

## The Road to Simplicity Followed by Merton's Friends: Ad Reinhardt and Robert Lax

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*Paul J. Spaeth*

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is One!  
*Deut. 6.4*

This great confession from the book of Deuteronomy (called the 'Shema Israel') has served as a foundation stone for the Jewish faith. Most often this confession is taken to be an affirmation of monotheism; that there is only one God, Jehovah, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But there are other meanings that can be drawn from this text that deal with the nature of God.

One of those meanings is that God is unique; unlike anyone or anything else. This has reference to God's holiness. Although holiness can refer to the idea of a pure God that cannot abide the presence of sin, it also carries the meaning of God as a being that is 'wholly other'. In this sense he is set apart from all other beings in that there can be no real points of comparison between himself and others.

Another, and perhaps deeper meaning that can be taken from the confession in Deuteronomy is that God is singular, or simple in his being. The monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity have each been drawn to the doctrine of divine simplicity.<sup>1</sup> What this doctrine says is that God is completely simple, composed of no divisible parts, and that those attributes are identical with who he is. This is the God who told Moses that his name was 'I AM' (Exod. 3.14), who can ultimately identify himself only with reference to his own being.

If God is indeed to be seen as simple according to the definition above, and if God is the ground of ultimate truth and reality, then it

1. Brian Leftow, 'Simplicity, Divine', in *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998).

follows that an inclination towards simplicity can, and should often be taken as an inclination towards God, whether it is the conscious intent of a person or not. A child does not usually operate on the level of a systematic or even an overtly conscious set of ideas, but rather on a more simplistic level of instincts and innate concepts. Christ affirms the value of this simple outlook when he says, 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Mt. 18.3), and that, 'The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these' (Mt. 19.14). In other words, the kingdom of heaven is open to the child and to those whose outlook is as simple as the child's.

### Columbia Days and After

Thomas Merton (1915–68), Ad Reinhardt (1913–67) and Robert Lax (b. 1915) attended Columbia University in New York City in the 1930s. They became friends there and from that time on they remained in contact with each other either through visits or correspondence. Although not consciously spoken about among themselves, each pursued a path of simplicity; Merton through entering the Cistercian order, Reinhardt through painting nothing but black canvases for the last decade of his life, and Lax through creating a poetry composed of spare lines and through his choice of life on the Dodecanese islands of Greece.<sup>2</sup>

Merton came to Columbia after having started his studies at Clare College in Cambridge, England. When he arrived to start his new school in January 1935 he entered as a sophomore. Lax had begun his studies in the fall semester of 1934. Reinhardt was an upper classman who was finishing his degree work in the spring semester of Merton's arrival.

Lax may have known Reinhardt earlier from high school days, and Lax and Merton were in classes together, but what the three had most in common was their work on campus publications. Reinhardt had been an editor of the *Jester* (Columbia's humor magazine) being a regular contributor of artwork in the form of covers and other graphics. In Merton's only reference to Reinhardt in his autobiography he says this:

2. For an earlier comparison of these three friends see Susan Howe, 'The End of Art', *Archives of American Art Journal* 14.4 (1974), pp. 2-7.

Ad Reinhardt was certainly the best artist that had ever drawn for *Jester*, perhaps for any other college magazine. His issues of *Jester* were real magazines, I think that in cover designs and layouts he could have given lessons to some of the art-editors downtown.<sup>3</sup>

When Lax became editor-in-chief of *Jester* in the fall of 1936, Merton was made art director. Although Reinhardt had graduated the previous year, there was still artwork of his that was used, including one cover design.<sup>4</sup>

While at Columbia Reinhardt had begun by studying literature but then changed to art history, graduating in 1935. Merton and Lax both studied literature as undergraduates; Merton graduating in 1937 and Lax in 1938. Merton went on to complete a master's degree in 1939, writing a thesis on William Blake.<sup>5</sup>

While Reinhardt went on to do further studies in art, Merton and Lax spent much time together after they graduated. This was especially true in the summers when Lax brought Merton to his hometown of Olean, New York and to the nearby College of St Bonaventure. Merton came with Lax in the summers of 1938, 1939 and 1940. Reinhardt showed up in the summer of 1940 as part of the large and changeable crowd from New York City that filtered through that year.

As a result of these visits Merton ended up teaching at St Bonaventure College for three semesters; from the fall of 1940 to the fall of 1941. And it was from the train station in Olean that Merton left to enter into monastic life in December 1941.

