

## Reviews

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BIDDLE, Arthur W. (ed.), *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. xx + 448. ISBN 0-8131-2168-X (hardback). \$39.95.

Those who have read—or attempted to read—*A Catch of Anti-Letters*, the collection of 66 letters from the 1960s between Thomas Merton and Robert Lax that Merton gathered and edited, but which found a publisher only in 1978, ten years after his death, may be excused for wondering if they really want, or need, to puzzle once again—at considerably greater length—over the friends’ witty allusiveness and obscure wordplay in *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice*, the complete extant Merton–Lax correspondence. The short answer to this question, for all serious readers of Merton, or of Lax, is an unequivocal ‘yes!’ This record of Merton’s longest and deepest friendship, a total of 346 letters dating from 17 June 1938, the year the two men graduated from Columbia, through 8 December 1968, two days before Merton’s fatal encounter with the defective fan in Thailand, is an indispensable source of factual information and of insight into the personalities of two remarkable figures and the relationship that nourished and sustained them both for more than 30 years. And the good news is that while the double-talk is present in the vast majority of the letters, it begins only gradually in the early phase of the correspondence, so that readers have time to adjust (as they didn’t in *Catch*), then disappears for a while in the first monastic years to re-emerge in the mid-1950s, by which time they should be able to relax and take it as it comes, not obsessing about catching every nuance (which it is doubtful that even Lax and Merton always did!) and enjoying the flow of high spirits and deep thoughts. Editor Arthur W. Biddle’s monumental effort in assembling these letters is a major contribution to Merton and Lax scholarship.

Of the total of 346 letters, 191 by Merton and 155 by Lax, 237 have not previously appeared in print. Some of these are brief notes or postcards (though not for that reason necessarily insignificant, as for example Lax’s 23 April 1950 note, consisting simply of the words ‘POWER WISDOM LOVE POWER WISDOM LOVE AT PLAY IN EVERY ACT OF EVERY BEING’ arranged in a circle, presaging the spareness of his later poetic style [p. 113]); but the majority are substantial and add significantly to our knowledge of the relationship. In particular the 102 letters (47 by Merton) between 1950 and December 1961 cover a gap not represented at all in *Catch* (which begins with letters of 1962) or in *The Road to Joy*, the second volume

of Merton's collected letters, which includes 43 letters to Lax but none from this period. *Prophecy* also restores the editorial omissions found in a considerable number of the letters in the two previous collections (all helpfully marked by the editor). It is now possible to get a reasonably comprehensive picture of this mutually enriching friendship, which was maintained largely through correspondence—Lax visited Merton only four times during his 27 years at Gethsemani, and except for the summers of 1939 and 1940, spent together at Lax's brother-in-law's cottage, they had relatively little time together after their graduation from Columbia. But the affection and affinity between them that Merton describes so memorably in *The Seven Storey Mountain* remain evident through the three decades when the friendship was dependent almost exclusively on the exchange of letters collected here.

