

'Bringing the Earth to Flower': A Tribute to Robert Lax 1915–2000; Poet, Pilgrim, Prophet

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Who is Bob Lax? Some readers may recognize the name through Thomas Merton's references in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in which Merton characterizes Lax as a 'potential prophet, but without rage'.¹ While others may be familiar with the humor, wit and compassion of Lax through the published correspondence between Merton and Lax entitled *A Catch of Anti-Letters*² as well as *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice* edited by Arthur W. Biddle,³ which received the 2001 Book of the Year Award at the Thomas Merton Convention held in Louisville, Kentucky in 2001. Only recently has Lax received some of the recognition that his life and work deserves, such as the Spring 2001 issue of *The Merton Seasonal*⁴ which is a special issue devoted to the life and work of Lax, as well as the University Arts Award given in honor of Lax by St Bonaventure University in May 2001. Lax is less known in the United States for being the truly gifted American minimalist poet that he is. Jack Kerouac describes Lax as 'simply a Pilgrim in search of beautiful innocence, writing lovingly, finding it, simply, in his own way'.⁵ Critic Richard Kostelanetz

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1975), pp. 180-81.

2. Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *A Catch of Anti-Letters* (Foreword by Brother Patrick Hart; Kansas City, MO: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1978).

3. Arthur W. Biddle (ed.), *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Robert Lax* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

4. *The Merton Seasonal* 26.1 (2001).

5. As quoted in David Miller and Nicholas Zurbrugg (eds.), *The ABCs of Robert Lax* (Devon: Stride, 1999), p. 13.

wrote in 1978 in the *New York Times Review of Books* that Lax's *The Circus of the Sun* 'is, in all probability, the finest volume of poems published by an English-speaking poet of the generation which comes in T.S. Eliot's wake'.⁶ Lax is regarded 'as among America's greatest experimental poets, a true minimalist... Lax remains the last unacknowledged and – alas, uncollected – major poet of his post-60 generation'.⁷ Lax has more of a following throughout Europe than in the United States. He lived in Greece from the 1960s until just weeks before his death in his hometown of Olean, New York, on 26 September 2000. His close friend Merton found that Lax is unappreciated because his verse lacks 'angst' – a common criteria for poetic greatness throughout the twentieth century. Throughout his poetry, Lax integrates inner observations and reflections with his Catholicism. His entire body of work reflects his Jewish roots and his conversion to Catholicism in young adulthood. Lax, who died at the age of 84, maintained a contemplative lifestyle as an alternative to the fast-paced, success-oriented and economically driven culture of New York City, where he graduated with his bachelor's degree in 1938 from Columbia, and where he once worked on the editorial staff of *The New Yorker* and was a reviewer for *Time*.⁸

Merton and Lax had a mutual respect and appreciation for each other's philosophies and art. They met while attending Columbia University, and their friendship remained close until Merton's death. Throughout their lives, as artists and Christian thinkers they significantly influenced each other. Evidence of this can be found in their poetry and art (drawings and photographs), as well as in their correspondence with one

6. R. Kostelanetz, 'The Sounds of Silence: The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton' (*The New York Times Book Review*, Feb 5, 1978), p. 20.

7. R.C. Kennedy, Victoria & Albert Museum, London; as quoted on jacket cover of the reprint of *The Circus of the Sun* in Robert Lax, *Love Had a Compass: Journals and Poetry* (New York: Grove Publications, 1996).

8. Portions of this introduction, as well as other excerpts in this article, were published in my article on Lax which appeared in *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 4.1 (Winter 2001). This article also contains published material which originally appeared in *Religion and Literature* in May 2000 ('Grace and Ethics in Contemporary American Poetry'); and it includes material from my dissertation, entitled 'A Religious Poetics in Contemporary American Poetry', which is published as a dissertation by UMI (Ann Arbor, MI).

The following presentations I have given involved material in this article as well: 'Robert Lax: Poet, Pilgrim, Prophet', Mideast Conference on Christianity and Literature (October 1999, University of Steubenville); 'Function(s) of 'Grace' in Contemporary American Poetry', South Central Conference on Christianity and Literature (February 1999, Beaumont, Texas).

another and with other writers and thinkers through letters and interviews. In his tribute to Merton, Lax remarks, 'In all the ages of Christianity there have been at least a few joyous hermits who have filled the world about them with divinely inspired joy'.⁹ In a letter to the poet Czeslaw Milosz, Merton refers to Lax's epic poem, *The Circus of the Sun*, stating, 'I wish you could see one good book, though, that is unknown, by my friend Robert Lax... Lax you would like'.¹⁰

In a 1959 journal entry, Merton records having just read Lax's *The Circus of the Sun*, remarking that it

is a tremendous poem, an Isaiah-like prophecy which has a quality you just don't find in poetry today, a completely unique simplicity and purity of love that is not afraid to express itself. The circus as symbol and sacrament, cosmos and church – the mystery of the primitive world, of paradise, in which men have wonderful and happy skills, which they exercise freely, as at play. But also a sacrament of the *eschaton*, our heavenly Jerusalem.

The importance of human love in the circus for doing things well. It is one of the few poems that has anything whatever to say. And I want to write an article about it.¹¹

As Merton suggests, Lax provides a prophetic voice for our times. The optimistic vision of the world in his poetry leaves him open to criticism that presumes that he neglects the atrocities, poverty, and violence in the world. Contemporary American poet Denise Levertov praised Lax's *The Circus of the Sun*, as she acknowledged: 'One might feel Lax's book too much ignores the world's anguish, if it were not full of a gentleness, a tenderness, that is not smug'. Levertov insists that the significant 'neglect' of Lax's work is 'undeserved'; she continues, 'but it is easy to ignore work of such lucidity because by its very nature it is not controversial; nor can one bracket it with any "movement"'.¹² A 1999 collection of criticism printed by a British press, *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, takes a significant step towards making reparations regarding the neglect of Lax's work; it includes commentary by such known writers as American language poet Susan Howe and American poet Mark Van Doren.

9. Robert Lax, 'Harpo's Progress: Notes toward and Understanding of Merton's Ways', *The Merton Annual* 1 (New York: AMS Press, 1988), pp. 35-54.

10. Robert Faggen (ed.), *Striving Towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997), pp. 74, 75.

11. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Vocation* (Journals, 3; 1953-1960; ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp. 360-61.

12. As quoted in Miller and Zurbrugg (eds.), *The ABCs*, p. 181.

If the publication of *The ABCs of Lax* (which includes references to Lax's readers as varied and acclaimed as Allen Ginsberg, e.e. cummings, and Sun Ra), as well as the republication of Lax's *The Circus of the Sun*, accompanied with previously unpublished material, by Overlook Press in 2000, and the criticism by lone literary critics, such as myself, who are either drawn towards his minimalist, experimental technique; his poetry which values silence, contemplation, meditation and prayer as embodied in monastic life; or his voice, which explores issues of spirituality, can spark and sustain interest in Lax's body of work, perhaps the poet, the pilgrim, the prophet will be appreciated for generations to come. After all, the poets of a society, according to Lax, 'should be carriers of vision'.

Lax's Poetics of Grace and Ethics: *The Circus of the Sun*¹³

Lax's poetic vision was shaped throughout his migratory life. He once travelled with a circus throughout Europe, and later observed the famed Cristiani family circus in Western Canada as a journal reporter, an experience which inspired his acclaimed volume of poetry *The Circus of the Sun*. The poetry relates the setting up of a circus to the Christian understanding of the Creation:

Fields were set
For the circus,
Stars for shows
Before ever
Elephant lumbered
Or tent rose.

13 *Circus of the Sun* was first published in its complete form in 1959 by Emil Antonucci, Journeyman Books. Prior to this volume, there were two appearances of material that would become a part of the complete epic. The first was in *New-Story* magazine in Paris (no. 4, June 1951); the material was an 'excerpt for a novel-in-progress'. The next printed appearance was in *New World Writing* 13 (NY: New American Library 1958). The piece was entitled 'The Circus'; it contained only a third of the full text, and had extra material that has been honed down. The second complete addition was published by Pendo Verlag in Zurich, Switzerland by Bernhard Moosbrugger.

More recently, *The Circus of the Sun* has appeared in Lax anthologies, such as *33 poems* (NY: New Directions, 1987) and *Love Had a Compass* (New York: Grove, 1996). A companion piece, *Mogador's Book*, was first published by Pendo Verlag in Zurich in 1992.

Circus of the Sun and *Mogador's Book* were written within six months of each other but published thirty years apart. Another related piece, *Voyage to Pescara*, was written in 1951 and was first published by Overlook Press in 2000; the collection of the entire circus epic is entitled *Circus Days & Nights*, edited by Paul Spaeth, curator of the Robert Lax Archives at St. Bonaventure University.

Lax extends this metaphor to how there can be a 'circus of the Lord' here on earth. He suggests that our 'tabernacles' on earth are only 'temporary tabernacles', and that they should aim to bring the earth to its full blossom.

The realization that much contemporary American poetry has brought me to is one that contrasts greatly with the conclusion Dennis Brown makes on what is demanded of contemporary poetry in *The Poetry of Postmodernity*: 'new poetry must construe "Waste Land" as much as a material possibility as a spiritual warning'.¹⁴ In contrast to Brown's invocation of the Waste Land motif to serve as a spiritual warning for poets of postmodernity, I contend that contemporary readers and writers need to recover from the dualistic gestures of material/spiritual, creator/creation, and grace/nature that have been propagated in the trails of the Waste Land.

Lax's poetics of grace and ethics provides an alternative vision to that of the Waste Land. Modernist poet T.S. Eliot finds that religion is the balm for the fragmentation of the modern world; however, this balm is quite extrinsic to nature and to humanity, suggesting that an entirely transcendent grace is needed to come down and 'fix' the world to make it whole and unified.

