

the cool winds of God. This is the heart of Merton's enduring witness to freedom.

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Thomas Merton and Robert Lax. *A Catch of Anti-Letters*. Foreword by Br. Patrick Hart. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1994. 128 pages. \$9.95.

Reviewed by Erlinda G. Paguio

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In an interview Robert Lax gave to Paul Wilkes for a film on Thomas Merton, Lax remembers the certainty of his friendship with Merton from the moment they met in 1936 while working as editors of Columbia University's *Jester*.

A small collection of "A Catch of Anti-letters" first appeared in a short-lived literary journal called *Voyages*. When it was published as a book in 1978, some reviewers considered it as nothing more than just the record of two friends enjoying themselves in correspondence. Its reprinting in 1994 is a timely and welcome complement to the five-volume collection of Merton's letters published within the last ten years. This collection of correspondence between Merton and Lax differs from the others because Merton himself selected and edited them a year before his accidental death in December 1968. They are anti-letters because both friends deliberately discard all the formalities of letter writing while engaged in a lively and humorous exchange of ideas and experiences. Merton was a monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani while Lax was in self-imposed exile in Greece.

They address each other in many ways, some of which are familiar only to themselves. Merton greets Lax with "Dear Waldo," "Ho Lexos," "Cher Monty," "Dear Most," etc. Lax is equally endearing in his salutation: "Dear Captain Thurston," "Dear Arthur," "Dear Zwow," "Dear Hoopsaboy," etc. Imaginative are the ways in which they end their letters. Merton closes with: "Yrs. Demosthenes," "Yr. pal Cassidy," etc. Lax often uses "yrs, Sam," but will also sign "yrs. Lycourges," or "yrs. Tiger," etc.

Although they continuously write run-on sentences, consciously forget all the rules of grammar, punctuation, spelling and syntax, their

repartee is captivating, especially when they pun. Mt. Athos becomes "Mt. Arthur." A Guggenheim fellowship is a "Guggenhappy fellowspot." Erich Fromm is "erich up" and "erich of." St. John of the Cross is "St. John of the Crux," and Albert Camus degenerates into "Albert Camels."

They appear to be joking all the time, but they are truly two wise and concerned men. Mark Van Doren, their teacher and friend, referred to Merton as his mirthful student, his merry friend, who was utterly serious and utterly free. He described Lax as one who could not state his bliss, which is his love for the world and everyone and everything in it. In one letter Lax describes for Merton the blue rooms he occupied in Kalymnos. He notes that over his bed was a box full of icons which could easily fall over him with the slightest tremor. "i am only telling you this. but i have the consolations of a solitary life. i stay in my cell and it becomes sweet" (47). Merton shares his solitary life, too: "The secret of the hermit life is that it remove the foundations and take away the building and there is no roof left and one float down the stream like a chip in the waters" (68).

His living among Greek Orthodox Christians led Lax to raise the question of who was right and who was wrong. Merton's reply was not theology, but a combination of wit, simplicity, and common sense: "Between us and them is no difference of faith, is no difference. . . . Difference between us and them is politics, chum. . . . Let the politicians figure it out. . . . It is to my mind that in the Holy Ghost and in Christ we are one and as for the visibility it is now obscure. I do not wish to explain to the guys how it is we are one because I don't know. Each one has to sit in his hutch and do his best. . . ." (40-41).

Included in this book are some of their poems and Merton's calligraphies. Lax is most impressed by "Night-flowering cactus" which he considers as "some one hell of a poem." The following lines evoke the pristine character of the true self in *The Inner Experience*:

Though I show my true self in the dark and to no man  
(For I appear by day as serpent)  
I belong neither to night nor day (13).

The imagery of "a white cavern without explanation" recalls the mystical experience of the Bride in *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love* of St. John of the Cross.

The short poem "Seneca" which Lax appreciated immensely, portrays the Roman philosopher Seneca as the exterior self and his wife as the inner self. While he promenades within his own temple, "policing the streets of this secret Rome," his wife listens:

While the wife  
 Silent as a sea  
 Policing nothing  
 Waits in darkness  
 For the Night Bird's  
 Inscrutable cry (21).

Lax considered this a great poem because of the unity of the words and the music. He advised Merton to write more poems like it: "as reinhardt makes now all the time the same black painting, make you also all the time the same dark poem; all the time, just that one poem: here a word, there a word, maybe a little different; . . . the music always the same . . ." (24). He encouraged him to make more calligraphies because they helped the poems as much as the poems helped the calligraphies.

Merton sent Lax a copy of his message to the new Latin American poets meeting in Mexico City. Lax's reaction to it is profuse pleasure: "it is wow wow wow: just what the poets is needing; just what i felt i was coming to see in the graces of yesterday afternoon; that this is what poems is all about, this what every poet should know" (37-38). In the message Merton affirmed that for the poet "There is only life in all its unpredictability and all its freedom" (*Raids on the Unspeakable*, 159).

Merton appreciated Lax's experimental concrete poetry. "Your two poems is most impress" (63). He sent Lax the early version of *Cables to the Ace*. Lax thought they were very crazy cables, but moving, nevertheless, as a meaningful poem after considerable reading and re-reading.

*A Catch of Anti-Letters* begins in 1962 and ends in 1967. Brother Patrick Hart provides short but most useful background information in his Foreword on the friendship between Merton and Lax, and their college friends and teachers at Columbia University. Merton's poem "Western Fellow Students Salute with Calypso Anthems The Movie Career of Robert Lax" is included as an Appendix. There are references to world politics, innumerable reminiscences of their college days,

health problems, as well as Merton's difficulties with the censors and his superiors. "One of the saddest facts of my factual existence is that I am in perpetual trouble with the hoodwinks and the curials . . ." (35) is condensed into "I am hailed before all the councils with a red pencil" (36).

The concluding letters in 1967 express their sorrow and loss over the death of their two close friends, Ad Reinhardt and John Slate. Merton writes: "Make mass beautiful silence like big black picture speaking requiem . . . Sorrows for Ad in the oblation quiet peace request rest" (120). Lax replies: "Oh Chauncey, . . . I sit near the sea & almost fall into it from sorrow. & then I sit (as seldom enough we do) in a church & look at the black & grey squares of the tiles, till the spirit is somewhat mended" (121). They would also mourn Slate's passing. Merton comments: "As each grows old so grows multiple the sorrow" (123). Lax laments: ". . . with passing of Dom John Slate is our generation all dissolved, resolved" (123).

The friendship between Merton and Lax so spontaneously expressed in the anti-letters reminds me of what John C. H. Wu wrote about two Chinese hermits, Han Shan and Shi-Te: "Even hermits have need of like-minded friends for mutual encouragement and consolation. This is what keeps them so perfectly human" (*The Golden Age of Zen*, 279). Brother Hart's description of Merton and Lax as "two supremely free men, free 'with the liberty of the children of God'" is most appropriate.

When Lax was asked how he felt when Merton died, he said: "In specific ways, I certainly felt I'd lost a correspondent; if I had something funny I wanted to tell him about it would be a little more different now . . ." (*Merton By Those Who Knew Him Best*, 74). He said it was one thing to feel that Merton had moved on to another stage and to feel that it was the right time for it. It was another to know that one couldn't drop a letter to Merton anymore.

The book is an entertaining testament of two poets, lifelong friends living life with all its unpredictability and freedom!