Biddle arranges the correspondence into five periods. The first consists of 60 letters (44 by Merton) beginning in the summer of 1938, as the two friends try to settle in to life after college. For Merton the transition to Columbia graduate school, begun the previous semester, is progressing smoothly—the major change is moving from his late grandparents' home in Douglaston, Queens into Manhattan, first to 114th Street, and in early 1939 to Perry Street in Greenwich Village. Lax has returned to Olean and a job as a radio announcer. The letters are filled with references to friends, books, movies, various writing projects, political events, especially the early phases of the Second World War, and eventually on Merton's part, religious concerns. The first half dozen letters from Merton (only one previously published) were written before his baptism, and provide, with their sprinkling of vulgarities and sexual references (including one rather crudely misogynistic comment), a glimpse of his pre-conversion lifestyle. With some gaps (the period around Merton's baptism; the weeks the friends spent together at the Olean cottage), the correspondence covers the main events of these years of Merton's life, often with specific details not recorded elsewhere—his master's thesis on Blake, his plans to join the Franciscans, his trips to Bermuda and Cuba, his time as a St Bonaventure English professor, his decision to join the Trappists. At about the midpoint in this period the friends exchange places, Merton moving to Olean to begin teaching and Lax going back to Manhattan, eventually to work at *The New Yorker*. There are some interesting foreshadowings, as when Merton writes in August 1938, 'I think to read about Zen Buddhism' (p. 12), and in the next letter, 'I read some Chinese called Chang Tzu' [*sic*] (p. 14). The letters are filled with comments about his literary enthusiasms (for instance Dante, mentioned repeatedly from March 1940 onward), his own writing (providing dates for many of the early poems, for example), and the oscillations of his own spiritual life (two pages after describing his experience in the Havana church of realizing 'that right in front of me was the great entirety of heaven with the big stadium full of saints Dante describes in the last cantos of the Paradise beholding in their midst the immense light of God' [p. 52] he laconically writes from Virginia, 'No monastery. Maybe look for a job' [p. 54], and in a subsequent letter describes his 'complicated misery' leaving Ginnie Burton's house after 10 days of dissipation, including what he would describe years later in his journal as 'my last adultery', evidently with 'Ginnie's cousin who I think to be the queen of the earth, although married' [p. 54]). The letters are slangy and allusive from the start, and in late 1940 begin to show the influence of James Joyce in their punning and double-talk, which will be a

standard feature of the friends' later correspondence—though the final letter in the group, dated 6 December 1941, in which Merton announces his plans to enter Gethsemani, reverts to a style of grammatical as well as thematic sobriety: 'It is time to stop arguing with the seven guys who argue inside my own head and be completely quiet in front of the face of Peace' (p. 84).

The second section, covering Merton's first ten years in the monastery, consists of only 20 letters, just eight of them by Merton, whose correspondence during this period was of course restricted by the Cistercian rule that limited sending and receiving mail to four times a year. (Biddle might well have included the two 1953 letters from Lax in this section, the only other surviving letters before 1956, when the correspondence would begin, slowly at first, to resume with a regularity that would continue until Merton's death.) Merton's letters, generally one per year at most (two from 1948, the year of *The Seven Storey Mountain*), generally focus on his twin themes of life as a writer and life with God, with reflections both on the congruence and the tension between them. In the midst of Merton's expression of deep religious fervor is an honesty that undercuts any pretensions of artificial piety, as when he writes in November 1942:

Naturally, while sometimes you are very quiet and happy because God is very obviously with you, with a presence & blessedness you never imagined possible, at other times this is not so. Then you try to pray or think of Christ and your mind instead of filling with peace, fills with slogans, He-she jokes, movies so bad you had forgotten them by the self-protective work of your own subconscious mind. You think of million dollar advertising ideas, and this makes you very ashamed, and bored, & disgusted. This is a trial common to our life, & has good effects, one of the principal of which is to make you love God not only for His obvious gifts, but realizing clearly, by His apparent absence, how infinitely preferable He is to everything else (p. 90).

Lax's letters, generally briefer, and almost all from the latter half of the period, after he too had become a Catholic in 1943, detail his own geographical and spiritual odyssey, from *The New Yorker* and Friendship House, to a Hollywood studio, to western Canada and the Cristiani Family Circus, back to Olean for a period of intense work on what would become *Circus of the Sun*, and eventually to France, where he would spend a good part of the early 1950s.

Though less explicitly and less frequently than Merton, Lax also articulates his maturing spiritual vision during this period, as when he declares that 'teaching theology the way St Augustine did', that is, by '[f]inding the Living God in the Scriptures...finding Him in the teacher and the student; the good performer and the beholder' is 'the only way to teach', and adds: 'That, indeed, his way to teach is the only way to dance. And, it turns out from talking to the acrobats, it is the only way to do somersaults on a horse. (That maybe sounds as though I misunderstood you or would apply what you said to where it can't go; but I anyway hope not.)' (p. 111).