Eliot's notion of grace is quite extrinsic and dualistic, causing oppositions between mind and body, spirit and flesh, Creator God and merely human, sacred and profane. Lax's book-length sequence of poems entitled *The Circus of the Sun* depicts a communal way of life where there is no domination and no sense of doom that dominates the minds of humanity. Grace in Lax's circus is in the movement of the objects of the juggler, is in the finely tuned somersault of the acrobat, as well as in the 'unfolding' generations of families. Lax's depiction of a creative atmosphere suggests that the divine does not have sole power of creativity and that human beings indeed contain creative and ethical capacities. What is emulated in the circus is how well a performer pleases and gives to the audience. This depiction of human relations and of grace challenges dualistic thinking of human/creator, spirit/flesh, and church/world that is arguably encouraged by elements in Eliot's verse.¹⁵

14. Denis Brown, *The Poetry of Postmodernity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), p. 138.

15. Eliot's verse partakes of the traditional dichotomization within the Christian tradition that is being critiqued within contemporary discourse. In Eliot's 'The Waste Land' and in *The Four Quartets*, the natural and human world is opposed to God/Christ and spirituality. It is as though the supernatural needs to come down from above and 'fix' the natural (humanity and the world). Eliot's verse encourages such dualistic thinking. However, I think it is helpful to consider the context in which Eliot was writing: a

Lax's *The Circus of the Sun* maintains a dynamic conceptualization of the term grace, which includes both sacred and secular connotations. Lax describes the circus as a 'song of praise, / A song of praise unto the Lord. / The acrobats, His chosen people, / Rejoice forever in His love'. Mogador, a major circus performer in the sequence of poems, as Lax poignantly describes,

walks the earth like a turning ball: knowing
and rejoicing in his sense of balance:
he delights in the fulcrums
and levers, teeter-boards, trampolines, high-wires,
swings, the nets, ropes and ring-curbs of the natural
universe.¹⁶

Lax's circus serves as a microcosm of the universe, where there is free-play and a unity of people and activities, where a spiritual presence is not separate from natural, worldly existence. The circus manifests variety, difference, and yet a constant unity and community. This sequence of poems embodies the Bakhtinian notion of the carnival, which allows for community, as opposed to hierarchy. The metaphor of the circus challenges traditional societal structures and roles: Lax's circus refigures a world where grace enables human beings to relate without dominance and without violence. The atmosphere of the text is one which values community: the text is dialogic, a layered text of many voices, as

time of unprecedented human destruction of humanity, natural resources, and the world itself, culminating in the effects of world war. Also, Eliot's Christianity is particularly doomsaying for this reason, as well as the particular condemnation of Christianity as a religion (due to its destruction and oppression that Christianity as an institution has contributed to for centuries) that was happening at the time, as new ideologies were coming to replace the old, at a time when there were many utopian ideals and ideas of social reform which were abandoning and criticizing Christianity/Christian thinking. Eliot's Christianity, therefore, was of a reactionary nature: 'The world', says T.S. Eliot, 'is trying the experiment of attempting to form a civilized but non-Christian mentality. The experiment will fail' (as quoted in Amos Wilder, 'The Surprises of Grace', in *idem, Modern Poetry and the Christian Tradition: A Study in the Relation of Christianity to Culture* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952], pp. 257-80 [269]). Eliot's poetry encourages a dualistic understanding of the operation of grace in the world, which depicts grace as a supernatural force which is not relevant to the secular world, or even makes such dualistic distinctions between sacred and secular which can be harmful as well. Eliot's theme of purgation and purification involves such a sacred/secular, natural/supernatural dichotomization. Contemporary religious thinkers, such as Karl Rahner and many liberation theologians, find that such dualisms contribute to the very destruction and various forms of annihilation that is the very antithesis of the principles of Christianity.

16. *Love Had a Compass* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), p. 63.

opposed to a monologic, authoritative tone and style. The text is in the form of novelized epic poetry, which is openended, accessible, as opposed to traditional epic poetry which is closed and requires an accepted, universal understanding of history that distances the reader from the plot.¹⁷ Lax's novelized epic poetry allows for a spontaneity and emphasis on process and movement, a fluid paradigm for a contemporary community of humanity and nature. It is within such a context that 'grace' is the most free: for grace to be grace, the giver must be free to give, and the receiver must be free to receive. Though there is a sense of a universal community of the 'circus', the characters' differences and individuality are celebrated and accented, as each plays his/her part. And yet, the individuality and difference does not lead to isolation or alienation, for every individual is dependent upon another and the whole; community is desired and required to maintain the circus. In such a world, grace is present and transcendent, the natural is super-natural, and vice versa. The multi-layered circus Lax depicts serves as a paradigm for community, difference, individuality, presence and transcendence; this world is in process, never fixed or stationary; it is a wandering community, yet there is a definite confidence of knowing one's place, a comfort of home, though it is moving, transitory and unfinished.

The interconnectedness of the circus Lax depicts can best be understood within the context of grace. The 'Postscript' to *The Circus of the Sun* overtly addresses elements of grace that were interwoven in the poems of the sequence. In the 'Postscript', which can be read either as prose, poetry or commentary – or a combination of the three (this blurring of genres is a feature reflective of much postmodern literature) – the poet persona writes a letter to Mogador, a member of the Cristiani circus family who is a main character in *The Circus of the Sun*. Lax's persona

17. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, novelization of all literary genres results in literature that is 'caught up in the process of "becoming"' ('Epic and Novel', in *idem, The Dialogic Imagination* [ed. Michael Holquist; trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991], pp. 3-40 [5]). This novelization of other genres has the following features: the genre becomes 'more free and flexible', the 'language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia' and the "novelistic" layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody' and, most significantly, 'the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)' (Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', p. 7).

It is not at all surprising, therefore, that portions of Lax's *The Circus of the Sun* were first published as a novel-in-progress in *New-Story* magazine.

explains that Mogador had wanted a poem in *The Circus of the Sun* to be called 'Unfolded Grace'. He then proceeds to consider its implications:

Unfolded Grace: the acrobat in somersault unfolding, landing lightly on horseback; the family in its generations unfolding, and arriving at the same moment, those same moments of unfolding grace. Why talk about the somersault, the leap, and landing as such a great thing? It is great and small. It is a high achievement for a man and no achievement at all for god or angel. It is proud and humble. It represents graceful victory over so many obstacles; the most elegant solution of so many problems. And yet like the blossoming of the smallest flower or the highest palm, it is a very little thing, and very great. Think, Mogador, of the freedom, in a world of bondage, a world expelled from Eden; 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 the 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. This play, like the ritual gestures of the priest, is characterized by grace; Heavenly grace unfolding, flowering and reflected in the physical grace of the player.¹⁸

This passage conveys a sense of grace that unfolds in and through the world, where the divine presence is realized in the physical and material world. Moreover, this grace 'at play' is also 'in praise', encouraging an association of pleasure and joy with the acts of obedience and ritual in religious experience. Lax's persona then relates his 'Circus of the Sun' to a possible realization of its form in contemporary reality (he continues to address Mogador):

I think there can be a 'Circus of the Lord'. For we are all wanderers in the earth, and pilgrims. We have no permanent habitat here. The migration of people for foraging & exploiting can become, with grace (in the latter days), a travelling circus. Our tabernacle must in its nature be a temporary tabernacle. We are wanderers in the earth, but only a few of us in each generation have discovered the life of charity, the living from day to day, receiving our gifts gratefully through grace, and rendering them, multiplied through grace, to the giver. That is the meaning of your expansive, outward arching gesture of the arm in the landing; the graceful rendering, the gratitude and giving.¹⁹

This depiction of human relations refutes the notion of self as isolated and autonomous, encouraging a notion of self which is realized in giving to others, in experiencing grace.

As Lax begins the sequence with an improvisation of the Gospel of John, the reader is made aware of the presence of the divine within the

18. Lax, 'The Circus of the Sun', in *Love Had a Compass*, p. 95.

19. Lax, 'The Circus of the Sun', in *Love Had a Compass*, p. 96.

context of a human-operated place. The presence of the divine is immanent throughout the circus universe. In the descriptions of the circus grounds there is an interconnectedness between human beings and the natural universe, all of which are maintained by their own efforts, responding simultaneously with the unfolding of the universe which is the divine presence. This 'unfolding grace' that the author persona describes in the 'Postscript' is poignantly illustrated in 'Penelope and Mogador', where Penelope the tightrope walker asks Mogador the acrobat 'how he was able to land so gracefully after he did a somersault on horse-back'. Mogador's various failed attempts at accomplishing his task that follow demonstrate that the flaws of arrogance, pride, self-righteousness, and aims to impress, control, or demand will result in failure, and the graced act will not be realized. It is not until he is free of all pretense and personal ambition that Mogador clears his mind and simply does the somersault, landing exactly 'with two feet on the horse's back'.²⁰ It is then that he is able to gesture with his arms held out, having completed the task, as his gesture gives with complete generosity to God and the human Other. This passage illustrates the 'unfolded grace' of the 'Postscript', where mental or physical effort do not alone fulfill the task: it is the non-self-conscious deliverance of a graced action, when all things combine in that moment (skill, habit, mind, matter, physics). This as 'unfolded grace' blurs distinctions between supernatural and natural.

This habitual condition of grace within the human being is a common notion in theological conceptualizations of grace. Thomas Aquinas characterizes graced personalities as 'habit' and describes grace as habitual act. Rahner maintains such a characterization of grace, emphasizing that grace cannot

be expressed except in categories of being such as state, accident, habit, infusion, etc. Such expressions are not confusing if properly understood, and they need not distort one's view of the fact that grace is always the free action of divine love which is only 'at the disposal' of man precisely in so far as he is at the disposal of this divine love.²¹

The characters in Lax's *The Circus of the Sun* are virtuosos in their performances, experiencing and revealing habitualized grace that unites supernatural and natural, is both given and received.