Lax visited Merton in the monastery in December of 1943, attended his ordination (along with other Columbia friends) in May 1949, visited again with Reinhardt in May 1959 and by himself again in June 1968. Lax and Reinhardt may have seen each other on various occasions around New York City, but spent an extended period of time together while visiting mutual Columbia friends in the Virgin Islands during the months of June and July, 1949.

### Merton and the Cistercian Ideal

There is much that could be said concerning simplicity, the Cistercian life and what Thomas Merton wrote about those two topics. But

3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1948), p. 154.

4. *Jester* 38.4 (December 1936).

5. Thomas Merton, 'Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation', *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (ed. Patrick Hart; New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 385-453.

perhaps the most direct, and possibly the best source, in relation to these would be the report of the Cistercian general chapter that Merton translated, edited and commented on, entitled *The Spirit of Simplicity Characteristic of the Cistercian Order* (1948). This book was self-published by the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, was attributed to 'a Cistercian Monk', and came out just before Merton acquired his celebrity status caused by the sky-rocketing sales of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

The book is made up of a report from a general chapter meeting that took place in 1925 in France, supplemented by a selection of illustrative texts from the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux. A quote from Merton's foreward will suffice to show the importance attached to simplicity in the life of a Cistercian monk:

Now simplicity is one of the outstanding characteristics of Cistercian spirituality and of Cistercian saintliness. Indeed, the experience of many monks will verify the fact that when members of our Order are seen to grow and progress in sanctity among us the chief characteristic which they acquire is this simplicity.<sup>6</sup>

A little further on he writes that a summation of the Cistercian idea of simplicity consists of two principles. The first is by 'getting rid of everything that did not help the monk to arrive at union with God by the shortest possible way',<sup>7</sup> and the second is 'the discarding of means of getting to God that were less direct, less perfect, less effective'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the Cistercian life is to be one that is reduced to the singular goal of seeking God. That goal is to be reached through simplicity in clothing, housing and diet,<sup>9</sup> simplicity in all sources of income,<sup>10</sup> simplicity by means of keeping a distance from the world,<sup>11</sup> and simplicity in the practice of worship.<sup>12</sup> This is the portrait of the Cistercian ideal as fashioned by Merton, the editor and commentator, after seven years as a monk.

6. *The Spirit of Simplicity Characteristic of the Cistercian Order* (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, 1948), p. i.

7. *The Spirit of Simplicity*, p. iii.

8. *The Spirit of Simplicity*, p. iv.

9. *The Spirit of Simplicity*, pp. 33-35.

10. *The Spirit of Simplicity*, pp. 35-37.

11. *The Spirit of Simplicity*, pp. 37-38.

12. *The Spirit of Simplicity*, pp. 38-42.

### The Black Monk

Merton's friend Ad Reinhardt was often referred to as 'The Black Monk', because in the last decade of his life his paintings consisted only of canvases painted black. Reinhardt's works were abstract from the very start of his career. From early paintings and collages done in a cubist style, he moved through another phase which led him into the use of geometric color shapes. The shapes in these paintings became gradually larger to the point of having only a handful on each canvas. As the shapes became fewer, so also the colors grew less diverse until each painting consisted of shades of a single color: red, blue and finally black.

The black paintings were all executed in the same way. What a person sees, when they have stared long enough, is a black canvas that consists of nine black squares all of the same size, joined together into a larger square in rows of three across and three down. The pattern that emerges is really a large plus sign, but has usually been referred to as a 'cruciform'. The emergent pattern is sometimes more visible, and sometimes less so. Each painting is five feet square and framed in the same way.

Reinhardt described these paintings in this way:

A square (neutral, shapeless) canvas, five feet wide, five feet high, as high as a man, as wide as a man's outstretched arms (not large, not small, sizeless), trisected (no composition), one horizontal form negating one vertical form (formless, no top, no bottom, directionless), three (more or less) dark (lightless) no-contrasting (colorless) colors, brushwork brushed out to remove brushwork, a matte, flat, free-hand painted surface (glossless, textureless, non-linear, no hard edge, no soft edge) which does not reflect its surroundings—a pure, abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting—an object that is self-conscious (no unconsciousness) ideal, transcendent, aware of no thing but art (absolutely no anti-art).<sup>13</sup>

This series of black paintings can be easily dismissed by some as a tiresome repetition of a trite idea, but it is the concept behind them that is perhaps most important. The appreciation of these works can in no way be conveyed other than by seeing the paintings themselves. They are works that defy reproduction and stand as unique objects that must be seen as originals.

13. Reproduced in Ad Reinhardt, *Art-as-Art; The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Viking, 1975), pp. 82-83.