The third section consists of 67 letters, almost evenly divided between the two correspondents, from mid-1956 through the end of 1960 (as well as the two 1953 letters from Lax, at that time still in France). The increased volume is due largely to Lax's return to America and involvement with *Jubilee*, the magazine founded by

their mutual friend Ed Rice for which Lax had been serving as 'roving editor' in Europe, as well as with his own off-beat poetry broadside *Pax*. Merton was a frequent contributor to both publications, and much of the correspondence is concerned with poems and articles submitted and requested, though in the process the friends discuss an increasingly broad range of topics: illnesses ('This is the year of the wood dog in which it is decreed that every fine fellow should spend some time in a hospital' [p. 138]); personal encounters (such as Merton's with Gregory 'Zilboorg' [sic], who allegedly warns 'If YOU get analyzed you will ruin the business and all the analysts will have to hide in the bushes, for fear of the Index' [p. 129]); mutual friends and friends of one or the other (Lax notes that 'JK the beat poet has published 250 new poems all wild & hysterical but I for one like them' [p. 180]); world events (the trip of Vice President Nixon – described by Merton as 'the scowling Friar' – to South America, which demonstrated the '[p]olitical philosophy' that '[i]t pays to take away money from Southamericans and to insult them at the same time' [pp. 150-51]); reading (Merton reports, 'I am having a mystical flirtation with Emily Dickinson' [p. 183]); writing (Lax declares himself 'hard at work on another project equally devastating of our so called contemporary civilization, only this time it is about marsiles and its surroundings: rome, budapest, rejkavik' [p. 184]). Merton's first letter to Lax during this period, dated 19 April 1956, is addressed to 'Oh Lax', signed 'Lv - in the Lord. Merton', and is written in standard grammar, but the next, from early June, begins 'First of all it comes soon for Rice the paperish manuscrib I have wrought concerning the secret harps' and is signed 'Uncle Pete'; Lax responds with one signed 'Lv, in the Lord, Cousin Olaf', and in turn receives one beginning 'Ho ho. Thanks Godot' and concluding 'Splash. Bishop Humboldt' [pp. 121-25]. From this point onward the two will match one another's inventiveness with wacky names, fractured syntax and wildly extravagant, at times semi-coherent language, obviously a delightfully welcome form of release from routine for both men – Merton especially, perhaps, since his routines were the more restrictive. Even when they were being most serious, the form they had adopted would keep them from taking themselves, each other, their own problems or those of the world too seriously. This period is marked by significant turning points for both men, as Merton is drawn both toward greater solitude and deeper involvement with the world, and Lax finds his poetic voice in *Circus of the Sun*, which Merton praises as 'one of the few if only religious books of any value that has skidded off the slides in these United Steaks for many years...one of the few books in the world that really establishes some kind of communion between the one saying something and the one hearing something that has been said' (p. 182). The mutual understanding, mutual appreciation and mutual encouragement that mark the exchange of letters during these years makes clear why this contact continued to be of primary importance to both men during the last decade of Merton's life.

Well over half the letters in the collection (199) date from the last eight years of Merton's life, divided by Biddle into two sections of four years each. While 82 of these, completely or in part, have already appeared in print, the majority are now available for the first time (though a number of these, especially from Lax, are brief notes). Biddle's fourth section consists of 76 letters, 37 by Merton (18 previously published). (Though Biddle writes that these years saw 'a renewal of regular correspondence' [p. 213] between the two friends, the 21 letters of 1960 were actually