Lax's persona describes this giving and receiving in the 'Postscript', where grace is unfolded, where it is the individual's task to accept it and

20. Lax, 'The Circus of the Sun', in *Love Had a Compass*, p. 71.

21. Karl Rahner, *A Rahner Reader* (ed. Gerald A. McCool; New York: Seabury, 1975), p. 180.

to then, in turn, give of it. Inherent in the performer's acts is not only the grace that allows it to happen and for it to delight an onlooker, but also the grace of giving, the open generosity with which the gift is given by the divine as well as, in turn, by the receiver who is transformed into giver. This is the significance, as the author-persona points out in the 'Postscript', as well as what is implied in the text throughout the *The Circus of the Sun*, of the outstretched arms at the completion of the performance that is given to the audience. This conceptualization of grace is contingent upon the receiver becoming giver, otherwise grace is static or becomes an impotent, deflating occurrence. Lax's circus is built by, through, and for grace:

Our dreams have tamed the lions,
 have made pathways in the jungle,
 peaceful lakes; they have built new
 Edens ever-sweet and ever-changing
 By day from town to town we carry
 Eden in our tents and bring its won-
 ders to the children who have lost
 their dream of home.²²

Within such a context, their performances, their acts, their dances with the horses become rituals:

What was begun
 As a run
 through the field
 is turned
 to ritual.²³

To approach mundane activities as 'rituals' instills a reverence for the play and work of life in ways that do not marginalize or categorize life experiences, but values the holy in the everyday.

Grace and ethics serves as the paradigm in Lax's *The Circus of the Sun*. The poem sequence highlights a character who is exemplary of a life of graced ethics: Rastelli, a circus hero, is esteemed 'Not because his work was dangerous / But because he was excellent at it / And because he was excellent as a friend'. Rastelli, who is symbolically linked with Christ, died at 33. He is emulated for his graceful acts as well as his graceful spirit: Rastelli is described as having been:

good at juggling
 At talking

22. Lax, 'The Circus of the Sun', in *Love Had a Compass*, p. 76.

23. Lax, 'The Circus of the Sun', in *Love Had a Compass*, p. 89.

At coffee
 Loving everyone
 He died juggling for everyone... He loved the world and things he
 juggled,
 He loved the people he juggled for.²⁴

Rastelli is revered as a juggler whose 'clubs and flames and hoops / Moved around him like planets...' He did not need to manipulate objects to answer to his will; rather, '[h]e moved all things according to their natures: / They were ready when he found them / But he moved them according to their love'. The poem highlights the way that Rastelli recognized his place in the world, how it led him to see himself as a part of creation, and how this reflects the Creator, discovering that grace is both reciprocal and cyclical:

Seeing the world was willing to dance,
 Rastelli fell in love with creation,
 Through the creation with the Creator,
 And through the Creator again with creation,
 And through the creation, the Lord.²⁵

The closing poem to the sequence reflects upon the components of a circus, as it asks the reader to consider the effects of when the circus begins and ends. The poem suggests that the notions of what it means to be human that are held by those involved in the circus as well as those who witness the circus are not left unchallenged. The sequence itself, in its depiction of the circus as a fluid paradigm for living in, with and through grace – may cause the reader's notions of grace, sacred/secular, human/divine, natural/supernatural – to be moved. This recognition reflects postmodern a/theologian Mark C. Taylor's claim regarding carnivalesque play:

By upsetting traditional hierarchies, carnivalesque play inverts inherited values and established meanings. This inversion does not leave opposites unmarked. The reversal enacted in festive celebration dissolves the original identity of the exclusive opposites that have defined the poles of most Western theology and have formed the foundation of Western society and culture.²⁶

The sequence of poems depicts a wide variety of circus characters, using various talents to give glory to God, and, in turn, to give joy and

24. Lax, 'The Circus of the Sun', in *Love Had a Compass*, pp. 90-91.

25. Lax, 'The Circus of the Sun', in *Love Had a Compass*, pp. 90-91.

26. Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 161.

fulfillment to the audience and themselves. This interplay of grace and ethics is revealed through the depiction of a world that is structured around play and entertainment, skill and risk. The circus does not contain the hierarchies of a capitalist society, where money and power determine human relations. The characters in the sequence and the readers themselves are left to consider:

Have you known such a thing?
That men and animals
Light and air,
Graceful acrobats,
And musicians
Could come together
In a single place...²⁷

This place of community is likened to a 'wedding' as the sequence concludes in a dialogic, inclusive fashion; the persona asks the reader a question which involves them in the text of the poem in a more overt fashion. This question can also push the reader to consider if they have witnessed such an event as the circus, and the celebratory atmosphere it encourages: 'Have you seen the noon-day banners / Of this wedding?' Lax's circus conveys that relations between human beings that are not dominant and an economy based on grace and ethics is possible to attain in contemporary society.²⁸ In addition to figuring ethical action in relation to grace, Lax's body of work, like that of Merton, addresses the pressing moral and religious issues and dilemmas of our time.

Resituating the Self: Lax's Introspective Poems

Lax and Merton seek to redefine the self, moving away from the autonomous subject, to the religiously centered, ethical subject. Though Christian faith is often viewed to be the antithesis of postmodernity, it is actually quite consistent with the state of living with ambivalence, the intellectual and volitional demands of negative capability, and a hermeneutics of suspicion and desire. According to Merton, modern civilization is heralding

27. Lax, 'The Circus of the Sun', in *Love Had a Compass*, p. 94.

28. See works by another contemporary author who conveys a similar sentiment: Wendell Berry, poet and recipient of a 1999 Thomas Merton Center Award (presented at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania). Berry encourages readers to envision a society where the environment and responsibility for the Other are concerns that affect the way people plan, grow and live. Berry's verse gives an ecological vision to grace, where a grace economy replaces the cash nexus of capitalist society. His poetry, like that of Lax, illustrates how such a world is possible.

the reign of individualism, where there is an 'abuse of subjectivism—imprisoned in ourselves we become paralyzed'. The resolution, Merton asserts, to such individualism is 'faith'.²⁹ Lax's work, reflective of many contemporary religious thinkers including Merton, locates a selfhood that is realizable when God and the human Other are privileged and prioritized. In a tribute poem on Merton, Lax wrote: 'the closer he came to knowing God, the closer he / came / to knowing himself, his true self...'³⁰ This realization is a common theme in the writings of both men of faith.

Identifying a notion of subjectivity in conjunction with the affirmation of God may seem to be incompatible with contemporary theories. In the period many define as postmodern, notions of truth, metanarratives, and Western concepts of man, God, male, female, nature, time, the autonomous individual, are being problematized. Primarily a phenomenon of Western culture, postmodernism has resulted in the refutation of the claim that truth is universal, transcultural and ahistorical. Postmodern discourse is influenced by such thinkers as Nietzsche (who declared for the twentieth century that 'God is dead'), Freud (who decentered the individual), Marx (who decentered history), and Saussure (who decentered language); consequently, for thinkers of the twenty-first century, truth has been destabilized. As contemporary thinkers informed by twentieth-century figures such as Derrida, Lacan and Saussure, 'we can no longer understand the signifier to be preceded by an anterior truth... the presence of a signified whose existence ultimately necessitates a transcendental signified (God, Man, the Mind, etc.) to which all truths can be referred'.³¹ Indeed, deconstruction will no longer allow the assumption that God is a given. Notions of God, as with any conceptualization, are necessarily culturally and discursively relative. Therefore, the God that Nietzsche pronounced 'dead', according to Merton, never was 'alive' in the first place. In his foreword to a modern interpretation of a medieval mystical treatise, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Merton addresses the 'furor about the "death of God"':

God was never 'out there' or 'up there' or anywhere in a particular place. In fact anyone who is acquainted with theological tradition is well aware that the God who has supposedly died in the minds of these new men is

29. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 40.

30. Lax, 'Harpo's Progress', p. 39.

31. Jacques Derrida, 'Difference', in *Speech and Phenomena, and other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (trans. David B. Allison; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 49.

a god who never lived in the first place. Like the god demolished by atheism, he is a shadow and a contradiction.³²

Throughout his poetry written while in self-exile in Greece, Lax locates an in/direct dialogue with God – be it through an experience that is of dimensions that are mystical, contemplative, praise or prayer – as a source for the nourishment of the faith and the ethical response to the human Other. His poetry articulates a faith exploration that reflects Merton’s mystical and ethical sensibilities: (1) poetics of unknowing; (2) internal dialogue: resituating the self through finding the self in the divine Other; through engaging in prayer and praise.³³

Lax’s prolific writings from the last few decades of his life (which are stored at the Lax archives of St Bonaventure University) acutely convey his passion for searching for the holy in all things, including the self, as Lax locates God as the source of the realization of selfhood and of the call of that self to responsibility for the Other and the world. Such a position disallows the claim that there is *nothing but* culturally constructed frameworks in human experience. Lax’s poetry provides resituations of notions of the self that locate faith, the spirit and encounters with God as real-life experiences and perceptions that transcend cultural, historical circumstances, while, paradoxically, remaining wholly immanent within human experience.

Contemporary theologians and religious thinkers examine all dimensions of human experience for yearnings and expressions of religious faith. And, reflective of spirituality in the contemporary American culture, they do so in a manner that appreciates more subjective experiences of the divine. The contemporary skepticism towards the grand narrative, and its heightened appreciation for ambiguity, pluralism, dialogue and community, contribute to a valuing of more subjective experiences of religious faith, as well as an openness to the wisdom of other religious traditions, and a recognition of the pluralistic nature of one’s own religious tradition. The religious faith that is explored in much contemporary American poetry reflects these concerns while it hesitates to use tropes of the past that tend to be dogmatic, didactic, and presuppose a narrative background of traditional religious expression. Such religious thought that explores the nourishment of religious faith is not the antithesis to ethical response. The ethics and faith which both Lax and

32. Thomas Merton, foreword to *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing: A Modern Interpretation* by William Johnston (St Meinrad, IN: Abbey Publications, 1975), p. x.

33. I presented a version of this section on ‘Poetics of Unknowing’ at Rivier College’s *Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day Symposium* (April 1998, Nashua, New Hampshire).

