

Religious Imagination” (87-103), Higgins looks at Merton’s spirituality, examining both his understanding of contemplation and how this understanding translated into ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. A more thorough examination of Merton’s interreligious study and dialogue follows in the fifth chapter, “Pilgrim to the East” (104-22). Here the focus is primarily on Merton’s engagement with Eastern religions, specifically Zen Buddhism, and the chapter ends with an account of the significance of Merton’s Asian journey.

Higgins writes beautifully and with the characteristic enthusiasm that he brings to his projects. He also writes accessibly. *The Unquiet Monk* serves as an excellent introduction to the life and thought of Thomas Merton both because it concisely covers the main parameters of his biography and writings, and because it immerses readers in the voices of prominent Merton scholars and friends. As someone who is frequently asked for recommendations for where to start with Merton, I would heartily recommend this book as a jumping-off point towards reading Merton himself. Moreover, for those who teach courses on Merton, each of the book’s chapters provides worthwhile introductions to various facets of Merton’s thought that could be used as a guide prior to engaging the writings themselves. Higgins’ chapter on Merton’s autobiographical writings and his poetry is particularly valuable in this regard, not least because of its clear and concise introduction to Merton’s poetry, arguably the least accessible facet of his corpus. But Higgins’ book is not just for Mertonian beginners. For those already familiar with Merton, *The Unquiet Monk* has the potential to rekindle enthusiasm for a man whose writings continue to inspire and convict.

Gregory K. Hillis

MCGREGOR, Michael N., *Pure Act: The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pp. 472. ISBN 978-0-82326-801-6 (cloth) \$34.95.

In 1985 Michael McGregor journeyed to Europe with questions. He had spent the previous three years traveling the world, writing about the systematic oppression that characterizes the existence of so many on this planet, keeping them impoverished. McGregor had reached a point where he felt he had to respond to such suffering concretely, that he couldn’t just write about it but wanted to devote himself more fully to finding a grand solution that he was young enough to believe possible to find. So he quit his job, sold his car and flew to Europe in search of answers. After six months he made it to Greece, and by this time, having

decided to write a novel about his experiences, he looked for a removed place to think and write. A Greek island, any Greek island, seemed to fit the bill, so he boarded the next ferry out, whose first stop was Patmos. However, before departing, he stopped in an English-language bookstore and happened upon an inexpensive copy of Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*, a book he had heard about but never read. McGregor read the book in the evenings he spent in the chilly apartment he rented. He loved the book, but what most appealed to him was the famous interaction between Merton and Robert Lax, in which Lax asked Merton what he wanted to be and, dissatisfied with Merton's answer, told him that he should want to be a saint, and that all he needed to do to become one was to desire it. McGregor was taken by this idea, and resolved to look up Lax in other books when he returned home. It was only on the boat ride away from Patmos – the days had become too cold for him to stay – that McGregor learned that Lax actually lived on the island he had just left. On his subsequent return to Patmos, McGregor decided to find Lax, leaving a note for him at the post office to ask if he would meet at a nearby pub. Lax came to the pub, and the two struck up a friendship that lasted until Lax's death in 2000.

Because of his personal connection to Lax, *Pure Act: The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax* is more than just a biography of the late poet based on research in archives, though McGregor has done plenty of that. It is also in part a beautiful account of a friendship between an established writer and a man searching for a vocation and meaning. Interspersed throughout the book, therefore, are invaluable personal vignettes that give us glimpses into Lax as friend and spiritual director. In this way we learn that conversation with Lax involved both long silences and laughter so exuberant that Lax would fall to the floor. And we learn that Lax “didn't force his views or wisdom on you but stated them plainly in the course of conversation, enthusiastic enough to want to offer a thought but patient and polite enough to wait his turn” (15). Most chapters begin with a brief personal story either about McGregor's interaction with Lax or about something McGregor encountered in the course of his research related to the chapter itself. To place himself so fully in the narrative was a risky move for McGregor, for to do so chances obscuring the subject matter and/or disrupting the flow of the narrative. Neither is the case in this book, for the personal vignettes end up illuminating Lax as a person in addition to demonstrating the clear effect one person can have on another – in this case, the role played in shaping and directing McGregor as a writer and seeker.

Lax's journey wove its way through an education at Columbia –

where he met those who would become his closest friends, especially Merton – through short stints working for magazines such as *The New Yorker* and *Jubilee*, through brief tenures as a teacher or visiting professor at various colleges, through finally finding his identity and home in Europe, particularly on the Greek islands of Mytilene and Patmos, where he would spend most of the last half of his life. The principle that McGregor says governed Lax's life was his pursuit of what Lax came to call "pure act." A student of Thomas Aquinas, Lax adapted Aquinas' understanding of God as "pure act" and "pure love" in contrast to a universe that is always in *potentia*, and Lax understood that we can become "pure act" ourselves when we act consciously and yet spontaneously. When we do this we become like God, provided we act in love. Lax witnessed what he understood to be pure act in perhaps unexpected places. In an interview late in his life, Lax talked about his love of jazz and particularly his love for jam sessions when all the customers have left and the musicians are simply playing for each other and with each other. Each musician is fully conscious of the present moment, of himself, and also of the other musicians, such that they are able to improvise and yet still remain in harmony with one another. Lax understood this ability to be consciously in the moment in a way that led both oneself and others to flourish, to be "pure act" in the flesh. Lax saw other examples of this elsewhere in circus performers. From an early age Lax was fascinated with the circus, and in 1949 he had the opportunity to travel with the Cristianis, a circus family who were the most famous bareback riders in the world. Here again Lax saw what he viewed as pure act, the ability to exist and be so fully present and in the moment as to create something of profound beauty. While with the Cristianis, Lax even performed as a clown, but more importantly, he learned from them how to live moment by moment, fully present. And when Lax went to the Greek island of Kalymnos, where he ended up living for years before moving to Patmos, McGregor argues that Lax witnessed an entire community living out what he saw as pure act. He saw there a place where people truly lived, a striving without striving, a way of existing in the world without conforming to the illusory notions of success tied to financial gain.

McGregor compellingly suggests that this understanding of pure act came to govern Lax's own life. He was most miserable when he conformed his identity to the measures of economic success and the success of being known as a writer. He found peace when he abandoned such measures and instead chose to imitate those who lived in pure act, and to devote himself to a life lived in the moment, consciously but spontaneously. And it is for this reason that Lax ended up living a minimalist life on

Patmos. Moreover, this approach to life profoundly affected his poetry, which become more spare, “reducing whatever he saw and valued to its essentials – its ‘purity’ – and conveying his ‘reverence’ for what he saw, a reverence akin to the mystic’s ecstatic vision” (289).

Robert Lax emerges from the pages of McGregor’s biography as an immensely compelling person and writer, and someone who merits far more attention than he currently receives. McGregor’s book travels a great distance in filling the gaps, but it also points toward further research that could and should be done. McGregor does a wonderful job of giving us a window into Lax’s personality, and his analysis of Lax’s poetry in the context of his life is helpful. What is not examined thoroughly enough is an understanding of Lax as a contemplative thinker. While McGregor devotes extensive attention to the friendship between Merton and Lax, I would have liked him also to devote attention to an examination of Lax’s conversion to Roman Catholicism and the way in which his Catholicism influenced his understanding of contemplation and the spiritual life. We get hints at this in *Pure Act*, but more work needs to be done on Lax the contemplative.

Overall, *Pure Act* is a beautifully written and captivating work that will no doubt spur on further research into a man whose way of existing and approaching the world continues to have something to say to us today.

Gregory K. Hillis