a higher number than any previous year.) Merton's interest in issues of war and peace emerges very prominently in these letters, with a good deal of comment about *Original Child Bomb*, 'Chant to Be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces', 'A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants', 'Better Red than Dead', *Breakthrough to Peace*, and other peace writings, and eventually about his silencing: 'I have been told to shut up about the wars, wars is not for Christians except to support' (p. 237). (As Biddle notes, three of the letters to Lax from late 1961 and 1962—including the one with this comment—were eventually included by Merton in his mimeographed collection of 'Cold War Letters', privately circulated among his friends as a way of circumventing the censorship.) Merton also reports on his health, his reading (sometimes simultaneously: 'I will lie on the hot water bottle and tighten up the traction and read more of the poems of George Herbert' [p. 254]), and events both ordinary (Fr Innocent preaching on Sartre on the Feast of the Holy Innocents: 'an interesting sermon and nobody slept' although 'Fr Innocent hasn't read Sartre any more than any body else around here and kept calling him 'Sarter'' [p. 234]) and extraordinary (particularly his clandestine trip to New York City to meet D.T. Suzuki in July 1964, a letter filled with references to the friends' old Columbia haunts and including a wonderful story about two Irish monks, one in a boat and one walking on water which he claims is a meadow, to prove which he throws a flower at the monk in the boat, who in turn catches a salmon with his hand and throws it at the first monk—to all of which Suzuki's only response is to 'ask where the first one got that flower. Not a wink about salmon, no siree' [p. 281]). Lax, meanwhile, has returned to Europe, first temporarily and then permanently, spending time on a number of Greek islands and finally settling on Kalymnos. (He would move to Patmos, where he remained for the rest of his life, only after Merton's death.) Much of the correspondence from this period concerns this relocation. Lax had applied for a Guggenheim grant (which he did not receive) to fund his original stay in Greece, and asked Merton for a letter of recommendation, which leads to a good deal of high-spirited badinage, in which Merton demands bribes, in \$50 increments, for concealing Lax's supposed scorn for formal education and 'contempt for the Greed's eppig Homware, Suffoelits, Europates, Askils' [p. 241] (i.e., the Greeks' epic Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus), and claims to think Lax, then at the Athens home of art historian Alexander Eliot, is 'staying with the very Eliot of cats. No, no. it has not come to this!' [p. 242] (a reference to T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*). There is also a good deal of discussion of the relationship between Catholicism and Orthodoxy, as when Lax describes a 'very strong, saintly ascetic, fiery-eyed' young Greek hermit, who 'doesn't seem to like jews and moslems much (though a convert's ok)' (p. 272)—the last undoubtedly a reference to himself. Lax soon inquires about the doctrinal differences between the two branches of Christianity and is assured by Merton that 'Difference between us and them is politics, chum' and that '[i]s not a whistle of a significant difference, that about the Filioque was dreamed up by Germans and it is something got to be undreamed by the same Germans' (p. 274), not exactly a historically accurate account but one that is at least metaphorically (or is it metaphysically?) apt. Also included are samples of Lax's later minimalist poetry, a style that prompts Merton's enthusiastic comment that 'the book is so good that the typewriter ribbon gets darker with enthusiasm' (p. 261).

The final section of the letters, from the period 1965–68, includes 123 letters,

more than a third of the total. Of these, 48 come from the last year of Merton's life, during most of which Lax was back in America, which made for a faster turn-around time between letters. The two writers continue to exchange literary work, with more poetry than prose coming from Merton who regularly sent Lax early versions of what would become the long sequences *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, and who enlisted his friend's support in gathering contributions for *Monk's Pond*, the four-issue magazine Merton edited in 1968. Merton's permanent move to the hermitage is related, prompting Lax's response, 'it is good to be a hermit. I too am a hermit. It is best. Always be one' (p. 313)—a self-description, perhaps more accurate than Lax himself realized at the time, that points to at least one area of profound congruity between the friends that complements the exuberance of their letters. A shared sense of the absurdities of contemporary life is illustrated by the exchange of various photos and advertisements clipped from newspapers and magazines, as well as by the increasingly surreal style of the letters, which are often tinged, especially on Merton's part, with bitterness at the immorality of the war in Southeast Asia and at some of the inanities of monastery and Church, both the conservative reaction to conciliar reforms and some of the more superficial manifestations of 'updating'. Merton comments early in 1967,

I am truly spry and full of fun, but am pursued by the vilifications of progressed Catholics. Mark my word man there is no uglier species on the face of earth than progressed Catholics, mean, frivol, ungainly, inarticulate, venomous, and bursting at the seams with progress into the secular cities and the Teilhardian subways. The Ottavianis was bad but these are infinitely worse. You wait and see (p. 356).