Merton embody and convey are reflective of contemporary resituations of notions of self, language, meaning and truth that have given way to the resurfacing of topics such as faith, religion, mysticism, contemplation and prayer in ways that privilege the *Other* as opposed to the self.

Merton and Lax acknowledged in their work and lives how contemporary perspectives can provide productive critiques and revisionings of Christian thinking. However, they both defend their Christian faith against those assumptions prevalent within strains of contemporary philosophies that discredit and/or disregard Christianity. They both defend Christianity against the view that the role of religion in society as a cultural institution is one which determines, coerces and controls the subject and the subject's behavior, identifying the church, evangelism and witnessing as the apparatus by which the subjects conform. However, both Merton and Lax would agree that contemporary theories have been profoundly significant for ethical conversations in its recognition of the cultural, historical, material circumstances that determine individuals and communities within a society. However, their lives and work reveal that dominant strains of Marxist, feminist and post-structuralist thought neglect or reject the true value of religious traditions, finding that religion is merely an 'opium of the people' (Marx), that Christianity merely serves to maintain the oppression of women and other culturally subordinated peoples, and that the very idea of a realizable self (in and through relation with God) that religious traditions insist upon is completely illusional.

Contemporary religious thinkers such as Merton and Lax, and liberation theologians, such as Gustavo Guitierrez, Rosemary Radford Reuther and Juan Luis Segundo, have been influenced by Marxist thought in particular, as it recognizes the pervasive and determining effects an environment has in the constructedness of a human subject. However, in contrast to much Marxist thought, these religious thinkers locate the 'Spirit' — which is a presence of the divine Other in human experience that both transcends and infuses human experience — as that which mediates between the human and the world, which assists that human in discerning between the just and the unjust, the true and the false, the spirit-centered and the self-centered. This reliance upon the Spirit (prominent among liberation theologians) for guidance and discernment in the world does not suggest that faith does not confront uncertainties, ambiguities and paradoxes; for, according to Christian belief, human life on earth can only see through a 'glass darkly'.

Some of the most significant religious thinkers of the twentieth century have opened up more direct ethical conversations in Christian thought (while responding to such philosophies as the death of God), by

locating religious faith as a source for the realization of selfhood. Many religious thinkers, particularly from Judeo-Christian traditions, refute the prominent notion of the self as merely a matrix of ideological and social constructs. It is important to recognize that a location of self-actualization within the encounter with the human and the divine does not suggest individualism, isolation or a self in opposition to the world or to the Other or to community.

In prayer, contemplation and meditation, as Merton asserts in his final testament, *Contemplative Prayer*, the person should not earnestly seek a method or style, but should 'cultivate an "attitude", an "outlook": faith, openness, attention, reverence, expectation, supplication, trust, joy'. It is in such a state humans know God in 'unknowing', and realize their selves fully, truly in God. This encounter with God, which is certainly not a sporadic or rare occurrence, is available to the human subject: this 'kind of dialogue', Merton claims, 'brings us deeper and deeper into the conviction that God is our all'³⁴. All forms of prayer, reading, meditation (*lectio, meditatio, contemplatio*), and all activities in the world that result in a spiritual life 'are aimed at *purity of heart*, an unconditional and totally humble surrender to God, a total acceptance of ourselves and of our situation as willed by him'. Purity of heart, Merton continues, 'means the renunciation of all deluded images of ourselves, all exaggerated estimates of our own capacities, in order to obey God's will as it comes to us in the difficult demands of life in its exacting truth'.³⁵

Lax's poetry implicitly problematizes the claims of religion merely being an 'opium of the people', that any notion of an authentic self is an illusion, and that all human experiences or personal beliefs are exclusively historically and ideologically determined. Indeed, religion can become merely an 'opium of the people'; however, religious experience and religious communities *need not necessarily be* a controlling, manipulative force that maintains the status quo and confines and conforms subjects. Contemporary religious poetry provides a space to wrestle with notions of the self in ways that help to dislodge the humanist notion of an autonomous self from our Western minds, allowing for the resituation of notions of the self that prioritize the Other.

As the Spirit is being embraced by liberation theologians and is resurfacing in contemporary discussions of theology and ethics, other sources of 'knowing' in the world are being identified and valued by apophatic, negative theologians (such as Merton) at a time that is often characterized as indeterminate and uncertain. The mystical practices that are

34. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 35.

35. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 68.

being revalued in contemporary societies, combined with the resurfacing of mystical treatises and writings particularly throughout the Western world, and the insights of contemporary theologians, locate a dimension of human experience that urges thinkers to move beyond the self, to notions of the Other and God in ways that surpass reason and logic.

The Mystical Dimension: Poetics of Unknowing

As the humanist notion of the subject has been displaced in contemporary theories, as a human being is no longer assumed to be the source and center of meaning and knowing, such disruptions have opened up the return of, or newly arrived at understandings of, knowledge, logic, reason and their limitations. Post-structuralist theories have exposed the falsehood of the notion of 'mastery' of knowledge of a subject, of arrival at indisputable certainties in studies presumed to be exact sciences. Such recognitions of the limits of knowledge in all disciplines and life experiences, and the inadequacy of reason and logic, and cause and effect rationale, have opened up a space for the return of or the renewed manifestation of other forms of 'knowing' (such as what is referred to in the apophatic tradition as 'unknowing'). 'Unknowing', or forms of knowing within negative theology, recognize that there are limits to human knowledge, and that any attempt to arrive at certainty or possess the ultimate knowledge of the divine will fail; the most authentic knowing of the divine is in 'unknowing', according to the tradition of negative theology that is present in all religions in their dimensions of mysticism that have historically been received either as religious expressions, experiences which range from the only true authentic encounter, or as orthodox, alternative, or even threatening to the status of the church and the status quo.

Though mysticism has always been a part of religious traditions, it has had a resurgence in the Western world in the twentieth century and up to the present. Perhaps it is due to its insistence on the essence of the divine as unknowable, and to its location of a space that transcends individuals, differences and language itself; or, in other words, due to its application of negative theology, and its emphasis upon unity and a space that transcends differences, as opposed to discrimination, marginalization and categorization. Since mysticism focuses on one individual's union with the divine, and affirms the essentially unknowable and unnameable condition of the divine (the basic premise of negative theology), this religious experience moves beyond language, theories and practices. The fifth- or sixth-century philosopher Pseudo-Dionysius, who is the basic source of Western mysticism, claims, 'Indeed the inscrutable One is out of the reach of every rational process'. *The Cloud of Unknowing*,

a treatise on mystical prayer by an anonymous English monk of the late fourteenth century, is the foundational treatise on the practice of unknowing in the Western tradition.³⁶ *The Cloud of Unknowing* author writes: 'So set yourself to rest in this darkness as long as you can, always crying out after him whom you love. For if you are to experience him or to see him at all, insofar as it is possible here, it must always be in this cloud...' In fact, for Merton, as he states in his foreword to a modern interpretation of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 'the "knowing" of God in "unknowing", far from being unreal and uncertain, possesses the highest reality and certainty of any experience accessible to man'. An understanding crucial to negative theology includes the ineffability of mystical experience, as well as the condition of the ultimately unthematizable, unnameable divine. This basic condition Pseudo-Dionysius addresses throughout his corpus: 'Nor can any words come up to the inexpressible Good, this One, this Source of all unity, this supra-existent Being. Mind beyond Mind, word beyond speech, it is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no name' (1.1). According to Pseudo-Dionysius, God must be given all names, and must also be denied all names; therefore, naming God must involve affirmation and negation, where the negation serves to acknowledge that the Divine is unknowable, incomprehensible, unnameable.

The contemporary climate that values more subjective religious experiences embraces such practices as mysticism. However, all too often mystical practices are viewed to be or constructed in a way that is in opposition to ethical action; when, on the contrary, many mystical theologians (including Martin Buber, Thomas Keating and Thomas Merton) will attest that mysticism aims to unify living beings, and values the individual lives of people, as manifestations of divine love and peace. Moreover, Eastern and Western mystics alike will contend that the true root and true response of mystical practice is love or care for one's neighbor through responsible treatment of the other. Mysticism has become significant in much contemporary discourse (including theology and philosophy), due to its negative theological principles which parallel the Keatsian notion of negative capability.

Mystical poetry acknowledges the limits of knowledge and reason to obtain certainty of the divine, embraces otherwise than knowing or

36. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* was quite familiar with Dionysius's works; he translated *The Mystical Theology*, and utilizes the Dionysian concept of the 'unknowing' and Dionysian negative theology within his treatise on centered prayer. The edition cited in this study *The Cloud of Unknowing* (preface Simon Tugwell, OP; The Classics of Western Spirituality; Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981).

'unknowing', the Spirit, and prayer as sources of knowing, and utilizes negative theology as God is named and unnamed, and concepts of the Holy are affirmed and negated. I find a poetics of unknowing to be more pervasive in twentieth-century poetry than the mystical verse of any other literary period, increasing in prevalence in recent decades. Contemporary American poets John Berryman, Robert Lax, Denise Levertov and Anne Sexton all provide examples of poets who utilize a poetics that affirms and negates notions of the divine, regarding 'unknowing' as the most authentic form of knowing that human beings are capable of having in this life. In the sparse amount of criticism on twentieth-century mystical verse, little attention has been given to the postmodern significance of a poetics of 'unknowing' that is prevalent in much contemporary religious poetry – Christian or otherwise.

Mystical tropes of an 'unknowing' nature—or, what I refer to as a poetics of unknowing—has become widespread in contemporary religious poetry. The mystical writing that has been most thoroughly studied and discussed in literary criticism is that of the medieval period. Indeed, the medieval period is widely known for its prolific mystical writers. The lyric or religious verse writings of the medieval period reflect the pervasively religious culture of the time; I would characterize this mystical verse as more of 'knowing' mysticism, which presupposes a narrative background in the doctrine and dogma of the Christian religion. Most medieval mystical lyrics based upon the doctrine of Christianity are of a more 'knowing' nature, invoking imagery of Christ or of significant biblical figures. This content encourages a 'knowing' of God, through reflection on what has been revealed to humanity through Christ and the scriptures. Because these lyrics are mystical—in that the experience of union with the divine is in itself ineffable—the effect of a mystical lyric, inevitably, is of an 'unknowing' nature—a 'knowing' that surpasses reason and intuition. Yet, medieval mystical lyrics tend to ground this unknowing in texts that privilege the 'knowing' of an agreed upon narrative.

