

## Matchless Friendship, Matchless Candor

Review of

*When Prophecy Still Had A Voice:*

*The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax*

Edited by Arthur W. Biddle

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Reviewed by **James Harford**

There is nothing in Thomas Merton's prolific writings, or in his voluminous correspondence with the great and the less great, to match the candor and genuine fondness that characterize the letters to his old friend, Robert Lax. Lax's own letters back to the Trappist are equally warm. But some graduate student would richly deserve a Ph.D. if he or she put together a trot for understanding the language they used. So one should be prepared to spend hours reading Arthur W. "Bill" Biddle's remarkably thorough compilation of the 1938-68 letters. They are as fascinating as they are often beyond obscure. I started out trying to understand every sentence, but that is well nigh impossible, what with the argot they used on each other. So I skimmed sometimes, or I never would have made it through the 400+ pages.

Biddle, an emeritus professor from the University of Vermont, swears that he sleuthed out – over a ten-year stretch of research – every letter extant, although he concedes that some may still turn up, such as from the early '50s, when Lax was most of the time in Europe. In all, I counted 153 Lax letters and 193 Merton letters. Merton's were usually longer.

The opportunity to read Merton's letters along with the replies of the recipient (previously possible only for the correspondence with James Laughlin, Czeslaw Milosz and Rosemary Ruether – along with the 66 Merton-Lax letters previously published in *A Catch of Anti-Letters* [Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1978], all of which are in Biddle's book, including some paragraphs that had been edited out of *Catch*) of course makes for especially engrossing reading, providing fascinating insight on particular subjects. Very interesting, for example, is an exchange on the subject of Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity. On May 1, 1964, Lax, having lived by then in various Greek locations for two years – Athens, Aegina, Mytilini, Patmos, and now Kalymnos – and having become knowledgeable about Orthodox thought and liturgy, wonders to Merton: "here it is good friday among the orthodox . . . the following questions are in my mind: how do we know we're right and they're wrong? how do we know that maybe we're both right? . . . (why do we think we shouldn't give up our special claims and just become one church among the orthodox?) (is that what's going on?) at all?" (273).

Merton's response is prompt. Just a week later, on May 8, he posts a long letter to "My dear

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Ludolf' that spends several paragraphs dealing waggishly with historical error, and then says, flat out:

And now from the angle of faith. Between us and them is no difference of faith, is no difference. Is not a whistle of a significant difference . . . .

Difference between us and them is politics, chum . . . . Let the politicians figure it out. Let the Vatican figure it out. . . . My hunch is that one day we all get together with those guys in the concentration camps and discover there wasn't any disagreement, we are all the same corpses. . . .

Stop and go to sing praises (273-75).

Lax's letters were sometimes a few sentences, or even a few words running diagonally down the page, like this one in 1961, in which Lax says he wants Merton's piece on Clement of Alexandria for his pamphlet periodical, *Pax*, which went to a few hundred subscribers in the 1960s:

hoy,

yes

Pax want Clement of Alexandria

hoy,

yes,

Pax want collected works

yes

yes

yes,

Jack (231).

Many of the letters have to do with Merton's frequent contributions to *Jubilee*, the Catholic lay magazine (1953-67) published by another Columbia friend, Ed Rice, on which Lax was Roving Editor. Merton not only wrote a lot for *Jubilee*, he also persuaded other notables to contribute. To Lax on November 27, 1961, he sent this: "Here is first of all enough poems of Ernesto Cardenal they should be Jubilee it seems to me. It is all poems wrote like little notes on scraps and bits while he was novice at Gethsemani. Very simple and sharp like haiku" (232). (Cardenal later left the Trappists and was censured by Pope John Paul for becoming an activist with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua).

Merton was finicky about the way his articles were illustrated. Here he tells Lax: "Now to accompany poem there should be picture. Hence I have send many pix of utterly conventional though lyrical quality, viz the usual monk with cow." In the same letter Merton fulminates against Catholic Church officials who tolerate weapons development in the cause of fighting Communism: "Tell Ed [Rice] or yourself thanks for all the papers and clippings which come in a jubilee bundle. . . . I will write sharp editorials . . . . I will chide and clump, roister and exorbitate all the mums . . . . make a huge mumps for all radical conserves. . . . Then to jail to jail with a a hopeful doleful visage." He refers to "sly jibes about peace from English Cathlick intellectuals very witty and sly indeed, saying war is much sin, and it is, baby, it sure is. This the popes have all said . . . . But not so our yonder folk catholic and suburb fathers who all cry out dead rather than red" (232-33). A month later he tells Lax that "Jubilee should move to Chile, or to Tierra del Fuego" and expresses disdain at the Abbey's "Christmas Crib which looks more like the window of Bonwit Tellers than like the window of a third avenue pawnshop" (234-35).

