

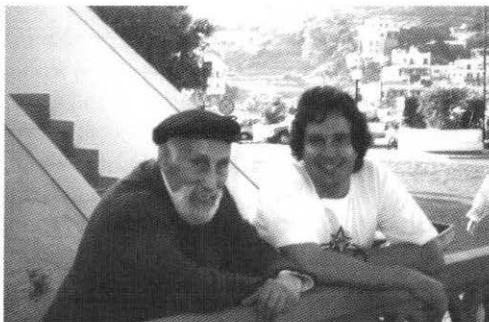
Reading Lax: A Brief Overview of Literature By and About Robert Lax

By S. T. Georgiou

Most of those who know of Robert Lax probably first learned of him through reading Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In this perennial spiritual classic, Lax is portrayed as both a gifted writer and natural mystic who helped his better known friend and contemporary discover his spiritual path. In Merton's words, "Lax was born with the deepest sense of who God was. He was much wiser than I, and he had clearer vision, and was, in fact, corresponding much more truly to the grace of God than I, and he had seen what was the one important thing" (*SSM* 181, 237-38).

Inevitably, the attentive reader of *The Seven Storey Mountain* comes to perceive that without the guiding influence of Lax, there may never have come to be a Merton as we know him. Perhaps for this reason, some readers of Merton's autobiography were moved to contact Lax, though their attempts were met with difficulty, owing to Lax's nomadic and eremitic lifestyle in the Greek isles. In June of 1995, Lax himself related to me how he had heard stories which centered on "an innovative young poet writing in the time of Kerouac" who, in the early sixties, quietly left an increasingly materialistic, hedonistic America and had "fallen off the edge of the world, somewhere in the Aegean."

Thus a cloud of obscurity, of "unknowing," has veiled much of Lax's life and work. Though among America's greatest minimalist and abstract poets, his "withdrawal from the world" has partly resulted in Lax being termed "the last unacknowledged major poet of the post-sixties generation" (Richard Kostelanetz, *The New York Times*, Feb. 5, 1978). Yet this lack of attention and widespread critical acclaim had never bothered Lax, who for over thirty years made the remote Greek isles of Kalymnos and Patmos his literary and spiritual workshop. The eremitic writer had purposely sought solitude so that he could work in "generative silence," a fertile, unfolding quiet which both his contemplative life and creativity explicitly demanded. As a result, only in the last ten years has an increasing number of titles by and about Lax come to print, helping to cast a more popular light upon the man Merton had said was "born so much of a contemplative that he will never be able to find out how much" (*SSM* 181). Among these more recent titles are the following books which are available in major bookstores, although smaller "specialty stores" concentrating in literature and/or spirituality may be better stocked with Lax material: *33 Poems* (Thomas Kellein, ed. [New Directions,



Steve Georgiou with Robert Lax

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1988)]; *Love Had A Compass* (James Uebbing, ed. [Grove Press, 1996]); *A Thing That Is* (Paul Spaeth, ed. [Overlook Press, 1997]); *The ABC's of Robert Lax* (David Miller and Nicholas Zurbrugg, eds. [Stride, 1999]); *When Prophecy Still Had A Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax* (Arthur Biddle, ed. [University Press of Kentucky, 2001]); and the recently published *Circus Days and Nights* (Paul Spaeth, ed. [Overlook Press, 2001]).

I vividly remember the struggles I went through to find even one book by Lax after I had met the writer (by chance) on Patmos in 1993. At the time, I knew nothing about Lax, and had hardly any knowledge about Merton, only knowing that he was a religious figure of some sort. And though Lax and I had spent numerous evenings together walking and talking by the sea, he never revealed quite exactly who he was, just that he was a poet who liked solitude and was a friend of Merton. Before I left him, he advised that on my return to California, I should read *The Seven Storey Mountain*. So I did, and only then began to truly understand who Lax was and, as well, came to see his precious, pivotal place in American poetry and in Merton Studies. Immediately I wanted to get hold of as many Lax books as I could, but this was somewhat difficult in 1993, even for one living in a literary city like San Francisco. But then, Robert's parting words came to the rescue. He had recommended that on my return to California, I should visit the Santa Sabina Retreat Center in nearby San Rafael because it was a meditative place largely devoted to Merton. One evening in late summer, I followed his advice (all the while hoping to find information relating to Lax as well), and was overjoyed to discover that a good number of Robert's poetry books and meditative journals were stocked at Santa Sabina. Nearly all were published by Pendo Verlag of Switzerland, the European press which has faithfully produced over twenty volumes of Lax's work, a "labor of love" made possible through the devotion and far-sightedness of Bernhard Moosbrugger who founded Pendo in 1973 so that Robert's work might find a greater audience. In essence, I had found a "Laxian goldmine"! But the lesson here for the reader is that Lax's titles are not always to be found in huge bookstore conglomerates, but in quiet places which mirror his creative and spiritual nature, such as retreat houses and innovative, avant-garde literary shops. And though a number of his ground-breaking early works such as *Circus of the Sun* and *New Poems* may certainly be found in various libraries, particularly university libraries, the premiere institution which houses the bulk of Robert Lax titles remains the Robert Lax Archives in Olean, New York, located in the Friedsam Library at St. Bonaventure University. Here, hard to find works such as those published by Pendo Verlag may be ordered, as well as many of Lax's shorter poems published by Michael Lastnite of Furthermore Press (library webpage: www.sbu.edu/friedsam; click on "Lax Publication Order Form"). Of course, Lax's original drafts and records are on file in the Archives as well, including critical essays on his work and articles pertaining to his writing.

