Review Essay

BOB LAX, A TRANSPARENT POET

JIM FOREST
Alkmaar, The Netherlands


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In a culture crowded with self-promoting, self-obsessed artists carrying huge, brightly lit posters of themselves, Bob Lax was an invisible man. While there seems not to have been a day of his life that didn’t give birth to a poem, many of which were published, he may be the important poet of the past century who was most successful in eluding the public gaze.

He made his first significant appearance in American letters not through his own writings but in his friend Thomas Merton’s autobiography, The Seven Storey Mountain, published in 1948. Merton described Lax as “lean as an exclamation mark,” “a gentle prophet who seemed to be meditating on some impenetrable woe,” “a born contemplative” who could “curl his long legs all around a chair, in seven different ways, while he was trying to find the right word with which to begin,” a shy man who possessed “a natural, instinctive spirituality, a kind of inborn direction to the living God” (Merton 181).

It was Lax more than anyone who challenged Merton to aim high in the life of grace and not allow the act of joining the Catholic Church to be the high-water mark of his religious development. During a walk down Sixth Avenue one night in the spring of 1939, Lax turned toward him and asked, “What do you want to be, anyway?” It was obvious to Merton that “Thomas Merton the famous writer” or “Thomas Merton the professor of English” weren’t good enough answers. “I don’t know,”
he finally said. “I guess what I want is to be a good Catholic.” “What do you mean, you want to be a good Catholic?” Merton was silent. “What you should say,” Lax continued, “is that you want to be a saint.” “How do you expect me to become a saint?” “By wanting to.” “I can’t be a saint,” Merton responded. He imagined sanctity would require a magnitude of renunciation and discipline that was hopelessly beyond him. But Lax pressed on. “All that is necessary to be a saint is to want to be one. Don’t you believe God will make you what He created you to be, if you will consent to let Him do it? All you have to do is desire it” (Merton 237-238).

Lax, as God-haunted as Merton, also joined the Catholic Church, but instead of embracing monastic life as Merton had done, finally made his home in a remote corner of the Christian east. Apart from rare journeys, the last 35 years of his life were spent in Greece, chiefly on Patmos, the island of St. John the Evangelist, living as a hermit in a succession of small apartments. But before Patmos became his home, Lax was a citizen of the circus, and carried that passport with him all his days. From early childhood he was enamored with acrobats, jugglers, clowns, and trapeze artists on their endless town-to-town pilgrimage. In 1943, while on the staff of The New Yorker after his years studying at Columbia University, Lax accompanied a colleague who was writing about the Christiani Circus. An enduring friendship took root between Lax and Mogador Christiani, acrobat and horseback performer. In the years that followed Lax corresponded with Mogador, occasionally visited the family, and in 1949 traveled with their circus in Canada. In 1953, Lax – then an editor of Jubilee magazine – wrote a feature on the Christianis.

It was during his years with Jubilee that I met Lax. Jubilee was one of the rare Catholic environments that had an eastern flavor, partly thanks to reproductions of icons and recordings of Byzantine music that Jubilee produced and sold. From time to time I would walk up to the Jubilee offices on Park Avenue South and drop into Lax’s whitewashed room. There was something Greek about the austere whiteness, as if he were anticipating Patmos. With his friend, the designer Emil Antonucci, Lax occasionally published poetry broadsides under the heading Pax – no two alike in shape, paper or typography – and would always give me the latest. There was also a link via Thomas Merton, with whom I often corresponded. (The Lax-Merton correspondence is now in print in an edition by Arthur W. Biddle.) Our face-to-face meetings were a long time ago and nothing remarkable happened – just the experience of being with Lax, who carried a singular, gentle silence with him of a purity one rarely experienced even in monasteries. It was not that he didn’t talk; he wasn’t chatty. There were unusual pauses in conversation, the kind of