

Writing for Writing's Sake: An Interview with Paul Spaeth

This interview was conducted in May 1998 by Michael W. Higgins, now president of St. Jerome's University, Waterloo, Ontario, and J. S. Porter, poet and professor at Mohawk College, Hamilton, Ontario.

MWH: We're speaking with Paul Spaeth, who is director of the [Friedsam] Library [at St. Bonaventure University, Olean, NY], and as importantly, the curator of the Robert Lax archives here. What is it most in Lax that draws you? Is there something quintessentially attractive about Lax that holds your attention, not only as an archivist, as a librarian, but as a human being?

PS: There are a couple of things that have drawn me to Lax. One of the obvious things is that Lax was born in Olean, has associations with this particular library, even this room we're sitting in. That was probably the starting point. As I got into him as a writer, I found that there were things about him that nobody else was doing. He was a person that was interested in writing for writing's sake, as a means of expression. He was interested not in self-promotion, not even so much in publishing what he had written. There was a simplicity about his writing that is deceiving to the reader. There is a forthrightness about his writing; he doesn't hide behind an avalanche of verbiage. What you see is what you get, what you read is what you get. I like that directness about him.

MWH: There's also something wonderfully wild and playful about him. You see that in the exchange of correspondence between Merton and Lax, for instance, in *A Catch of Anti-Letters*. And there he allows himself to be really playful. The allusions are clever, and the language is macaronic, and the language is sometimes silly. It's a strange concatenation of verbal parts. But there's a seriousness nonetheless that underlies this, and a bonding in this particular case, in his relationship with Merton. What do you think Merton gave him? I think we have a sense of what Lax gave Merton, a sense of the role of the contemplative, a remarkable serenity – if you consider the turbulence in Merton's inner life, and contemplative life, with Lax as a wonderful counterpoint. But what kinds of things, if at all, did Merton give to Lax?

PS: Well, I can't answer that too well because I'm not so familiar with Merton's writings to be able to talk about that. Certainly one obvious thing is that Merton joined the Catholic Church first, and then Lax came later on. I think certainly Merton was an influence on Lax in that regard. I don't really think that Lax is so much influenced by anything in particular, as much as everything together.

MWH: Leaving aside the possibility that there is or isn't an influence, subtly or not so subtly expressed, what about the phases in his work? Can you identify particular periods when you can see a shift in his poetics? Or is it all of a piece? Is the Lax of the 30s the Lax of the 90s?

PS: I think there is one major shift that comes about, and he really says it himself in titling his one collection of poetry from the 1960s that was put out by Journeyman Books. He called that selection of poetry *New Poems*. And I believe in conversation with him, he gave it that title because he precisely meant that. This is something new that was coming about in him. If you look at those poems, there's a paring-down, an experimentalism in the poems that wasn't there before. What you had before that period are materials for the most part that look like traditional poetry – they sound that way. There's some wonderful things, especially *Circus of the Sun*, which was a monumental

piece, an elongated collection of poems. *New Poems* is a decisive shift. He's saying, I don't have to sound like a poet *per se*, I can do this. I can make a poem and say that a series of the word "is" down the page is a poem, or a series of numbers on a page is a poem. Another poem right around that period of time that he did was one called "Black and White," which is composed just of those words repeated in variations throughout. Another poem from that period is called "Sea and Sky," which is a little bit more elaborate but deals with a single column of words and sometimes partial words down the page, deals with natural imagery, deals with images of sea and sky. He has a very visual orientation to what he is doing, too, which comes out in the interest that is in art circles, graphic art circles, about his work.

MWH: So it's not just how the poem sounds, it's how the poem looks.

PS: That is definitely part of it, because he'll do things with the words. A Lax line could be one word or one syllable or one letter from a word. And that could be a Lax line. And the effect of that on a reader is that you just slow down. Either you can rush through it because it's shorter than most poems would be, or you can do what Lax intended, slow everything down, slow down the pace of your reading because you're dealing with a word, not a complete word but a word that's broken up, and a word where the next word in the sentence is down below it, it's not next to it. It kind of blows apart your normal reading structures.