Having located where one might obtain titles by and about Lax, one may consequently ask, "Which books really give a good feel for Robert and his craft, and is there a particular 'reading order' that is best to follow, especially for those unfamiliar with the man?" To begin, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, first published by Harcourt Brace in 1948, remains an obvious must. The book not only clarifies the Lax-Merton relationship, but also points to Robert's "instinctive spirituality" which manifested itself throughout the whole of his life.

For those wishing to delve into the Lax-Merton friendship, a book that logically follows would be *When Prophecy Still Had A Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax* (reviewed elsewhere in this issue). Herein, a thorough description of the Lax-Merton relationship is given, and the hundreds of pages of accompanying correspondence include the zany and unorthodox "antiletters," in which Merton and Lax comically and keenly addressed each other in an almost Zen fashion (a

portion of these letters were originally published by Sheed, Andrews & McMeel in 1978 under the title *A Catch of Anti-Letters*). At the close of the book, a valuable, broad-ranging interview between Lax and Arthur Biddle, the editor, appears.

With regard to interviews conducted with Lax, yet another general interview good to read would be that conducted by Peter France in his book, *Hermits: The Insights of Solitude* (St. Martin's Press, 1996), which begins with a fine selection of Lax's poetry and journal writing. However, the book which remains the outstanding "Robert Lax sourcebook" is *The ABC's of Robert Lax*, published in London by Stride. Herein is a wealth of information including interviews with the poet, scholarly essays on his craft, unpublished works, examples of his correspondence, and autobiographical reflections. Well-known authors whose thoughts on Lax appear in the volume include Denise Levertov, Stephen Bann, Emil Antonucci, Brother Patrick Hart, and Jack Kerouac. Interestingly, Kerouac had thought of Lax as a mentor and affectionately called him "Laughing Buddha."

In focusing on Lax's poetry, *Love Had A Compass* and *33 Poems* are very fine general overviews of Lax's creative work (both are now sadly out of print, but may still be found in many bookstores). These two outstanding collections include Lax's lyrical, psalm-like *Circus of the Sun* and also feature a number of his early minimalist poems such as "In Me Is the Watcher." However, each book contains its own special selection of verse, making it advantageous to acquire both volumes. *Love Had A Compass* features "Port City: The Marseilles Diaries" (a lengthy verse narrative of Lax's life-shaping experiences there). *33 Poems* contains Lax's highly acclaimed "Sea and Sky" (a minimalist treasure trove of oceanic images that evoke an ever-expansive sense of wonder), as well as "21 Pages" (a lyrical, metaphysical wait upon God written hauntingly in the first person).

Many "Laxophiles" who have read a broad compendium of Lax's more readily available works are inspired to seek out new titles through Pendo Verlag. While all the Pendo books are excellent, some of the more outstanding editions which, as yet, have not been reprinted by American publishers, include *Psalm* (a beautifully orchestrated "prayer-poem" in which Lax meditates on the Divine), *Dialogues* (a series of philosophical discussions between "A" and "B" who explore the meanings and value of peace and love), and *Mogador's Book* (a contemplative extension of Lax's circus experiences and written as a tribute to his acrobat friend Mogador). A word of clarification, however, with regard to *Mogador's Book*. This text is also included in the newly released *Circus Days and Nights* which also features a previously unpublished lengthy poem by Lax, "Voyage To Pescara" (on Lax's circus experiences in Italy), along with his awesome classic, *Circus of the Sun*.

As we enter a new century and millennium, Robert Lax's works are steadily reaching a wider public. Surely in the next ten years, many more unpublished poems, journal entries, and art by Lax (he enjoyed drawing sketches) will come to print, as will biographies and scholarly books that shall help to spread the "good news" of this amazing man's life and craft. Already, video documentaries have appeared on Lax, as demonstrated by Nicolas Humbert and Werner Penzel's *Why Should I Want A Bed When All That I Want Is Sleep?* (Cine Nomad, Munich, 1999). At last, and most deservedly, the prophetic words written by Catherine de Hueck Doherty (the Russian baroness who founded Friendship House, the Catholic settlement house for the poor in Harlem where the youthful Lax had volunteered his services) have come true: "*Caritas*, otherwise known as Love, spoke loudly in Robert's every gesture. It shone on his face and spoke through his words. There were many incidents with this son of Israel, but I'm afraid it would take a whole book. He is the kind of man about whom someday books will be written" (Catherine Doherty, *Not Without Parables* [1977] 76-79).