One art critic has said that these paintings, 'constitute an exceptional body of interrelated works unique in the history of art in terms of their effect, intention and execution'.<sup>14</sup> The same critic cites Merton's interest in Buddhism as a possible influence, saying that one way of looking at the black paintings is to see them as, 'objects of disinterested contemplation—demanding not merely a different order of perception but inducing a qualitatively different state of consciousness from normal consciousness... They are in a sense icons without iconography'.<sup>15</sup>

Probably the best example of the intersection of the meditative simplicity of the monastic life and the simplicity of the black paintings came about when Merton wrote to Reinhardt to ask, 'Have you some small black and blue cross painting (say about a foot and a half high) for the cell in which I perch?'<sup>16</sup> This request was honored and the painting that arrived almost a year later was a smaller version of his 5 foot by 5 foot black canvases. In a letter of response to Reinhardt, Merton had this to say about the painting:

It has the following noble feature, namely its refusal to have anything else around it... It is a most recollected small painting. It thinks that only one thing is necessary and this is time, but this one thing is by no means apparent to one who will not take the trouble to look. It is a most religious, devout, and latreutic small painting.<sup>17</sup>

Merton accepted it as a modern icon, to be used as an aid to contemplation. In his journal he described it in this way:

Almost invisible cross on a black background. As though immersed in darkness and trying to emerge from it ... You have to look hard to see the cross. One must turn away from everything else and concentrate on the picture as though peering through a window into the night... I should say a very 'holy' picture—helps prayer—an 'image' without features to accustom the mind at once to the night of prayer—and to help one set aside trivial and useless images that wander into prayer and spoil it.<sup>18</sup>

14. Barbara Rose, 'The Black Paintings', in *Ad Reinhardt: Black Paintings 1951–1967* (New York: Marlborough Gallery, 1970), p. 16.

15. Rose, 'The Black Paintings', p. 19.

16. Letter of 3 July 1956 preserved in the Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC). Quoted in the introduction to 'Five Unpublished Letters from Ad Reinhardt to Thomas Merton and Two in Return', ed. Joseph Masheck, in *Artforum* 17.4 (December 1978), p. 23.

17. Letter of 23 November 1957 in Masheck, 'Five Unpublished Letters', p. 24.

18. Journal entry of 17 November 1957 in Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Vocation* (ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham; Journals, III,

Even in regard to his earlier work Merton had written that: 'Reinhardt's art is pure and religious. It flies away from all naturalism, from all representation to pure formal and intellectual values'.<sup>19</sup>

An avenue of meaning that can rightfully be brought to the black paintings is to see them as pictorial representations of apophatic, or negative theology. This theology emphasizes the absolute otherness of God. Because of the incomparable nature of God, we can never speak of him directly and positively, but rather we can only say what God is not. If one accepts this position, God becomes the abyss or the dark cloud that covered the top of Mount Sinai in the wilderness (Exod. 19.18, 20.21).

It is interesting to note that Merton translated a piece by Nicholas of Cusa in an issue of *Lugano Review* entitled 'Dialogue about the Hidden God ('*De Deo Abscondito*'), which deals with just this approach to God. The same issue had an article by Reinhardt and a seminal poem by Lax.<sup>20</sup>

Reinhardt's paintings are indeed dark, and they are also simple; in fact they could hardly be simpler. The pattern that emerges on each canvas is hardly discernable. In his writing about these paintings the thing that is emphasized over and over again is singularity and simplicity; reductionism to the extreme. The operative word in his repetitive tracts is the word 'one'.

In 1962 Reinhardt began to publish a series of pieces in various journals, the first of which was entitled 'Art-As-Art'<sup>21</sup> Subsequent essays all went with the subtitle 'Art-As-Art Dogma', each of which was numbered. That first essay begins like this: 'The one thing to say about art is that it is one thing. Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else'.<sup>22</sup> (Part 3 of his statements appeared in the issue of *Lugano Review* that also contained Merton's translation of the piece by Nicholas of Cusa mentioned above, and Lax's 'Black & White', which will be discussed below).<sup>23</sup> One of the last of this string of personal

1953-1960; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp. 139-40.

19. Journal entry of 5 January 1940, in Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation* (ed. Patrick Hart; Journals, I, 1939-1945; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 128.

20. *Lugano Review* 1.5-6 (Summer 1966), containing: Robert Lax, 'Black & White' (pp. 35-50), Thomas Merton (trans.) 'Dialogue about the Hidden God [by] Nicholas of Cusa' (pp. 68, 70), Ad Reinhardt, 'Art in Art is Art as Art' (p. 86).

