

The Play of Poetry, Praise and Prayer

Review of

In the Beginning Was Love: Contemplative Words of Robert Lax

Edited with an Introduction by S. T. Georgiou

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*Think, Mogador, of the freedom in a
world of bondage; the freedom of the priest,
the artist, and the acrobat. In a
world of men condemned to earn their
bread by the sweat of their brows, the
liberty of those who,
like lilies of the field, live by
playing. For playing is like Wisdom before
the face of the Lord. Their play is
praise. Their praise is prayer. (107)*

These words of poet and mystic Robert Lax capture in brief form the essence of his *ars poetica* and reveal the reason he chose to live a life of solitude, contemplation, prayer and poetry – in short, a life of “play” instead of a life of work. Addressed to Mogador Cristiani, a young acrobat of the famed Cristiani family Lax befriended and traveled with during a brief interlude of his extraordinary, peripatetic life, the poem elevates the activity of art to that of worship. To be an artist is to devote oneself to holiness, to serve as a priest of the imagination, to celebrate the miracle of creation, and to give glory to its Creator. Lax spent much of his life in pursuit of this ideal, and after considerable searching found the place where he could immerse himself in the work (or the play) he was called to. In 1962, at the rather late age of 47, he visited the Greek islands of Kalymnos and Patmos, fell in love with the rare, spare beauty of the place and with the simple life of its people, and eventually took up residence on “Patmos, Holy Patmos,” as he described it (11), the island associated with the Revelation of St. John. Lax would remain here as a solitary for the rest of his life – visited occasionally by pilgrims in search of wisdom – until illness and age forced his return home to Olean, New York, where he died in 2000.

S. T. Georgiou, the editor of a new anthology of Lax’s poems and prose writings, *In the Beginning Was Love: Contemplative Words of Robert Lax*, was one of those pilgrims. In his brief yet informative

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biographical and critical introduction to the collection, Georgiou acknowledges his friendship with Lax and his admiration of his writing: “Here it should be noted that the compiler and editor of this anthology was part of an artistic-spiritual circle devoted to Lax. After serendipitously meeting the poet-sage in Patmos in 1993, I (and other ardent searchers) intermittently returned to the isle to meet with him until his death in 2000” (15). Georgiou is also the author of an earlier book on Lax, *The Way of the Dreamcatcher*, wherein he recounts his meetings with his mentor and records some of their remarkable conversations, providing readers with a rare portrait of Lax, one that is both intimate and deeply personal. As an acolyte, Georgiou knew Lax as a friend, philosopher and guide, a fact that lends both of his books poignancy, authority and *gravitas*. The selections that he includes in this new anthology, culled from Lax’s voluminous writings (both published and unpublished), are informed by a keen understanding of the poet’s preoccupations and predilections as well as by a deep affection for him. Georgiou introduces the reader to Robert Lax at his best, featuring both the poems written early in his career – accessible lyrics praising the beauty of the world – as well as the bare, spare experimental poems Lax wrote later in life as he strove to strip away unnecessary words and punctuation, along with grammatical and poetic conventions that hampered him in his linguistic dance before the Ark of the Lord. Thus, we see Lax both fettered and unfettered, always testing the boundaries of the art he loved, eager to discover just how much could be said in a single word.