In *The Cloud of Unknowing* treatise, the author dwells upon the belief central to Pseudo-Dionysian theology: 'God is ultimately and essentially incomprehensible to the human mind and that if we want to "know" God in this life, we must divest ourselves of all our ideas about the reality that we call "God"'.³⁷ The thrust of this prayer treatise is a practice of negative capability: every name, mental image, and concept that is affirmed of God is also negated, as it emphasizes that the divine is

37. Karen Armstrong, *Visions of God: Four Medieval Mystics and their Writings* (New York: Bantam, 1994), p. 52.

ultimately unthematizable. This medieval prayer treatise that is becoming more widely known in contemporary circles embodies negative theological impulses which I find serve as a model for a 'poetics of unknowing'.

The mystical writings — particularly the treatises that embody a negative theology — of medieval thinkers are 'reflowering' in the contemporary climate, due to such contributions as those of Merton. This reflowering of a spirituality that embraces negative theology reinforces the more subjective and transrational spiritual pilgrimages that individuals are seeking in postmodern times, times which resemble the reflowering of mysticism in other periods throughout history (such as the late Middle Ages). As Karen Armstrong argues, 'the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* gives a much more honest, humble, and thought-provoking answer to the question, "What is God?" He simply replies that he hasn't the faintest idea'.³⁸ *The Cloud of Unknowing* author, through his treatise on 'centered' prayer, leads the reader 'to the apex of all love, in God', and instructs the reader on how to approach an inexplorable union, a momentary connection with God. A practice or a poetics of 'unknowing', therefore, insists upon faith rather than reason. Faith, as a transrational understanding or conviction, is confidently affirmed, while human reason is thoroughly negated. *The Cloud of Unknowing* author 'can be read as teaching us all something of what it means to take God seriously', according to Simon Tugwell, a scholar on the book. He continues, 'And one of the first things is that we must take our own pious practices much less seriously. This is because, strictly speaking, there are absolutely no "means" by which to "get God". It is God who stirs our will to himself, "without means either on his side or on thine". No "means" can bring us to this point; "all good means depend on it, and it on no mean". "Mean unto God get thee none but God"'.³⁹

Practices (including poetry) that are mystical acknowledge the limits of knowledge and reason to obtain certainty of the divine, embrace otherwise than knowing or 'unknowing', the Spirit, and prayer as sources of knowing, and utilize negative theology as God is named and unnamed, and concepts of the Holy Other are affirmed and negated. '[W]hen it comes to communicating some of the delights of contemplation', Merton claims, 'the poet is, of all men, the one who is least at a loss for a means

38. Karen Armstrong, *Visions of God*, p. 50.

39. Simon Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Press, 1985), pp. 182-83.

to express what is essentially inexpressible'.⁴⁰ Just as *The Cloud of Unknowing* author through his treatise on 'centered' prayer, leads the reader 'to the apex of all love, in God', and instructs the reader on how to approach an inexplorable union, a momentary connection with God, the mystical poem has these preparatory capacities as well. The type of poem that fulfills this role, what I refer to as 'poetry of unknowing', prepares a state of mind that is appropriate for a person who is seeking to 'reach out' to the Divine, to enter into the 'cloud of unknowing'. A poetics of 'unknowing' (a description that I derive from Dionysian negative theology) is appropriately paradoxical: poetry of unknowing uses what is known to get at the unknown, and acknowledges that the unknown cannot be known. The joint effect of these paradoxical conditions, which reflects the methodology of the meditative process described in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, can provide the reader with a 'centered' contemplation, a heightened appeal to the senses and emotions (as opposed to the intellect), a preparatory phase for attaining the proper state of humility and restraint, a 'forgetting' of one's self, sin, and the world, and, ultimately, an experience of the 'love' expressed in the mystical poem.

A poetics of unknowing involves various literary techniques that enable the poet to fulfill conditions of affirmation and negation. Lax, like fellow contemporary American religious poet Denise Levertov, frequently utilizes a poetics of unknowing in his mystical verse. Utilizing a poetics of ambiguity, plural text, open form and free verse, Lax conveys a spirituality that has postmodern sensibilities. While his poetry is affirmative of faith, it resists absolute truth claims and refrains from arriving at certainties or monistic visions. His poetry features *both* obligations to the affirmation and the negation of a divine Other. In other words, as Pseudo-Dionysius argues, the divine must be given all names, and must also be denied all names; and so, poetics of 'unknowing' results when the poet uses what is known in order to give an understanding of the unknown, while, at the same time, acknowledging that the divine, is unknowable, incomprehensible, unnameable. While some of the features of the two conditions overlap, and some may be similar, as I describe it, the first condition primarily serves an affirmative role, while the second serves as a negation.

Mystical poetry throughout literary history names God in affirmative and negative ways. The names that poets tend to draw upon in their mystical verse throughout literary periods reflects a negative theology which in the Western tradition is rooted in the work of Pseudo-Diony-

40. Thomas Merton, 'Poetry and the Contemplative Life', *Commonweal* 44 (July 1947), pp. 281-86 (286).

sus. Negative theological ways of naming God are prevalent in much contemporary religious poetry as well, though the poetic forms may be less traditional than the names they articulate. In the affirmative condition, the names traditionally designated for God, according to Pseudo-Dionysius's negative theology, are the following: scriptural names (such as Power, Righteousness, Salvation, Redemption, names of greatness and smallness, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, God of gods, Holy of Holies), 'all the affirmations we make in regard to beings' (therefore, a multiplicity of names), the names of his effects (since God is known through his effects: good, light, beautiful, love, ecstasy, zeal), unified names of the entire Godhead (One, Good), names with a Causal sense (Creator), names of three persons (expressing distinctions of Father, Son, Spirit), names of the Son as incarnate, 'participated' terms (such as Wisdom, Life, Being), and conceptual names of God (attributes such as Beauty and Love). Dionysius's list of names moves from the general to particular: he begins with Good (which pre-contains affirmation and negation, for the general contains Being and Non-Being), then Being, Life, Intelligence, Omnipotence; the particular names he gives God are combinations of great and small names (concepts of God manifested in all activities, not limited to scriptural names or those attributes normally associated with God, such as 'Worm'), and sensible objects in the world. In addition, Dionysius designates 'Ancient of Days', and 'New' as names that convey the notion of the primacy of God's being, which reveals that 'he goes forth from the beginning of the world through all things until the very end'.⁴¹ Thus, Dionysius states, 'in those sacred revelations of himself during mystical visions he is depicted as ancient and new'.⁴²

While, in the negative condition, all the names of God, according to Dionysius's negative theology, must be denied of God, because God is above understanding, is above naming; God is not any of his effects. To suggest this, God must be either not named, or, when he is named, the names that refer to God must acknowledge that he surpasses any concept by having a negation implicit within them (such as names that begin with the prefix 'hyper' and 'super'). There are two privileged names Dionysius does isolate as names of God that are not negated — Good and One. Good and One are the only privileged names for Dionysius, for goodness is the effect of God that includes all other effects. In other words, 'Good' is the one name which reveals all the emanations, processions of God. And, however diverse his effects are, there is a unified 'One' that is indivisible; it is existence alone and has no essence. In

41. Pseudo-Dionysius, 1.1-8.

42. Pseudo-Dionysius, 10.2.

addition, names that include the word 'itself' (such as Life-itself, Being-itself) which are affirmations of God, contain within the name an acknowledgment of his surpassing these concepts; they are participated terms that resist essentializing God.

These two conditions of the poetics of unknowing appeal to the senses and emotions, as opposed to the intellect, though the experience of unknowing, according to Pseudo-Dionysius and *The Cloud of Unknowing* author, begins at the volitional level – the 'will' – which is characterized as not located at the level of the senses and emotions; furthermore, the cloud of 'forgetting' of the self and the world results in the ultimate 'divine ecstasy' in which human love is united with the 'yearning' of God. Pseudo-Dionysius finds (though he affirms and negates this as well) that 'yearning' draws God away from his transcendence, and this produces an answering ecstasy in humans. This is the end of the process: a union superior to understanding. Like Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Cloud of Unknowing* author finds this last step to be not one of intellect or the physical, but of 'love' on both sides. Therefore, it is 'love' alone that penetrates the Cloud of Unknowing. In consideration of this, in order for poetry to be a preparatory 'unknowing', as I describe it, there has to be one constant that is not negated (for it is not an understanding, is not comprehensible): the poetry of unknowing must result in an expression of love, in reverence and awe. This joint endeavor that both affirms and negates notions of God creates an effect of centered contemplation. A poetics of unknowing in contemporary mystical poetry, particularly that of Lax, embodies postmodern sensibilities: deprivileging logic, reason and rationality; privileging contemplation, ambiguity, paradox, mystery and other 'marginalized' ways of knowing.

The very form of Lax's verse is appropriate for its meditative, mystical content. His verse is centered columns of short lines, some lines containing only a syllable or a word or letters. As contemporary American Language poet Susan Howe describes, Lax's poems 'seem one mystical whole... So many people can't pull off the simple one word line down the page, but [Lax] manage[s] to make it vibrate and sing, and fill with wind like a sail'.⁴³ Lax's 'simple' approach is an appropriate one. Dionysius explains that God is simple, meaning that he cannot be broken down into parts. An entity which is complex is made up of many parts; whereas, God is not: he is complete, unified. Therefore, Lax's text suggests that to aim at eloquence would presume that a level of intellect or a concern for ornamentation was necessary in order to address God, when

43. From Susan Howe and Robert Lax correspondence (1983), Lax archives, St Bonaventure University.

Pseudo-Dionysius and *The Cloud of Unknowing* author would insist that this is not so.