21. First published in *Art International* (Lugano, December 1962). Reprinted in Reinhardt, *Art-as-Art*, pp. 53-56.

22. Reinhardt, *Art-as-Art*, p. 53.

23. See n. 20.

manifestoes that Reinhardt wrote appeared in the first issue of Merton's little magazine called *Monk's Pond*.<sup>24</sup> This last writing is much like all the others, utilizing the same ideas but placing them in paragraph form under 17 headings such as: 'The one thing', 'The one object', 'The one content', etc., etc.

Reinhardt's very doctrinaire approach to art brought him to the point of the black paintings. It had been the practice of many modern art movements to issue manifestoes that elucidated (sometimes) the works of art they produced. Reinhardt followed this course of action, not as part of a group, but rather as a group unto himself. He saw his black paintings in an almost apocalyptic sense:

Reinhardt himself came to view them as the culminating development of abstract painting: a terminal point of the easel tradition, beyond which it was impossible to proceed to a further extreme.<sup>25</sup>

In an interview Reinhardt said, 'I'm merely making the last painting which anyone can make'.<sup>26</sup>

When you read through Reinhardt's statements about art you encounter deliberate obscurity, outright contradiction and, more often than not, a sharply satirical sense of humor. He could certainly be called a curmudgeonly old crank, even though he died fairly young. We can never be quite sure just how seriously we should take Reinhardt's pronouncements, or even if he took himself seriously at all times.

When everything is said and done we have to say that the black paintings are indeed an austere accomplishment, showing the obstinate will of an artist to pare down his art to the simplest level. Another art critic has said:

Reinhardt's paintings are made with one end in mind; they are objects to experience esthetically, not commentary, self-expression, or formal exercises that may be challenging to decipher. They demand concentrated attention and their perceptual intensity is as little dependent upon illusion as possible.<sup>27</sup>

24. Ad Reinhardt, 'Art-as-Art', *Monk's Pond* 1 (Spring 1968). Reprinted in *Monk's Pond: Thomas Merton's Little Magazine* (ed. Robert Daggy; Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), pp. 6-8.

25. Rose, 'The Black Paintings', p. 16.

26. 'An Interview with Ad Reinhardt,' in Reinhardt, *Art-as-Art*, p. 13.

27. Lucy P. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt Paintings* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1966), p. 26.

### The Monk of the Greek Islands

The above statement about the paintings of Ad Reinhardt could just as easily be applied to the writing of Robert Lax. When one looks at the poetry of Robert Lax what you see, and what you read, is what you get. His mature writing is stripped bare of any imagery that relates to anything but itself. There are no hidden references, or meanings that form the basis of the teaching of literature in present day academic circles.

Merton early on recognized the special status of Lax when he wrote:

The secret of his constant solidity I think has always been a kind of natural instinctive spirituality, a kind of inborn direction to the living God...he was born so much of a contemplative that he will probably never be able to find out how much.<sup>28</sup>

Although Lax had been born in a very small town in southwestern New York state, he was well acquainted with the life of New York city before he attended Columbia University. His early career saw him working at some major magazines, teaching college and even working in a Hollywood studio for a time. But these and other wanderings soon gave way to choosing life on the islands of Greece. The reason he gave for choosing the Greek islands, in an interview, was, 'so that I'd have a quiet place, not very expensive, and in wholesome surroundings—good air, good climate—to write'.<sup>29</sup> In talking about the effect of the islands he said:

I think the island landscape has helped me clarify my thinking; I like being in a place where there is sea and sky and mountains, trees, even olive trees, and sheep goats and shepherds: the natural, sacral, ancient, classical symbols of western poetry.<sup>30</sup>

When asked about the necessary conditions for writing, Lax said:

Well I think a necessary precondition for good writing is a fairly high degree of concentration, and that solitude and silence can contribute to that...these conditions aren't too hard to find in the Greek Islands.<sup>31</sup>

28. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 1948), p. 181.

29. 'Interview with Robert Lax—William Packard', in David Miller and Nicholas Zurbrugg (eds.), *The ABCs of Robert Lax* (Devon, UK: Stride, 1999), p. 20.

30. 'Interview—Packard', pp. 20-21.

31. 'Interview—Packard', p. 20.

Lax sought out the solitude of the Greek islands for his writing as Merton had years earlier chosen the solitude of the monastery for his. On the islands of Greece Lax found the elemental nature of his surroundings ideal not only for his temperament but also as a cell from which to compose his writings.