Georgiou’s introduction provides a good foundation for an appreciation of Lax’s poetic project. He offers a selective chronology of Lax’s life, wherein he notes the importance of his friendship with Thomas Merton at Columbia – a friendship that lasted a lifetime, well after Merton entered the monastery and Lax moved to Greece. In fact, it is this acquaintance that brought Lax into the public eye. Lax is mentioned frequently in Merton’s best-selling *The Seven Storey Mountain*, wherein Merton identifies him as a valued mentor and notes that he was recognized by many in their circle of friends and colleagues as an instinctively holy person: “He was one of the voices through which the insistent spirit of God was determined to teach me the way I had to travel.” It was Lax, of course, who taught Merton that his spiritual goal, after his conversion, was to become a saint, much to Merton’s surprise (*Seven Storey Mountain* 237-38). As young men, they had much in common. Like Merton, Lax, too, wrote for Columbia’s literary and humor magazines, was mentored by the legendary Mark Van Doren, was in possession of a strong religious sensibility, eventually converted to Catholicism, and had aspirations to become a writer. Yet Lax would go on to live a very different life from that of his celebrated friend. Though both sought a life of solitude – one retiring to Gethsemani Abbey in rural Kentucky and the other to distant Patmos – Merton’s turned out to be far more public. Merton wrote scores of books, along with hundreds of essays and poems, his work widely published, read and reviewed to the point where he became an internationally known literary activist and spiritual savant; Lax lived a quiet life, far from the public eye, writing his unconventional poems and prose, keeping his voluminous journals, engaging with the native population of fisherman and sponge divers, and hospitably receiving the spiritual seekers who showed up at the door of his stone hut. Rather than writing for men (and women), Lax wrote for God, his writing life inextricably bound up with his life of contemplation and prayer. After moving to Greece, Lax did not actively seek publication, and, as a result, only a small portion of his work was made available to readers during his lifetime. Georgiou’s anthology seeks to remedy that state of affairs, offering readers a sampling of Lax’s work, allowing us brief, illuminating glimpses into the mind and spiritual practice of this brilliant, holy man.

The 81 numbered poems and journal excerpts that constitute *In the Beginning Was Love* are not arranged chronologically. Instead, Georgiou creates thematic groupings, enabling the reader to see Lax approach his subjects from a number of different perspectives and to explore them in varying forms and genres. Thus, the poems and prose passages call and hearken to one another, allowing us to eavesdrop on the poet in conversation with himself and to hear the poems talking to one another. For example, the opening four poems and passages of the volume concern themselves with the theology and aesthetics behind Lax's poetic practice. Georgiou wisely selects the opening lines of Lax's first and best known book of poems, *Circus of the Sun*, to begin the volume:

*Sometimes we go on a search
and we do not know what we are looking for,
until we come to our beginning . . .*

*And in the beginning was love. Love made a sphere:
all things grew within it, the sphere then encompassed
beginnings and endings, beginning and end. Love
had a compass whose whirling dance traced out a
sphere of love in the void: in the center thereof
rose a fountain. (21)*

The theme of pilgrimage is central to Lax's thinking and art, tracing a path towards one's desired end which is mysteriously implicit in our own beginnings. The sphere, the image of perfection, charts the shape of our own search and also echoes the shape of the world and of the rings of the circus (a favorite trope of Lax), arenas of action wherein life takes place, where art is performed and played out by human beings. This art is an echo of the first act of art, the creation of the world by the Creator, the genesis of all art and the human need to engage in it. Poem #2 in the book picks up on this image, ascribing to the circle's center the dwelling place of "The Lord" who "radiates to the centers / he has formed; / Giving light to the light, / the sun, the eye, the atom," circumscribing creation with "The infinite circling movement of his love" (22). Poem #3 features another variation on this theme of the workings of God in the world, wherein the poet asserts that "The part must be studied / as part of a whole" and "the whole must be studied / as being made up of parts" (23). Thus, God as artist of the creation dwells in all things, both large and small, and the challenge to our limited human vision (and our limited language) is to see and speak God's pervasive presence in the totality of being. Given these circumstances and limitations, the poet's role, as described in poem #4, is to see all things simultaneously – parts and wholes, beginning and end, past and present, center and circumference – and to bring them into relation with one another, "drawing all things together in a single line of / writing," so they might flow together and back to their source, "as brooks find their way to a stream, streams to a river, / and river to sea." These "single lines" the poet crafts bring about communication and the passing on of wisdom:

*when things are in line, they speak to each other
when things are in line, they speak to the whole (24).*

In this concluding couplet, wherein the lines double, echo and nearly mirror one another, the central images of the first four poems resolve themselves in the repeated pattern of poetry, the form embodying the concept, as the poet brings all of creation into conversation with itself.