Lax's verse which is ever searching, ever desiring, ever yearning for God, reflects *The Cloud of Unknowing* treatise and Pseudo-Dionysian line of thought, because 'love' itself was not something either could explain, it could only be felt, or experienced through one's will, which cannot be forced or caused; for, in the words of *The Cloud of Unknowing* author, they are a natural reaction to the impulse caused by the 'Yearning', which results in such a human reaction as a 'tear'. According to *The Cloud of Unknowing* author, someone new to the experience of 'the cloud of unknowing' will at first be in 'darkness', and it is only when the person has responded to the impulse of the 'Yearning' that he will experience love for God. *The Cloud of Unknowing* author emphasizes that the yearning that brings the person into union with God is a 'sudden impulse', and that the 'fall' out of the cloud of unknowing, out of the centered prayer, will be just as sudden. In *21 Pages, The Hill, Dialogues, Notes and Psalm*, Lax depicts the inability of a person to stay focused, to maintain meditation.⁴⁴ The inability to remain centered is described by *The Cloud of Unknowing* author. In order to attempt to overcome falling out of centered prayer, *The Cloud of Unknowing* author explains, a 'cloud of forgetting' is necessary to achieve for the entrance into the cloud of unknowing; this cloud of forgetting is an erasure of one's awareness of all circumstances and beings.⁴⁵

Lax uses this common postmodern poetic of interrogative text in his poem 'what's God'.⁴⁶ Lax's interrogative text serves as a poetics of 'forgetting' in its defamiliarization of notions of God, the Unknowable. Though, he uses questioning in his poem in order to celebrate the unknown as he playfully conveys his confidence in the power and presence of God.

Lax opens his minimalist verse with the question: 'what's God / gonna do / this after / noon / ?' The question is broken into several short lines forming a column, and additional space is left with the blank lines in the text, creating an effect which values simplicity. Also, the space on the page contributes to an effect of negation, through the absence of words. The speaker does not attempt to provide any clear or precise answer to the opening question, rather, he allows his answer to explore further the

44. Robert Lax, *21 Pages* (Zürich: Pendo Verlag, 1984); *idem*, *The Hill* (ed. Paula Diaw; Zürich: Pendo Verlag, 1999); *idem*, *Dialogues* (Zürich: Pendo Verlag, 1994); *idem*, *Notes* (Zürich: Pendo Verlag, 1975); *idem*, *Psalm* (Zürich: Pendo Verlag, 1991).

45. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p. 128.

46. In *A Thing That Is* (ed. Paul J. Spaeth; New York: New York Press, 1997), p. 40.

unknown. The speaker characterizes God as one who is 'unmoved', who will 'move / something'. The speaker continues to ponder the actions of God, emphasizing that 'he'll move...every / thing'. The speaker's declarations are ambiguous and suggestive, rather than definitive and final. He suggests that God will move everything

in
 a special
 way
 always the same ways,
 but always
 with a dif
 ference
 some dif
 ference
 some where[....]

This apparent contradiction of God's actions being described as both same and different fulfills in these lines an affirmation and a negation. Naming God's actions as 'same' and 'different' has significant implications in Dionysian negative theology: according to Dionysius, 'God is transcendentally, eternally, unalterably, and invariably the "same"'. For, in 'him there is no change, decline, deterioration, or variation'. However, Dionysius claims, "'difference", too is ascribed to God since he is providentially available to all things and becomes all things in all for the salvation of them all... "Difference" means that the many visions of God differ in appearance from one another and this difference must be understood to indicate something other than what was outwardly manifested'.⁴⁷

Lax concludes his expression of curiosity in this poem by again addressing the reader with the same colloquial diction he uses throughout. But, rather than addressing the reader with a question as he did in the opening, the speaker ends with the suggestion to the reader that encourages anticipation and awe:

wait till
 you see.

Lax's poem has features that create a subtle centering and a symmetry through the visual column that is formed, and through the rhythm, internal rhyme, repetition and alliteration. Its ambiguity and lack of definition and detail reflects the content of the poem: Lax's poem can be explored in limitless ways, just as his verse suggests of God. The poem

47. Dionysius (9.5) in *The Divine Names*, p. 116.

symbolically begins with the bold two-word line 'what's God' and concludes with an undetermined two-word answer 'you see'.

'One of the chief problems of mystical theology', Thomas Merton asserts, 'is to account for a loving, unitive and supernatural love of God that is beyond concepts, and to do so in language that does not in one way or other become completely misleading. The mystical theologian faces the problem of saying what cannot really be said'.⁴⁸ And, indeed, this is also true for the poet. Therefore, 'poetry of unknowing', that both affirms and negates notions of God, recognizes in its negation that its own act will fail, its own efforts are futile to name God and/or to transcribe a mystical experience. Lax conveys this, as he fills volumes of notebooks in an archive with his attempts, as he tries and fails theologically, and yet poetically succeeds.

Internal Dialogue: Resituating the Self

In the thought of Merton as well as Lax the self is not understood as an autonomous, isolated subject, nor is God understood as an object apart from humanity and the world. Lax's verse situates God within the self, where the search for self-fulfillment and the search for God are conflated, disrupting traditional dichotomies within Western religious thought. The intimate dialogues with God in Lax's poetry that are conveyed problematize prevalent notions of the self, prayer and faith that are harmful to an individual or community through thwarting human desires and through misleading believers with the misconception that prayer has no relevance to true ethical action.

Lax shares the assumption common among twentieth-century theologians and religious thinkers, including Merton, that a human being has the a priori capacity to seek and receive a relation with God, where the self is realizable in the union with God; and, also reflective of contemporary thought, they qualify that the full self cannot be known until one is fully united with God in the afterlife. Such an understanding of the self found in and through God reflects twentieth-century Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, as well as Merton, as they locate God as the source and fulfillment of selfhood. The poetry characterized by its internal dialogue with God can be described, in the words of Lax, as a 'readiness to recognize' God; 'that's all' we 'bring to the encounter'.⁴⁹ Such an encounter between an individual with God reflects the shift that has taken place within the American religious climate toward more subjective experi-

48. Merton, foreword to *The Mysticism*, p. 16.

49. Lax, *21 Pages*.

ences of the divine, relying less upon the confirmation of tradition, doctrine, and sanctioned rituals.

In works such as *21 Pages*, *The Hill*, *Dialogues*, *Notes* and *Psalm*, Lax locates an internal dialogue with God as a source for the nourishment of the faith and the ethical response to the human other.⁵⁰ Much of Lax's verse is meditative, as it finds the self in God and finds God in the self, as his persona engages in an internal dialogue. This resituation of the self is poignantly illustrated in Lax's metaphor for the self – the 'celery stalk' growing toward the light:

Sometimes I think it's like celery stalks growing in darkness. Stalks reaching up toward the light. My waiting for you is like a plant that grows up toward the light. Doesn't veer from its path. No wind can turn it. I wait & am aware of waiting.⁵¹

Lax's book-length sequence of prose poetry *21 Pages* contains post-modern theological impulses in its search of self in God and search for God in the self. The text is fragmented, open, predominantly interrogative, is self-conscious, self-reflexive, confessional, spontaneous, organic and personal. The persona throughout the text refers to the process of meditation and of recording meditative verse, including attempts to focus, to silence the mind and to be physically still while meditating. The reader is made ever aware of the process of constructing the poem, as the author persona intrudes with such declarations as 'I ought to be able to say it better than that. But how? By not trying? I'll try not to try. I'll try to say it the way it is, the way I see it. But I won't try too hard. Trying too hard gets me off the track. I know where I am now. I know I can get some part of it said'. Reflective of the apophatic tradition of religious expression (which deprivileges reason and logic, and privileges mystery and ambiguity), and the postmodern suspicion of absolutes, Lax's persona resists claims of certainty regarding his self and God; the only certainties are his acknowledgements of his pressing desire to be fulfilled by God. When the text is declarative, often the text folds back on itself: each declarative statement is made unstable by the fragment or statement that follows, such as in the passage:

My fallen state, if that's what it is. My dark night of the soul, if that's what it is. My long night's waiting, if that's what it is. I saw a lot more then, on those nights of sleeping, not sleeping under bridges, sleeping, not sleeping on benches, under

50. I presented a version of this section ('Robert Lax: Internal Dialogue with God') at the Festival of Faith and Writing 2000, Calvin College.

51. Lax, *The Hill*.

trees, in barn or on church step than I'm seeing now. No matter. I continue to watch.

The meditative sequence delves deep into the human psyche of the author persona, as he searches for God and searches to find himself. Often the search of self and the search for God is conflated, as illustrated in this opening sequence, which suggests that at their core the destination of the two searches are inseparable:

Searching for you, but if there's no one, what am I searching for? Still you. Some sort of you. Not for myself? Am I you? Need I search for me? For myself? Is my self you? I know: Self. Is that you? Is it me? Why search? I seem to be built to [...]

The entire sequence is reflective of the postmodern theological tendency to stress desire rather than truth or other forms of absolutes, to arrive at understandings based upon faith rather than reason, to claim desire rather than absolutes as the *raison d'être*. The sequence affirms the desire and longing of the human being to encounter something other than himself/herself as he/she knows it, in order to find a fulfilled self in relation with God. Lax's text implies throughout the sequence, and frequently makes explicit, the notion that the human being was 'Made, put together, invented, born for that single, singular purpose: to watch, to wait'. This desire that fuels the entire meditation for the persona, as he concludes, is what the persona has 'known...from the beginning'.

Faith, for Lax, as he defines it in *Psalm*, is a 'falling toward' God. The persona declares that he 'made one choice, a long time ago', and that 'since then' he has 'been falling' toward God.⁵² Lax's verse depicts religious desire and belief in a way that emphasizes the particularity of the religious experience without being didactic:

It is you yourself
who urges me
to find you.

I believed you
when you spoke.

I believed myself
when I answered.

