

THE LATEST CATCH

Thomas Merton & Robert Lax

A Catch of Anti-Letters

Foreword by Patrick Hart, OCSO

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Commentary by **Richard Weber**, OCSO

Rereading these “anti-letters” in order to offer a few comments on them for *Merton Seasonal* readers, I couldn’t help thinking of Merton’s friend and contemporary at Gethsemani, Father Peter Aikens. Father Peter, also known at Gethsemani and around its environs as “Fr Roc” and “The Clock Doc” (he repaired watches), entered Gethsemani as a mature priest, coming from the Holy Ghost Fathers (as they were then called) where he had taught drama and public speaking at the college level. Father Peter, like Lax and Merton, had an uncanny ability to alter — some Gethsemani monks would say murder — the English language to an alarming degree.

Father Peter, who passed on to the Lord some years after Merton, would have enjoyed these “anti-letters,” with their clever alterations of grammar, spelling and syntax. Merton and Lax, like Father Peter himself, seemed to have had a love for language, and marveled at its ability to convey emotion, passion, feeling, and thought. Language for these men was also a medium for love, friendship, concern, criticism, and communion.

Whether or not the Lax-Merton anti-letters are primarily an excuse for semantic experimentation is certainly debatable. Both men were writing what they at least considered serious anti-poetry at the time. Merton’s letters, especially towards the end of this volume, are striking in their studied spontaneity. Whatever the case, these letters are truly urgent, concerned, and animated exchanges between two people, quite obviously free enough with themselves and one another to express their personal feelings without being self-conscious or ashamed.

We find here warm concern about spiritual, intellectual, and personal matters. Merton and Lax share their search for deeper meaning and commitment in their lives. A frequent exchange centers on the issue of health, and one gets the impression that in many ways, Lax and Merton are the same as other middle-aged bachelors, worrying about their teeth and hair falling out, and grappling with the problems of getting old, living alone, and facing the prospects of physical and mental diminishment. These serious issues provide some of the best reading, as the two friends reflect back and forth on the grim business of life, and the perils to and chances of their own sur-

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vival. Above all, the sudden deaths of their friends spark somewhat long and brooding reflections on the fickleness of life, and on their own mortality.

For two men who had deliberate self-styled anti-social lives, and wrote anti-letters about them, they still remained remarkably well-connected. Merton shares an almost endless string of writing, publishing, visiting, and travel agendas. Lax is often at another address, pursuing some course or concern of his own, all the while, like Merton, singing the praises of his solitary and somewhat eccentric existence.

Interspersed with these letters are a variety of poems by Merton and Lax. Some are playful and comical, others are profound and serious. Each encourages the other to write more experimental poetry, and Lax raves on and on about Merton's calligraphies, some of which are included here.

For my taste, the number of letters selected turns out to be just about right. Anti-letters, like anti-poetry, are a good example of "a little going a long way." These missives are meant to be read a few at a time, as after too many, a certain weariness, boredom and tedium tends to set in. Merton, of the two, gets carried away and gives in to the temptation to be cutesy. Lax is less so, but his progressively worsening syntax, spelling and grammatical fractures get on one's nerves. My advice is to go slow, and skip what you want.

With the recent publication of many of Merton's letters, and with the planned publication of his many journals, a more textured and broadened view of his life and work will certainly result. The lasting literary achievement of the elusive Lax, like so many others who have become or remain known through their contact with Merton, remains to be seen. Whatever the case, knowing Merton through and in contact with his many friends, enhances the picture of a life that continues to fascinate many. This slim volume offers still another impression of one of the most alluring characters of our time.