It was not only Lax's life that underwent a simplification, it was also his literary works. Although never partaking in the obscurantism of much of modern poetry, Lax's earlier poems were fairly conventional in nature. A turning point came in 1962 with the publication of *New Poems*.<sup>32</sup> This collection was entitled 'new' not only because the poems had not been published before, but because Lax was settling on a certain course for his poetic work of which this was the formal announcement. The poems are short and set in the middle of the page. Most consist of very few words, with phrases that often repeat. One poem consists of an arrangement of the numbers 1,2,3,4, while another poem consists of an arrangement of the capital letter A. But the most minimal expression is the poem that consists of the word 'is' repeated 27 times down the center of the page with breaks after the seventh, fourteenth, seventeenth and twentieth repetition.

*New Poems* was not an experiment but, as was said earlier, a turning point. The full development came in 1965 with 'Sea & Sky'.<sup>33</sup> This poem consists of 117 pages on any of which there is not more than thirty words, and most pages much less than that. Each line contains no more than one word and many times the line consists of a single syllable of a word or even a single letter. These short lines appear in a single column. In the original publication the column was justified to the left of the page, but it was Lax's intention that the column appeared in the center of the page.

The content of the poem needs to be spoken of in three ways. First, as can be expected from the title, the meaning of the words employed give us images of nature. Second, the image of the words on the page forces the reader to slow their pace of reading and in so doing to bring about a deeper concentration on the words themselves and their sounds. And third is the sound of the words, for in the choice and repetition of certain words and phrases Lax brings before our ears a poetic mantra of sorts which leads us into a meditative stance. By simplifying image, words, lines and sound Lax leads us away from our normal perceptions of those elements into an intuitive and transcendental mode of thought.

32. Robert Lax, *New Poems* (New York: Journeyman Books, 1962).

33. Robert Lax, 'Sea & Sky', in *Lugano Review* 1.3-4 (Summer 1965), pp. 15-132.

In the year after 'Sea & Sky' Lax published what is perhaps his furthest push in the direction of simplicity. In 1966 'Black & White'<sup>34</sup> was first put into print. In its 21 sections, some consisting of a page containing two columns and some only part of a page, there are only four words used: black, white, stone, &. It would be difficult for anyone to go further than this without losing a sense of lyricism altogether. The same issue of the journal in which 'Black & White' first appears also had the article by Reinhardt and one by Merton that has been noted previously.<sup>35</sup>

When asked in an interview about any influence that his friend Ad Reinhardt might have had on him, Lax said:

Sometimes, not specifically, but the general direction that he was working in certainly did—towards reducing the colors, reducing the form, and repeating the theme—I could understand that.<sup>36</sup>

As has been said Reinhardt and Lax corresponded with each other fairly often. There are a number a versions of a poem that Lax wrote for him, one of which reads like this in manuscript form:

black  
 black  
 black  
  
 blue  
 blue  
 blue  
  
 black  
 black  
 black  
 black  
  
 blue  
 blue  
 blue<sup>37</sup>

Although Lax followed this direction toward simplicity and directness in all of his works, perhaps the greatest legacy he will leave to modern poetry will be 'Sea & Sky' and 'Black & White'. William Maxwell seems to sum up Lax's sense of simplicity when he wrote to

34. Robert Lax, 'Black & White' in *Lugano Review* 1.5-6 (Summer 1966), pp. 35-50. Reprinted with drawings and designs by Emil Antonucci in 1971 (New York: Journeyman Books).

35. See n. 20.

36. 'Interview with Robert Lax—Nicholas Zurbrugg', in Miller and Zurbrugg, *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, p. 28.

37. Reproduced with permission.

his friend and said, 'I have got faith in your ability to slip through the net of materialism and maintain the bare uncluttered life that your work and heart require'.<sup>38</sup>

### Conclusion

In the later Middle Ages the Franciscan philosopher William of Ockham came to be associated with an approach to truth, whether that truth be construed as philosophic, theological or scientific. That principle called 'Ockham's Razor' can be stated in this way, 'Plurality should not be assumed without necessity',<sup>39</sup> or even that it is futile to use more when something can be done with less. In the life and work of Thomas Merton, Ad Reinhardt and Robert Lax certainly this principle of parsimony held sway. It was a theme and a way of life that was shared by each. But this theme was something instinctual with the three rather than something consciously developed or sought after. Merton, Reinhardt and Lax certainly influenced each other, but maybe more than anything else their common attraction towards simplicity acted as a strong bond between them throughout their lives.

38. William Maxwell worked as an editor at *The New Yorker* (which is where he met Lax). Maxwell is a highly regarded novelist, writer of short stories and essayist. The letter to Lax is dated 3 April 1996.

39. 'Ockham's Razor', in Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), I, pp. 156-61 (156).