I can't remember
exactly what you
said

I can't remember
 what I said either
 exactly.⁵³

The religious experience for the persona is a mysterious and ambiguous experience (which is central to postmodern sensibilities), while there is a sincere certainty in his faith:

...I remember
 that there was a moment of trust—a long,
 full moment of trust that passed, that existed
 between us.

If that is true, I have found you:
 you are within me
 urging me to look.⁵⁴

The certainty of Lax's religious belief is not derived from absolute truth claims or universal principles, but the 'desire' for God that 'never abates' and the conviction that, as he addresses God: 'If I cannot see you it is because you are / within me. / You are the spirit urging me to find you'.

Indeed, Lax is a prolific writer of meditative verse that locates the self in God, and God within the self. Lax's situating of the self in God and God in the self has ethically responsible implications, as the following passage from Lax's book of meditative verse, *Notes* exemplifies:

Thinking that the source of each person's life is something within him or her—as the seed—as source of the tree—contains the life of the tree from the beginning. The seed contains the life, but is dependent on air, water, sunlight, earth to fulfill the promise it contains. Without the life that's in the seed there'd be no flower, no tree. But life needs materials & forces from outside to come to full growth.

G-d the Holy Spirit dwells within us, as life within the seed. But He is outside and beyond us, too, encouraging, sustaining the growth of the seed.

Still, let us think of Him as being within—He is within—and let us honor Him, too, in ourselves and in others.⁵⁵

53. Lax, *Psalm*, p. 22.

54. Lax, *Psalm*, p. 24.

55. Lax, *Notes*, p. 8.

This religious and ethical notion of honoring God within other human beings is also emphasized in a later passage in *Notes*: the persona utilizes apophatic language (language reflective of negative theology) to explain that 'our movements', 'our thoughts', and 'our desires' can be traced 'down to the "Nothing" from which they arise'. That 'Nothing' of God, the persona claims, 'is to be revered, honored, in ourselves and in all who live'. Lax cites as an example the sacred acts of the Hindu to illustrate this reverence of the divine in the human Other:

Hence Hindus put their hands together and bow
their heads in saluting—in greeting—each other.

They are making a sign of reverence to the Holy Life
which dwells within the being—of themselves, and
of the person greeted.⁵⁶

The poetry of Lax qualifies that the full self cannot be known, until one is fully united with the divine in the afterlife. In Lax's *Psalm*, he asserts that 'the spark of life which is in the seed is one which has come from Him & returns to Him'.⁵⁷ In *Dialogues*, Lax's persona boldly states, 'you'll never / find out / who you / are'; 'it can't be / known'.⁵⁸ In *Dialogues*, he also claims, 'the / way / to / be / your / self / is / to / for / get / your / self'.⁵⁹ Locating God as the source of self problematizes the humanist notion of free will, as Lax's verse illustrates: 'what / are / you / go / ing / to / do / with / this / mo / ment / ? / what / is / this / mo / ment / go / ing / to / do / with / me?'.⁶⁰

The poetry of Lax resituates the self not only by finding the self in God and finding God in the self, but by engaging in prayer and praise, as the following section explores; his poetry reflects the human need to pray to and praise God, as well as *God's need*, as many Christian thinkers (including Merton) as well as Jewish thinkers insist, for human prayer. In the contemporary climate where ethics is becoming of central concern in discussions on politics, religion, education and society, twentieth-century religious thinkers contend prayer is central to our being, and they insist that prayer has ethically responsible implications.

56. Lax, *Notes*, p. 10.

57. Lax, *Psalm*, p. 34.

58. Lax, *Dialogues*, pp. 10, 12.

59. Lax, *Dialogues*, p. 6.

60. Lax, *Dialogues*, p. 72.

Poetics of Prayer and Praise

Throughout the centuries, religious believers of various backgrounds have grappled with concepts of prayer and action, setting them up often as dualistic practices. Many religious thinkers throughout history, Jewish and Christian alike, have sought to undo such dualisms, and to value prayer as a significant component to being a responsible believer. In the contemporary climate, when American individuals in particular are seeking more subjective experiences of religious faith, prayer has become valued for its personal, private nature, as well as for its public consequences or concerns, as matters of prayer throughout religious traditions are matters that concern other people and the world. In other words, the act of prayer is an encounter with God (alone or with thousands of people), that is not dictated or determined by doctrine or religious sanction, but are responses that a responsible believer(s) makes to the concerns of the world.

Prayer is not a pressing issue in typically secular conversations. The mention of prayer in conversations on such issues as war, peace, terrorism, violence, education, and other aspects of our contemporary society, may cause one to wonder, what relevance prayer has? How is it that prayer or reflection is not merely self-indulgent, self-focused and oppositional to ethics? Often activists are suspicious of prayer, as it seems to avoid action. Whereas, according to Merton, who is widely known for his personal integrity as a Trappist monk, theologian, poet and peace activist, prayer is not 'simply an evasion of the problems of real life', he asserts that 'the humility of faith...will do far more to launch us into the full current of historical reality than the pompous rationalizations of politicians who think they are somehow the directors and manipulators of history'.⁶¹ In fact, for Merton, prayer is 'never something which we can claim as though by right and use in a completely autonomous and self-determining manner according to our own good pleasure, without regard for God's will'. 'The gift of prayer', Merton continues, 'is inseparable from another grace: that of humility, which makes us realize that the very depths of our being and life are meaningful and real only in so far as they are oriented toward God as their source and their end'. The self, for Merton, is only illusional when we 'seem to possess and use our being and natural faculties in a completely autonomous manner, as if our individual ego were the pure source and end of our own acts', causing our acts, 'however spontaneous they may seem to be, [to] lack

61. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, pp. 112, 113.

spiritual meaning and authenticity'. Our true selves, therefore, are 'hidden in obscurity and "nothingness", at the center where we are in direct dependence on God'.⁶² Such an awareness of the center of our being, for Merton, quite simply is an argument for prayer and contemplation. Merton locates prayer as fulfillment of one's needs and the world's needs, disrupting the dichotomies between the contemplative and the world, and between prayer and ethical responsibility. Such a disruption is illustrated in the poetry of prayer by Lax.

Lax's *Psalm*, which is named for the scriptural prayers to the Lord, is devoted to personal meditations on God and the self in dialogue. Much of Lax's poetry is highly meditative, as his persona vigorously searches the self using an internal dialogue to know the purpose of the self, and the realization of the self in God. In much of his poetry, Lax links the natural occurrences, behaviors, and inclinations that human beings have – such as waking and singing – with the divinely inspired impulses that cause a human being to seek, desire, to pray to, and praise God. In a passage from *Psalm*, Lax's persona contemplates the relation between the acts of waking and singing and the desire to pray and praise, as distinctions between a natural act (such as waking from sleep) and a chosen act (such as praising) are conflated: 'Is waking one act with singing? / Is beginning to wake beginning to praise, / to pray, to sing?'⁶³

If, indeed, a 'readiness to recognize' God is all we 'bring to the encounter', as Lax aptly states in *21 Pages*, a readiness for an in/direct dialogue with God – in the act of prayer, and in the ethical response to the human Other – is a disposition that prioritizes God and the human Other. Such a disposition, as it is conveyed in the poetry of Lax and in the prolific writings of Merton, displaces the self as center, allowing for the privileging of the human Other and the divine Other. Furthermore, prayer, for Lax as well as Merton, is the very source of peace, for that which is within, and throughout the world. For Lax, he found the peace most satisfying on the Greek island of Patmos.

Voices and Visions from Patmos

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62. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* p. 70.

63. Lax, *Psalm*, p. 50.

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While living simply on the island of Patmos, and earlier on Kalymnos, Lax produced more than 300 published works of poetry, journals and essays, in addition to hundreds of pages of unpublished works and photos which are stored at the Lax archives at St Bonaventure University, near Olean. I had the privilege of being the last to interview Lax in May 2000 at his home on the legendary Greek island of Patmos, where, in the Christian tradition, St John received and wrote the Revelation. Since his settling on the Greek island of Patmos, the landscape, the people, the way of life, the history and the tradition of the island influenced and shaped Lax's writing; Lax was moved by its simplicity, wisdom and sincerity. Once he arrived on Patmos, Lax recalled that he realized he had found the place he had been searching for. He found that 'everybody, particularly the farmers and fishermen, the people who are "unlettered" here, reaffirmed my beliefs since childhood, because they are permeated with the wisdom of the island'. Lax explained that there are many islands in Greece, but 'Patmos is the only one that has been compared to Jerusalem as the Western holy city'. Lax confirmed, and I would agree after my month's stay on the special island, 'It is with good reason'.

The island of Patmos is the site of pilgrimage for many people who seek discovery, meaning, adventure or rest. It is here where St John wrote: 'I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ' ([NKJV] Jn 1.9). Though the island has become more commercialized with the increase in tourism over the past decades, there remains levels of reverence within the island, in the natural beauty, the inspiring presence of the mountaintop Monastery of St John the Theologian and the hillside cave of the Monastery of the Apocalypse, the hundreds of chapels, and, in the Patmians, in their respect for God, for life, for others and for the island.