JSP: New territory for a moment, Paul. I'm interested in the man's day-to-day life. Here he is in Patmos, Greece. He's hanging around fishermen and sponge divers, hardly the intellectual elite of the country, and deriving a great deal of spiritual sustenance from his contacts. At times when you read the journals, you feel as if you're in the company of a kind of poetic anthropologist, someone who's noting little details about character and behavior, but with a finely tuned poetic sensibility. Could you take us through a kind of typical Laxian day?

PS: Well, I really couldn't give a specific rundown. I can give examples of things that he would do during the day. I think his day is caught up with things like walking down to the village, greeting people, stopping to talk with people. It's all just very simple kinds of things. Eating a simple but good meal, just the setting of the island itself is something that invigorates him. The point you make about not being in an intellectual or academic atmosphere, I think is something that he sought out. He's gone away from all that stuff. He was going to go to graduate school. He had an assistantship to do that. He didn't want to do it. He taught for a time, filling in. He taught English for a time, in a college situation. He didn't want to do that. He wrote for *The New Yorker*, worked at a script department in Hollywood, did all of those kinds of things. But where did he draw his inspiration for his first really monumental piece, *Circus of the Sun*? He traveled through western Canada for a summer with a circus troupe. It's not an intellectual atmosphere, it's not an academic atmosphere that fuels him. He doesn't follow trends. He draws inspiration from natural events, simple events. Natural and simple people, countryside, sea and sky. The island.

MWH: He's not a very terribly self-disclosing writer, unlike Merton, who is shockingly autobiographical. And as a consequence I don't think you can turn to the poetry to learn something about Robert Lax, whereas you can with Merton. So tell me something about the Lax that is so private. Why is he such a solitary? It's an extraordinary life, yet we know little about it really. What about the loves and the passions and the crises in Lax's life?

PS: Well, I don't know if they're there or not. They could be, and this is just a cursory reading of his life – a person grappling with who he is and what he wants to do and where he's going. All of

that stuff that creates all this strife and tension in a young person, I think that Lax maybe came to grips with it early on, or was more able to deal with it early on, and more accepting of the flow of events around him. When you read the descriptions of Lax that Merton gives in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, you read of a person who had a kind of spiritual self-assuredness early on, early on enough that it touched Merton's own life and he recognized that. He writes about when he himself had these ideas – I want to be a famous writer, I want to be recognized for this and I want to get things out there to people – he talks about Lax, saying Lax had none of that kind of passion, let's call it. And I think it's because of that certain self-assuredness there, early on, that he never lost. I'm not sure if it was a life of passion that would have to be talked about or brought up. Certainly he did a lot of different kinds of things. His life in Paris over a number of years would certainly be an interesting chapter to write about. He wrote a kind of long piece that was published recently in the book on Marseilles, the years that he spent in Marseilles, but I don't know.

MWH: Is his art *not* to be self-disclosing? In that direction, he is unlike many of his contemporaries. You have to go back to the classicists to find someone who loses themselves anonymously. It's just not the modern sensibility. So what is it about this Lax that a modern could be attracted to?

PS: In the context of your question, I'd say nothing. That's my first response to that, flat out. The thing about Lax is he writes journals all the time. When he talks about writing, the advice that he gives people is write everything, don't throw away anything. And in most of Lax's material he doesn't slavishly work over a poem or whatever. He writes it out and basically, if it gets published later on, it's that draft. He doesn't go through a lot of drafts. The only thing that I know of where there was maybe some more extensive work on is *Circus of the Sun*. And that was only kind of tidying up lines. So, basically, the first draft is the last draft. He writes constantly about his own life. He has, and he will continue to do it. But it's the sense that the kind of stories that attract us are not his kind of things; even if those things happen in his life, they're not going to be counted so important and they're just going to be put on the side. He's going to go on with other things.

