18. *A Catch of Anti-letters*, p. 123.
19. Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton By Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 74.
20. *A Catch of Anti-letters*, p. 11.

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