In January, 1962, Merton was told to cease and desist with his anti-war writings: "I have been

nacht und nebel for my war book [*Peace in the Post-Christian Era*]. I have been put in the calabozo. . . . I have been shrewdly suppressed at the right moment. . . . I have been told to shut up about the wars, wars is not for Christians except to support" (237). In 1963 Merton writes Lax that Ad Reinhardt, the abstract painter who was also a Columbia friend, "says he is going to chew you down" for not joining a peace march to Washington. "I am trying to figure out some way I can get nationalized as a Negro as I am tired of belonging to the humiliating white race" (251). In a response signed "D. Scott Decision" Lax says, "i am always on the march" (252-53).

Merton consistently encouraged and praised Lax's poetry. He sent copies of *Circus of the Sun*, which has been called one of the best poems in the English language by one critic, to several literary luminaries, including Czeslaw Milosz and Evelyn Waugh. He later offered a glowing analysis of Lax's minimalist poems – such as those in *Lugano Review* in November, 1965, consisting of page after page of mostly single words running top to bottom:

Them poem is most exciting they blow off the top of the hat sitting on that white sheet. . . . but for reverence let nobody do any drawing let them just stop and think you made use of all that silence it falls into the silence just one word on top of another fast not with undue hesitations it move right along about the city, and the people with the vain they was muttering. It moves right along with the sea being a yearning sea I think this is the best poem we got flying around and Fitz [Jim Fitzsimmons, publisher of *Lugano Review*] done give it his best (314).

Biddle's intersticed comments are illuminating since he has obviously read a lot of both Merton and Lax besides the letters, and he got to be pretty good at interpreting the sometimes mysterious references and the wild names (Merton's long-time agent Naomi Burton becomes "Naomi Birdstats," "Naomi Purstong," "winona birdquist," "naomi gimgould," "Nagomi Burdquist" and others). Biddle calls the 1965-68 letters "perhaps the richest and most linguistically playful of the whole collection" (291). Merton's comments on Lax's poems, which had by then become more and more minimalistic, are a good example: "My dear Max, It comes from you in bewildering profusions the whirling note with cryptics in circulo making very rich effects of sunsets and landscapes of the mind" (299). This was a sad period, though, during which Columbia friends Reinhardt, Sy Freedgood, and John Slate all died – within six months of each other in 1967 – as did *Jubilee* magazine, starved for funds.

Merton has told us that he spent only about six hours a week writing, including correspondence, which is hard to believe, since some of these letters go over four typeset pages. He was a fast typist, but many of the original letters were handwritten in tight, but neat, script.

It is profoundly moving to observe the Trappist's spiritual transition. He had written Lax in November, 1942 – less than a year after his arrival at Gethsemani – words that maybe we should all reread when our faith flags:

It is very very good and sweet to be always occupied with God only, and sit simply in His presence and shut up, and be healed by the mere fact that God likes to be in your soul, because you like Him to be there. And in doing this you also love your neighbor as much as you could by any action of your own: because God cannot be in your soul without that fact having an effect on other people, and not necessarily people who have ever heard of you (89).

That's a letter to the same Bob Lax who, only a few years earlier, participated with Merton in the girl-chasing, hard-drinking, and general dissipation of *Jester* magazine days at Columbia University, and

later during Olean summers.

Lax died only recently, on September 26, 2000, in his home town of Olean, New York, and is buried on a beautiful knoll next to the graves of Franciscan friars at St. Bonaventure University, where his archive, as well as one of Merton's, is well tended. The faith of both men persisted to the end, but each became, in later years, increasingly concerned about the behavior of the institutional Church, Merton especially. His unhappiness, as well, with the monastery and even with the contemplative life, shows up often in his letters to his old friend. A letter dated June 7, 1966, is devastatingly critical of the abbey: "really you would not recognize the old dump. It is nothing but *weltschmerz* inside and out. Cleverly distilled *weltschmerz* painless and insidious which sneaks in through new liturgies, tourist guitars, speeches of pontiffs, protestant wits, old black Joe (again) and many others too numerous to mention" (332). The two become very interested in Zen. Lax, from Kalymnos on October 21, 1965, wrote, "Am in receipt of your thoughts on Zen & all except one sentence involving the word 'down,' I understood entirely. There shld be more Zen in the world & less strife and confusion" (312).

The most intensive exchanges were in the last two years of Merton's life – 31 back and forths in 1967 and 48 in 1968, 29 of the latter from Merton, the last one as he was leaving for Bangkok where he died on December 10, 1968. A Lax letter dated December 8 from Kalymnos never reached Merton. It recommended, ironically, that he "learn as many breathings as possible from the meditative monks" (420).

The book ends with an absorbing twenty pages from a number of interviews that Biddle had with Lax on Patmos in 1992 and 1998, followed by Emil Antonucci's drawings accompanying Lax's poem "One star," written on learning of Merton's death and discussed at the conclusion of the interview.

Nitpicks: There are a number of misspellings (i.e. Freegood instead of Freedgood [291]) but I didn't keep careful note of them. Lax went to Greece in 1962, not 1964 (Lax Chronology [xx]). I know that because my wife Millie and I, who first met Lax in Paris in 1952, have letters, but more often little notes with a few words, some wavy lines and some colored dots, from Athens in those years. Merton must have gotten some of those notes, too, and perhaps they have not survived even Biddle's meticulous research.