The following year he writes 'When you come to ol' Kaintuck don't let on you are coming to see me. Frantics are burning my books in L'ville (honest, have writ to papers, "will burn *Seven Storey Mountain*: Merton is commie red atheist contra Vietnam war pitznik.") Bad reputations for all' (p. 387). The successive deaths of Columbia friends Ad Reinhardt, John Slate and (in a house fire) Seymour Freedgood in late 1967 and early 1968 bring a heightened awareness of mortality, and prompt perhaps the only letter in the final decade of the correspondence not written in double-talk, a brief note addressed to 'oy, Merton', signed 'Lax', and concluding, 'We must pray for old Freedgood who was up in the flames & makes Slate & Reinhardt seem blessed in their birthdays, and always, every minute take care' (p. 379). The year would of course end with the death of another of the old Columbia crowd, in a guest house room in Thailand. In his last letter to Lax, now returned to Greece, Merton writes from Calcutta that the abbot has sent permission for 'estencion of le voyage' and adds, 'I bear in mente the winds of spring from Tokyop wafting the passengers to Athens and Mount Arthritis' (p. 417). But the projected visit was not to be: on December 8 Lax wrote back, in a letter Merton would never receive, 'learn as many breathings as possible from the meditative monks & whatever else can be done for recollection', and adds, 'send me anyway your next address' (p. 420).

Editor Biddle's brief Introduction and his headnotes to the five sections and to individual letters are very helpful in orienting the reader to the general and particular contexts of the letters. He points out that in reading Lax's letters 'one needs to interpret from small hints' in contrast to Merton's 'more confessional' style (p.

xv)—a distinction that could well apply to their poetry as well as their correspondence. He also provides a detailed chronology for both men, particularly useful for Lax's longer and less well-known life, climaxing in his death on 26 September 2000, shortly after returning to Olean from Patmos.

There are a few minor omissions and inaccuracies that should be corrected for any reprintings of the volume: two of the letters also found in *The Road to Joy* (61.30 [p. 234] and 62.2 [p. 235]) are not labeled in the headnotes; Merton's volume of poetry *The Tears of the Blind Lions* has been reduced to a single *Lion* in the headnote to Letter 49.3 (p. 109); Pablo Antonio Cuadra has become 'Antonia' in the headnote to Letter 61.20 (p. 228); Seymour Freedgood is 'Freegood' in the introductory note to the last section of letters (p. 291); Dona Eaton has become 'Donna' in Biddle's interview with Lax (p. 435); neither Merton's article on Herakleitos nor that on Peter Damian appear in *Disputed Questions*, as stated in the headnote to Letter 60.6 (p. 192) ('Herakleitos the Obscure' is found in *The Behavior of Titans*; 'St Peter Damian and the Medieval Monk' was published only in *Jubilee*). The undated Letter 41.5, preceding one dated 13 March 1941, seems to be out of place, since it mentions an article on the Trappists for *The New Yorker* that Merton decided not to write, an event that according to Robert Giroux took place after Merton's Holy Week retreat at the monastery (see his Introduction to the Fiftieth Anniversary Edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. xiii).

Though difficult to compile because of the variety of (mis)spellings, an index, at least of persons and of writings, would have been a useful addition. Also helpful would have been a system similar to that used by David Cooper in his edition of the Merton-James Laughlin correspondence, which provided brief categorizations for each letter ('TLS' for 'Typed Letter Signed'; 'AL' for 'Autograph Letter (Unsigned)'; etc.)—such annotation would have been particularly useful for this set of correspondence, where even the typos have been left as in the original letters. A fully annotated edition would of course have been impracticable, perhaps coming close to doubling the size of the volume, and probably impossible even for someone of Biddle's close acquaintance with the work of both men. Those notes that are provided are helpful, though the principle for inclusion is somewhat hazy (why, for example, are Professors Tindall and Neff supplied with first names on page 8, but not Professors Christy and Fairchild?); some annotations found only in *A Catch of Anti-Letters* might have been included here as well (for instance the fact that 'nacoms' was the name of a secret society at Columbia that Merton belonged to [*Catch*, p. 46; cf. p. 278], or that Robert Gerdy had died of a heart attack [*Catch*, p. 71; cf. p. 320], or that Harry J. Friedman had been a Columbia classmate and *Jester* business manager [*Catch*, p. 73; cf. p. 322], or that 'sanpaku'—a word used by Merton in a nonsense poem—is a Japanese term for fatigue caused by vitamin deficiency [*Catch*, p. 74; cf. p. 323]). But though *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice* is not a perfect edition, it is as close to definitive as one is likely to get.