We see this sort of patterning throughout the selections Georgiou chooses, as he places side by side works Lax never consciously intended to be published together, demonstrating the integrity and consistency of Lax's vision across the many years of his writing. Drawing on Lax's journals, typescripts from the Lax archives at St. Bonaventure University, Lax's published collections of poems and prose, and even personal letters he received from Lax, Georgiou has assembled a remarkably integrated series of excerpts that serve as epiphanies, lucid moments of insight Lax receives and translates into words. While the anthology demonstrates the steadiness of Lax's focus, it also showcases his development as a poet. Poem #46, for instance, written in 1989, represents one of the spare, experimental poems Lax is, perhaps, best known for, wherein he creates vertical columns of verse, limiting himself to a few syllables per line. Though not quite as extreme as some of his hyper-minimalist later works (wherein he often limits himself to only one syllable per line) as evident in the book-length sequence often hailed as his masterpiece, *Sea and Sky*, the poem employs many of the same techniques, both aural and visual. It is difficult to convey a sense of the accumulated power of these columnar poems without quoting them at length and in their proper form, but perhaps this excerpt will at least suggest the rhythmic effects created by the stripped-down simplicity and nuanced repetition of key words that characterizes Lax's later work:

*I'd be happy
to call them*

psalms

*& to say
that to write
a psalm*

*is to sing
a new song
to the Lord*

*the words
of the Lord*

are pure

*refined
seven times*

in the fire

*my words
are now
in a process
of refinement*

Here, once again, Lax is describing his own craft, a process of purgation and purification that constitutes a kind of spiritual discipline, as art and prayer coalesce. Yet even as Lax attempts to explain his singular practice, he is joyfully making music as he goes:

*but even
the process
of learn
ing

to sing

is
singing
—

(I sing

as I
work

I sing
in my work

my work
is song) (76).*

The song-like quality evident in the sound of this poem becomes less lyrical and more percussive in poems such as “Water Sunlight Writes” (#55) and “The Arc” (#56), wherein the poet excludes all extraneous words – conjunctions, adjectives, parentheticals – refining his poetic expression to absolute essentials and to pure beat. “Water Sunlight Writes” consists of only seven words (*water, writes, sun, light, on, the, in*) rhythmically repeated, but with incremental changes in their ordering in imitation of the constantly shifting quality of light on the water. Similarly, “The Arc” employs only six words (*the, arc, in, sky, of, sea*), monosyllables repeated with incremental changes, playing against the reader’s expectations and reflecting the ever-shifting balance between sea and sky in the landscape Lax observes with such great attention each day. From moment to moment, neither sky nor sea stays the same, and the language of the poem captures both the elemental quality of the landscape (the few words needful) and the dynamic relationship between the enormous forces they name.

In his introduction, Georgiou states that “the inner life of Robert Lax is the primary theme of this anthology.” The selections are meant to exemplify the ways in which Lax’s “interior vision integrates both art and spirit, poetry and contemplation” as he searches for God primarily through the exercise of his “poetic intuition” (13). Georgiou succeeds admirably in achieving his goal, revealing to the reader the quality and intensity of Lax’s inner life through the experience of his poems and poetic prose. Lax’s work is characterized by a high-minded seriousness, but it is also shot through with humility

and humor. Most of these poems are grounded in the human world of circus performers and in the natural world of rock and sea and sun. Lax approaches the divine through the real, the supernatural through the mundane, the universal through the particular, enacting a truly incarnational vision. The world and the word prove suitable theatres for Lax's deep imagination, giving him ample freedom and space for the kind of play an artist must engage in to be true to his vocation. With each passing day, month and year on Patmos, Lax seems to have discovered anew a fact he knew well, the ways in which every artist's "*playing is like Wisdom before / the face of the Lord,*" the ways in which "*their play is praise. Their praise is prayer*" (107). Georgiou's new collection of Lax's writings invites the reader to vicariously participate in that play.

As a postscript to this review, it is worth noting that this is a propitious time for Lax studies. The publication of Georgiou's book coincides with that of a new biography, *Pure Act: The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax*, by Michael N. McGregor, and *Poems (1962-1997)*, edited by poet John Beer and published in 2013. In addition, in December 2015, *Poetry* magazine published a portfolio of poems by Lax and features a podcast interview with McGregor on its website to accompany the poems. Beer and McGregor, like Georgiou, knew Lax – made their own pilgrimages to Patmos and soon became part of his circle of friends and devotees. Each of these books offers a distinctive perspective on Lax and complements the others nicely. In addition, these books are selling remarkably well, finding their way into the hands of eager readers, suggesting both the enduring appeal of Lax's work and his continued relevance. In addition to good reading, this renaissance gives all of us – longtime readers interested in preserving the legacy of Robert Lax and those new to his work – cause for celebration.