JSP: One of the things it seems to me Lax has put his mark on is the concept of waiting. I guess I'm thinking of the prose meditation *21 Pages*, where you have a sustained meditation on the life principle of waiting. It might be waiting for God, waiting for a person, waiting for the entrance of the Spirit into one's soul. You're never quite sure what the waiting is intended for. But he seems to have this incredible discipline, as exemplified in his prose work of being able to be still and go on waiting. In this vein, I'm thinking of Paul Tillich's famous sermon on waiting, and I'm thinking of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and I would put Lax in that company, as one of the finest thinking-feeling probes into this experience and almost ontological concept. I wonder if you could comment on Lax in relation to waiting.

PS: I agree with what you're saying. I guess the question that it begs is, what is he waiting for? I don't know – I agree with what you're saying, I just don't have a response.

JSP: Part of that waiting is looking and recording. He keeps his daily journal. But I never feel, with Lax, that it's looking to analyze or it's looking to judge or even to think. It's almost looking the way an animal would look, of taking in a scene, and I'm struck by that. You mentioned earlier that he's comfortable talking about a circus, he's comfortable talking about literary matters, and everything under the sun. I think that would tie in with the idea that each thing that happens is precious, that there's not a hierarchy.

PS: I made a comment in an introduction to a poem he wrote called "27th and 4th" that was

reprinted by Stride Press. He put [it] out originally as a broadside piece, a series out of New York City that he called *Pax*, when he was working for *Jubilee* Magazine. This poem is about the corner where the office of *Jubilee* was. And basically what the poet does – and it’s a fairly long piece – is he looks out the window and observes. And that’s exactly what he does – rather than looking to those dramatic events that seem to drive all the rest of us and even drive our interests – he says: wait a minute, are those things so important? What about this person walking down the street here? That you’re not going to look at. What about the bird here, what about the beauty of this morning with the light coming through? He used to do a lot of early poems dealing with the imagery of light, and he still does that. So he’s looking at these things that we would disregard, put aside as being unimportant. And he’s putting them on a poetic pedestal, and saying: yes, this small thing here is important, we should take joy in this. Just like the cycle of poems, *Circus of the Sun*. Lax always had an interest in the circus, since he was a little boy, and here he takes the circus, which is a childlike delight and blows it up into this picture of all creation. Look how it’s like the glory of what God has done, he says. He opens it up, and does that with these small things. Maybe what he’s waiting for is these little events to look at, to present before people, to write about.

MWH: You made the case for his utter unconventionality. He’s a loner, he does his own kind of thing. He experiments. He never identifies himself with a circle. Is that also true of his theological and philosophical leanings?

PS: Well, part of it is that his theological and philosophical leanings would have been shaped right here on this campus. His family was Jewish. His father actually came over from Eastern Europe, I’m not exactly sure where, to work in a clothing enterprise of an uncle in a nearby town. Eventually his father opened up a store in Olean. The town, early on, had a synagogue, so there was a regular Jewish community here. But then, while growing up in this town, the family actually wandered between Olean and New York. The mother, especially, wanted to locate in New York, because I guess they had come through there, had relatives there, and liked that town. In growing up, Bob would have been more attuned to New York City than the other large cities around here like Buffalo or Rochester. He would hardly ever go [to those cities]. But his mother had spent time on this campus, probably at a time when there weren’t too many women around, before it was co-educational. I guess they had started some classes, not particularly on this campus, but almost extension classes at the Motherhouse across the road from here. And Bob kind of grew up in and out of this campus and this library. He must have picked up on that Catholic and Scholastic bent. When he was going to go to graduate school in North Carolina, he was going to do a dissertation topic on Aquinas. In fact, we have a whole sheaf of notes that he was putting together. Not notes in the regular sense of the word, of reading a text and taking notes from it, but notes in the sense of thoughts. Trying to put together ideas about Aquinas and, I think, looking at the virtues, so that Christian and Catholic background, he kind of grew up with. It was probably a very natural thing for him to come into the Roman Catholic Church at a certain point in his life. Judaism is a background certainly, and Catholicism was always there.