Lax poignantly describes the landscape and atmosphere of Patmos in 'A Greek Journal', stating that arriving at the island is like being

64. Untitled poem taken from Lax, Notebook 1 October 1999, in Lax archives, St Bonaventure University.

'awakened to a ritual, a performance': 'as the traveller approached the island he could see the calm hills, the quiet houses, the broad, domed church that stood above the harbor, the sweetness, the meekness of the island spoke to him, scarcely spoke to him...' (p. 61)

Lax considers the seasons and cycles and admiringly identifies the 'rituals' of the island:

if spring in this moment graced the hills, would not a dry wind follow, and
white sun later, and winter rains?
the day was the common property of the people; the people, the common
property of the day
waiting for nothing. hoping for nothing. expecting nothing. aware, none-
theless, of the change of light, the change of the seasons
on the west face of each house, the levelling light
the hills stand up to sing (an anthem of evening)
sun's formal fatherly leave-taking into the sea
last instructions: prescription for ritual of arising
(the quieter the land, the more apparent its rituals)
are we not to learn from the seasons; from season after season, to learn &
learn...⁶⁵

Lax finds Patmos to be a holy place. He traces how this place remains the island of revelation, in its biblical and historical sense, as well as in its contemporary meaning and relevance. He refers to 'patmos, holy patmos', stating, 'i've never come here without the feeling, at least on the first few days, that the island is holy'. He describes the island: 'the bend of the walk around the bay. the view of the monastery up on the hill (a citadel) as seen from far end of the bay. the terracing of the hill. a feeling, real feeling, of peace in the air'.⁶⁶ The apocalyptic atmosphere of the island is never far from Lax's poetic consciousness:

a walk this afternoon out on a (familiar) high road by the sea. beautiful, volcanic rocks at roadside: apocalyptic-looking: sculptured [...] strange majesty, strange intimacy too—they talk in a familiar voice: apocalyptic presences. (someone who wrote to me last week at kal said 'those stones (in greece) really speak'. now i know what he means.) and i felt all today as I did yesterday that peace, deep feeling of peace is here. that here is where i should stay at least for a while [...] that here things would grow, things would speak. [...] that here the days would go as though nothing were happening, but something would be happening. that i would do nothing all day long, but toward the evening of every day i'd write (&slowly become) more articulate: almost every time i've been here the days have

65. Lax, 'A Greek Journal', *Love Had a Compass*, pp. 238-40.

66. Lax, 'A Greek Journal', *Love Had a Compass*, pp. 224, 225.

gone that way: i've felt as though nothing were happening; yet at the end of the year i've found that the work i did at patmos was (often) work that stood.⁶⁷

The vision of the apocalypse surfaces throughout Lax's Greek Journal. Lax often refers to the apocalyptic landscape of Patmos, such as the rocks which are predominantly scattered across the island: 'rocks scattered helter-skelter on the hillside, as though after an explosion, as though after an apocalypse: yet each one "perfect" in its place. [...] patmos rocks are magical, mystical, holy.'⁶⁸

He likens the rocks to the prophet himself who heard the revelation:

the rocks look like a person who has 'suffered' a great revelation
like a prophet
after the spirit
has set him
free

And, furthermore, Lax locates himself within this holy place:

when i am alone on the road with the rocks, the whole world falls away,
and i am alone & 'contained' in a familiar place.
the color of the rocks is the color of fire (the color of pomegranates)
if a rock by the roadside is shaped for sitting, it is well-shaped for sitting
(& well-placed, too, for meditation)
the rocks at patmos are vertical rocks; and the hill at patmos rises high
the holiness of patmos is priestly, prophetic, ecclesiastical holiness.⁶⁹

The atmosphere of Patmos and the surrounding islands Lax describes in terms of grace, order and purpose. He refers to 'islands set out with care & grace (as though for a tea ceremony)'.⁷⁰ Moreover, he details the people of the island as purposeful in that order. This can be seen in Lax's highlighting of the monastery which is on the mountaintop of the island, overlooking the port city of Skala, where Lax lived. The Monastery of St John the Theologian is a significant feature in the minds and lives of the people of the island, as he makes clear: of 'mama's' children, 'yerasimos is the most favored. though he lives at the monastery, they also keep a nobly furnished room for him at the house'.⁷¹ However, Lax does not neglect the various layers of reality of the island and the monastery: though most of Lax's references to the monastery are appreciative and mystical, Lax quotes a local Patmian who felt that the monks 'had turned

67. Lax, 'A Greek Journal', *Love Had a Compass*, p. 227.

68. Lax, 'A Greek Journal', *Love Had a Compass*, p. 232.

69. Lax, 'A Greek Journal', *Love Had a Compass*, p. 233.

70. Lax, 'A Greek Journal', *Love Had a Compass*, p. 232.

71. Lax, 'A Greek Journal', *Love Had a Compass*, p. 229.

the monastery into a tourist attraction'.⁷² Lax does record, nonetheless, times that he would 'go up to the monastery and listen to the liturgy', and he even wondered if 'merton would be there?'.⁷³ Lax also found himself led, by Patmian friends, to attend chapel, which was certainly not lacking on the island of over 400 chapels, where many families had built their own chapels to pass down into generations.

Patmos deeply affected Lax's faith experience. He claimed that the people of Patmos, namely the fishermen, farmers, carpenters, others who live and work on the island, and those who come to stay for a while, 'reaffirmed my trust in the most high, the one thing to lead me to where I should go, and just as much to lead all the people on the island to the same degree of trust'. Lax continued, 'They're finding that they have experiences that leave them gasping with wonder, the beautiful way things can unfold, lives can be creatively meshed with each other'.

Before living in Greece, Lax had lived in New York City, where he felt burdened by the modern way of life. As he records in 'A Greek Journal',

night seems lighter, less heavy, here [on Patmos] than in kalymnos, and considerably less heavy than in new york. the weight of people sitting around at night, the weight of their thoughts, the weight of their plans seem to create a physical pressure in the air above all the cities: creates, that is, a psychological pressure so strong that it seems tangible, physical, bears down like a weight on the shoulders.⁷⁴

Lax continues,

it would be hard to imagine a similar weight bearing down on so small an island, being gathered even from the nocturnal fantasies (for so much of it rises from fantasies) of so small a community. perhaps it could. but just as new york seems heavier than kalymnos, and london perhaps even heavier than new york, the size itself of the city, and the number of perambulant dreamers within it seems to affect the magnitude of the weight that hangs above it and presses down.⁷⁵

Lax contrasts the city and the village life of the island, locating a key difference between the two, stating,

there are paradoxes to be discerned here, because although life in a city seems to be constantly changing, each violent occurrence within it, each brutal fact, seems to be permanent, seems to be part of its unchanging face; in an island village the opposite is true: the hills about it are permanent, the seasons come and go in a stable rhythm; houses are built to stand till

72. Lax, 'A Greek Journal', *Love Had a Compass*, p. 230.

73. Lax, 'A Greek Journal', *Love Had a Compass*, p. 232.

74. Lax, 'A Greek Journal', *Love Had a Compass*, p. 242.

75. Lax, 'A Greek Journal', *Love Had a Compass*, p. 242.

they fall; children carry the names of their forebears, and within this mostly comic framework, incidentals in the life of man seem smaller, more ephemeral.⁷⁶

Despite his embrace of village life, Lax maintains hope for the cities of the world, God's cities. Reflective of his *The Circus of the Sun* verse which embodies a vision for how humanity could interact in a way which better fosters an atmosphere of worship and praise, Lax envisioned the city as a potential garden of Eden: he stated in our interview:

My view of the city is a form of a garden of Eden. A real city should be green and blossoming, with beautiful things; it should be a blossoming city, right here on earth. This earth was not created for nothing. All we should do is make it grow, make it be what it was meant to be before the fall. Earth was created because heaven was so full of love that it wanted someone to share that love with, to enjoy it; that is how it came into being.

Whether in the city or the village, however, it is the ability to walk in stride that Lax finds remarkable about Merton. Lax recalls Merton's steady walk on Fifth Avenue when they had arranged to meet, as well as his firm footing in the monastery. While in Greece, Lax found a source of wisdom and spiritual direction in the life and work of Merton. Lax records in his journal that Merton is often the 'guru' in his mind and imagination 'who tells me other wisdoms: usually the wisdoms of abstinence & avoidance; of retreat, prayer & preparation, of non-attachment, of 'sitting quietly doing nothing', of seeking smallness, not greatness, or of seeking nothing at all'.⁷⁷ A reason that Lax remained in Greece was 'to learn' and to contemplate and to write. He admired the certainty and stability he had observed in Merton:

[Merton] had one quality, particularly in the last years, but even (to a large degree) from always, from even before he (formally) became a catholic: a certainty of tread.

that might sound as though he plonk plonk plonked like a german soldier as he walked down the street. actually, he didn't: he danced (danced almost like fred astaire: bang bang bang; or bojangles robinson, tappety bam bam bam) but he knew where he was dancing.

he did walk with joy. he walked explosively: bang bang bang. as though fireworks, small, & they too, joyful, went off every time his heel hit the ground.

76. Lax, 'A Greek Journal', *Love Had a Compass*, p. 242.

77. Lax, 'A Greek Journal', *Love Had a Compass*, p. 209.

[...] it was true the last time i saw him bang bang banging down a long hallway at the monastery. he walked with joy. he knew where he was going.⁷⁸

It is appropriate that Lax concludes 'A Greek Journal' (*Love Had a Compass*) with a praise poem, followed by poetic thoughts of God and the hereafter. In his praise poem, Lax 'praise[s] the Lord / for the beauty / of the sun [...] for the sound / of the wind [...] for the movement of the trees [...] the dancing of the sun'. He concludes the collection *Love Had a Compass*, contemplating a time and place 'in another land', when

[...] with my
own compasses

I will not look
further for
righteousness

I will understand
you only in your
absences

Lax's life and work exemplifies that love, indeed, has a compass after all.

Throughout his travels, Lax was drawn toward certain groups of people that he could 'quite happily relate to', such as taxi drivers, who Lax referred to as 'receptacles of everything in the world; they are a crowd like gypsies—in New York or in Paris—they have a similar wisdom'. He was also drawn toward jazz musicians: 'especially after the crowd leaves, the jam sessions they have for themselves and the kind of collaboration they have, the way they do their best to bring the best out of the other players; they set it up for him to come in with his instrument'. These instrumental people in Lax's life remind me of the role he fulfills as a poet. The taxi driver, jazz musician, fisherman, farmer, carpenter, in light of Lax's insight into human life, are each apt metaphors for the poet. However, though I find the description to be fitting, Lax would likely prefer not to be remembered most as a poet, pilgrim or prophet. Rather, as he stated simply in our interview on Patmos, he wants to 'stick around and bring the earth to flower'. Through his volumes of writing and in the minds of his faithful readers, he does just that.

78. Lax, 'The Greek Journal', pp. 208-210.