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Writing a Spiritual Life

Richard Kostelanetz

In the course of reviewing *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* for *The New York Times Book Review* in 1978, I suggested in passing that, "Lax remains the last unacknowledged (and, alas, uncollected) poet of his post-sixty [now post-1910] generation." While the first adjective about neglect is still true two decades later, the second has since been partially rectified, first with *33 Poems* (1988) and then with *Love Had a Compass* (1996), which duplicates much of its predecessor, and *A Thing That Is* (1997), which collects only previously unpublished poems. I say "partially" because some of the best Lax remains unavailable, beginning with the great long poem, "Black & White."

In that review I placed Lax "among America's greatest poets, a true minimalist who can weave awesome poems from remarkably few words." Consider the work (two pages in the old book, only one page in the new one) that begins:

the port
was longing

the port
was longing

not for
this ship

not for
that ship

and continues through slight variations from stanza to stanza to this conclusion, becoming lovely precisely in a spareness that says all:

not for
this &

not for
that.

First published in 1962 (and written two years before), this text epitomizes esthetic minimalism long before that epithet characterized not only painting with a single color or sculpture with a simple shape but the repetitive music of Philip Glass or the 1970s short stories of Raymond Carver. Another Lax poem, "River" (1964), contains only that title word repeated twelve times down the page. (Yes, that's what a river does – repeat itself in a line.) Such reductive creative processes echo the spirit of Japanese haiku without imitating its precious forms or its comparative verbosity. In contrast to the poetic fashions of recent decades, needless to say perhaps, Lax's poems have nothing to do with metaphors, personality, or confession.

Other important Lax moves involved using first the entire space of the printed page and then cunning punctuation. "Able Charlie Baker Dance" (1967) has only those four words, but now spread across the page in columns that reflect the tab-stop technology of the typewriter (and now the computer). The concluding stanza reads:

a-	bak-	char-	dance
ble	er	lie	
			char-
dance	dance	dance	lie
			char-
dance	dance	dance	lie

The absence of a concluding period suggests that the poem could go on, while the hyphens evoke a feeling of movement. Such essentially visual poetic techniques are elaborated in "Sea & Sky" (1963), which runs over sixty spacious pages in *33 Poems* (and is not included in the new book) and which I rank among the great long poems of our time.

Lax was also a masterful prose writer, beginning with "The Man with the Big General Notions: A Fable," which was published in *The New Yorker* in 1942 and which, in my opinion, belongs in every anthology of advanced American fiction. On page 79 of *Compass* is an extraordinary piece of prose that begins: "The sunset city trembled with fire, the air trembled in fiery light, a fiery clarity stretched west across the walks, the tongues of air licked up the building sides, the wings of fire hovered over the churches and houses, . . ." and concludes: "This is our camp, our moving city; each day we set the show up; jugglers calm amid currents, riding the world, juggled but slightly as in a howdah, on the grey wrinkled earth we ride as on an elephant's head." This strikes me as doing Franz Kafka better than Kafka did Kafka.

Some of Lax's wittiest prose appears in letters he exchanged between 1938 and 1968 with Merton, then confined to a monastery in Kentucky. This correspondence demonstrates that even decades after their friendship began the two men turn each other on. (Ad Reinhardt's widow once repeated to me her husband's quip that Trappist Tom, "having taken the vow of silence, wrote garrulous letters to his friends.") Living his own version of a spiritual life, Lax tells Merton: "this patmos is a splendid place. at first you wld think so, then you would not, then you would think so again. the people are of a very high quality; likewise the geography. what then if a crowd of international sapristi shouters come up on their donkey-backs with their cries of vois-donc and ooh (même) la la." Each man is continually trying to outdo the other in inventing new names for their salutations, Lax, for instance, addressing Merton as "Mustwich," "Murtogs," "Hidgen," "Captain Thurston," "Doctor Moosehunter,"

"Zwow," "Captain Belsford," "cher Feuerbach," "Doctor Klaventook," "Colonel Hoopsaboy," "Ambassador Philbrick," "Captain Hopscotch," "Uncle Flipper," "Commodore Perry," "Captain Bashford," "most cherished albert houdini," etc., rarely repeating himself. What is necessary now is not only a selection of correspondence among the three masters (if not their buddies as well) but a collective biography of a legendary group of artist/writers who esthetically resembled one another even as they lived far apart (New York, Kentucky, Greece).

Richard Kostelanetz has published many books of poetry, fiction, criticism, and cultural history. *The Old Poetries and the New* (1981) and *The New Poetries and Some Olds* (1991) are collections of his poetry criticism.

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