MWH: Merton talks about what he’s reading. He’s influenced by Hannah Arendt, he’s read a recent work about Simone Weil, he’s reacting to the life and letters of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He reacts to them, he quotes them, he wrestles with them. Is Bob Lax thinking in a vacuum? Is there any sense that he’s engaging some of his contemporary thinkers?

PS: If you asked Bob this question, you’d probably be surprised at what he would answer. He

might throw out a whole raft of names that I would never have considered that he was even thinking about.

MWH: German Public Radio is interested in his work. Are there reflections or commentaries on him or is Lax doing the talking?

PS: Both. Lax has, for years and years, done readings throughout Europe, especially in Germany. Of course, the reason for that is because his major publisher for years has been Pendo Books run by Bernhard Moosbrugger out of Zurich, Switzerland. He puts out very nice, uniform editions of his writings with German translations on the facing page. So he's become very well known to German audiences and he's very well liked in German avant-garde poetry circles. And a person in Germany, Hartmut Geerkin, has done lots to bring Lax onto public radio in Bavaria. They do programs, not only commentaries, about Lax's work, with Lax reading himself as well as productions based on his poems. They did one production based on a rather, shall I say, screwy piece called "Bob's Bomb," which was almost like a nonsense, one-page thing. They made a day-long production of it. I've not heard it myself; it was quite an extravaganza. I forget how many hours it was.

JSP: He certainly has his following in the United States. John Ashbery has written glowingly of Bob Lax as has William Maxwell, both of whom are big names in American writing circles. So he's not unknown but, on the other hand, he's not as well-known as he ought to be. I'd just be curious, Paul, to get your view on the Lax we ought to present to a new public, to young people in particular. Is it Lax the poet that would have some impact on youth's attention? Or is it Lax the wise old man? Because there is a deep, wise spirituality there too that can enrich human lives.

PS: When you talk about Lax the wise old man, I agree with that. The reason I laugh is because he's Lax the wise guy, too. There's a lot of humor in his work. I was just mentioning before that in talking with him, you're as likely to end in a fit of laughing as you would in a beard-pulling, head-scratching, contemplative state. So, I don't know. Sometimes when I have the opportunity to present Lax before people, I'm not sure how to present him and sometimes I try to gauge the audience. But the Lax to present before a young audience is a Lax that certainly is wise, that would give people a sense of the joy of life, and a Lax that enjoys life and invites people into that experience, an experience of life, not just high end stuff, but the joy in the common stuff. His writing goes right across the board, everything from very abstract to journal material to short parable things to haiku stories or episodes – which is one of the titles of one his books. So there's all kinds of writing there. They're all subtle. You could call them "sublime" in what they do, and in many cases they're very humorous, almost like a joke with a hanging punchline or something like that. It's wonderful stuff to experience.

MWH: Lax really writes to express. He doesn't write for a specific material gain, or even in order to be published. But just simply to express.

PS: Right. This can be verified just in the archives here, where we have hundreds and hundreds of manuscript notebooks and typescript sheets. The majority of this material has not been published. He doesn't write for publication. If someone comes along and wants to publish something, he'll be like a grandmother going to the cookie jar when the grandchildren come and say oh here, have this cookie. Lax will go to his typescript cover and say, here, maybe this will be nice for you, and hands it out. So that in itself will tell you that he's not the usual writer who writes for fame or monetary gain or whatever. Those kinds of things are all right, but Lax is just not that into them. And because he hasn't set that as a goal, his writing has taken the form that it has taken. It could take that, it had the freedom, to take that.