

Chesko's beatitudes

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PURE ACT

The uncommon life of Robert Lax
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Robert Lax

HERMIT'S GUIDE TO HOME
 ECONOMICS

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The title piece of *Hermit's Guide to Home Economics*, published last year as a New Directions pamphlet, arranged in columns of isolate words or syllables, gives in essence Robert Lax's extreme vertical style and peculiar vision: "view / 'd / through / a / chink // in / the / her / mit's / wall". It is also characteristic in being whimsically humorous: "he'd / come // to / be // quite / a // talk / er, // just / from // talk / ing // to / him / self". Lax's onion soup and potato salad is "more / on // than / pot". In simple rhythmic repetition of homespun wisdom, he tells us twice that "you / make // your / world // your / world // makes / you". If this makes Lax sound like a bloodless saint of the avant-garde who embraces banality as much as profundity, well, he is. But the story of how Lax arrived at such "unisingular" poetic austerity has its fascination, as Michael N. McGregor recounts in *Pure Act: The uncommon life of Robert Lax*, moving from his home town of Olean, New York, to longtime residence on the Greek Islands, via circuses, seminaries and jazz figures of the 1930s and 40s.

It was also a religious-philosophical journey, away from his family's Judaism to the Catholic conversions of his university friends, notably Thomas Merton, whom Lax met during his first year at Columbia and to whom he was intellectually connected from 1937 onwards. Others

essential to his development were the professor and poet Mark Van Doren and the painter Ad Reinhardt, then editor of the college magazine *Jester*, to which Lax contributed humorous pieces (as he did a few years later to the *New Yorker*). Merton's charismatic personality allied to spiritual quest attracted Lax, sustaining

their exuberantly Joycean correspondence of thirty years. For his part, Merton recognized in Lax a "combination of Hamlet and Elias" who also had an "inborn direction to the Living God". Showing a more worldly side, Lax provided his family's holiday cottage as a writing venue for Merton, himself and their friends over two summers in 1938-9. "Jazz was always coming from the record player", McGregor writes of these formative weeks, by way of modifying his tendency towards hagiography, "and alcohol flowed freely."

The threat of being drafted for military service during the Second World War, as well as Merton's entry into a Trappist monastery, caused Lax an extended period of mental dis-

tress. He filled it with helping at a Catholic charity in Harlem, supplemented by work as a film critic for *Time* magazine and even as a researcher in Hollywood, until "he found a way to live the simpler life he wanted most", and set free his writing. He first accomplished this by accompanying the Christiani Brothers Circus for a month-long tour of western Canada in 1949, performing as a sad clown Chesko, recording impressions that inspired a lyrical cycle of poems combining Christian allegory with exact physical descriptions, *The Circus of the Sun*, admired by Jack Kerouac on its publication ten years later. An accompanying piece, *Mogador's Book*, detailing Lax's attachment to a young male acrobat, remained unpublished until 1992. The Christianis gave him an example of "pure act", a way of conscious living in the present moment, first recognized in jazz musicians, then later in his beloved Greek fishermen and sponge divers. It was a concept he was to apply to his lifelong "conversation" with

God. It may also underlie his descriptive fusion of the sacramental and elemental in nature, as in the repetitious “Sea & Sky” (1965).

The abrupt changes in Lax’s style towards abstraction and minimalism, evident in *New Poems* (1962), can be attributed to close observation in the studios of Ad Reinhardt and Dave Budd, reinforced by the abstract expressionists’ ideas of an art preoccupied with its own process. Verticality had appeared in Lax’s work before, but he now deployed it in repetitions of simple words (is, never, death, go, river) in almost mathematical patterns or clusters. Reinhardt’s monochromatic red on red, blue on blue, and finally black on black paintings gave Lax a model for his series of “Color Poems” from 1965 onwards (“red / red // black / black // black / black // blue //”), initially as a tribute to the painter who had recently died. So Lax’s experimentation with words was always rooted in his concerns – at once serious and playful – with people and places.

Lax idealized the poor and sometimes criminal types he liked to live among: an episode in a Marseille flophouse, four people chastely sharing his room, is both funny and poignant. He latterly saw himself as having “a sense of oneness with the people” of Kalymnos, and then Patmos to which he later moved, developing a friendship with C. K. Williams. As McGregor records, he was regarded with suspicion by many of the locals as a CIA spy, especially during the Greek military junta and the Cyprus crisis, and was forced to spend two years away from his idyll. By the time he settled on Patmos in 1978, his close association with Thomas Merton meant that he was increasingly sought after by literary-religious tourists, celebrity photographers such as Richard Avedon, and latterly by film crews making documentaries for television and art galleries, especially in Germany where Lax enjoyed cult status. A monkish naive character dedicated to God and writing, Lax maintained his gnomic humour throughout. This was a man of more Beatitude than Beat. Invited by Billie Holiday to go to her apartment to smoke dope and listen to jazz records, McGregor tells us, he declined.