In his customarily gracious Foreword to the volume, Brother Patrick Hart mentions his personal preference for publishing both sides of a correspondence, since reading the letters of only one of the writers 'is much the same as hearing just one side of a telephone conversation' (p. ix). Part of the pleasure and benefit of this collection for readers familiar with Merton is getting to know his friend Robert Lax, and coming to know why that friendship was so central to his life. This pleasure and benefit is considerably increased by Arthur Biddle's wide-ranging interview

with Lax that closes the volume, providing striking insights both on the Merton-Lax relationship and about a poet who is increasingly recognized as a major literary figure in his own right, and who certainly comes across in this conversation as an icon of wisdom, a truly admirable human being. Biddle notes that the 20 pages of interview are a condensation and synthesis of over 100 single-spaced pages of transcript from talks over a number of days in 1992 and again in 1998—what is provided can only leave readers with the desire that the entire set of interviews might one day become available.

At the end of the published interview, Lax says of Merton's death, 'I certainly felt as though I'd lost a correspondent. It wasn't that I'd lost a friend because I don't feel that now either. He's there in that sense, the friend is there. But as a correspondent he's hard to get to' (p. 440). For Lax, the correspondent is no longer hard to get to, and because of Bill Biddle's devoted work, both correspondents are no longer hard to get to for readers of *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice*. The title is taken from a 25 November 1957 letter from Merton to Lax, then back in Olean, advising him to 'Visit all the haunts, stamp in all the snows, pause beneath all the trees & drive back & forth to Bradford as in the days of old when prophecy still had a voice' (p. 139). On the evidence of these letters, prophecy continued, at least intermittently, to have a voice, in fact two voices, as long as the friends sent their love and wisdom and puzzlement at the world and its ways back and forth to one another—although, like all authentic prophecy, it is not always easy to grasp on a first reading!

Patrick F. O'Connell

MERTON, Thomas, *Thomas Merton: Writings Selected With an Introduction by Christine M. Bochen* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), pp. 144. ISBN 1-57075-331-8 (paperback). \$14.00.

One of the most enduring aspects of Thomas Merton's character lies in his ability to stir deep empathy in very different personalities. Merton is contemplative to the mystic, prophet to the people of the covenant, activist and reformer to those who seek justice. So it is, perhaps, unsurprising that different lenses and different perspectives produce differing views of Merton. Christine Bochen is candid about the Merton she presents in *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings*. Comparing her approach to William Shannon's, she notes how the introductions to each chapter 'show how Merton's social concerns unfold and fit into his life and work'. Bochen quotes Shannon's prescription for the Christian life, a process of 'awakening to the reality of God within, living with love and justice, and recognizing and sustaining all that unites the human community' (p. 32). She frames Merton's life and work through Shannon's three dimensions of Christian life.

The first group of selections, 'A Call to Contemplation', includes passages early and late in Merton's writing. From a letter to Sr Therese Lentfoehr in 1949 to the 1968 essay 'Creative Silence', the drumbeat of the call to prayer rings consistently in these works. But Bochen begins with the assumption that 'few who read Merton embrace the contemplative life with the intensity possible for monks and hermits' (p. 51). Bochen may underestimate many of Merton's most devoted readers, and since the majority of her selections are pulled from his later life, even this opening