

# Thomas Merton and Friends in the 1940s

By James Harford

There could hardly have been more contrast between the experiences and moods of Thomas Merton and those of his two close friends, Bob Lax and Ed Rice, than what prevailed in the mid-1940s. Merton had been on a high for more than two years – since entering Gethsemani – when, on March 19, 1944, the feast of St. Joseph, he took his simple vows, advancing one more step towards becoming a full-fledged member of the “OCSO” (Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance). Lax, though, was coming off an unhappy year at *The New Yorker* and unsettled periods in Harlem and North Carolina, while Rice was stumbling as he tried to make his way into the commercial world of magazine publishing.

Neither Lax nor Rice had achieved anything like financial stability. Lax was usually broke – partially sustained by his haberdasher father – so it was fortuitous that Merton had filed a legal document on February 14, 1944, giving his old friend the yearly dividends from the Grosset and Dunlap stock he had inherited from his grandfather, modest as they were.<sup>1</sup> Rice’s financial lot was equally precarious. He, too, needed doles from his father, a successful Wall Street broker. After writing a fund-raising letter for a while for the Children’s Aid Society he got his “first real job,” a low-level post with the foreign edition of *Look*; then he went to *Colliers*. “We did a book called ‘Movie Lot to Beachhead’ but I got no byline. I also did a ‘History of War’ for Dell, with pictures, and got \$100.”<sup>2</sup> A history of war for \$100!

Also in 1944 James Laughlin of *New Directions*, encouraged by Mark Van Doren, published Merton’s first book, *Thirty Poems*, in his Poets of the Year series. It is somewhat surprising that Laughlin accepted the poems since, as David Cooper, who edited the Merton-Laughlin letters, recalled, Laughlin admitted that “Merton’s early religious poems, except for their color and vigor of imagery, do not particularly interest me. There is something facile about them.”<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless Laughlin would go on to publish many Merton books, and would become a close personal friend. Laughlin had questions for Van Doren about the kind of contract that should be offered, and to whom it should be sent. Van Doren responded that he would ask Lax for advice – should the contract go to him [Van Doren] “as representative or agent” with royalties going to the monastery, or “directly to Merton or the abbot”? “I have asked Lax to fire an answer back, and you may hear next week.”<sup>4</sup> Recognizing Lax’s business naiveté it’s a wonder that Van Doren expected such crisp action. In any case, the contract went, eventually, to the monastery, as for all other Merton books in his lifetime.

At Christmas time Lax made another visit to Gethsemani and told Merton he should be writing more poems. Merton, however,

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**James Harford**

had not thought it was “God’s will,” and his confessor agreed, but then the Abbot told him, on the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul (January 25, 1945), “I want you to go on writing poems.”<sup>5</sup> That Easter he sent some new ones to Lax for passing on to Van Doren. “I have very little time to write them & none to work on them a lot & make corrections – or type out better copies.”<sup>6</sup>

Lax was having some success with his own poetry. *The New Yorker* had published two more of his poems in 1944 and then this little one, “Breeze on a Lexington Avenue Local,” revealing a nice eye for city scenes, in 1945:

The flower merchant drops his pack  
And leans against the sliding door;  
Wind, beautiful but blind,  
Stirs petals on the iron floor.<sup>7</sup>

In Lax’s Columbia archive is a penciled postcard dated 1944 from Robert Lowell which seems to propose some kind of collaborative activity: “I hope before the year is out we will be able to accomplish what we planned.” Whatever was “planned” never came about, evidently.<sup>8</sup> Lax brooded about his writing in a very downbeat entry in his journal:

Your whole trouble, Charlie, and we may as well talk about your whole trouble as anybody else’s, because you won’t be able to fix anybody else’s until you are able to fix your own which you know better than anybody else’s, your whole trouble is not being able to stick to anything long enough to get good at it. . . .

Writing, i figure, is what you ought to stick to, it’s the one thing you’ve got a pretty good start on and sometimes have done o.k. with. drawing is maybe ok to kid with.

One thing about writing is ideas of silence . . .

Second is a feeling that if you aren’t writing a letter or a book on charity you aren’t doing what you ought to do.

Third is a feeling that because MVD [Mark Van Doren] and Slate [John, one of the Columbia crowd] said once are you still writing the journal you ought to be still writing the journal . . .

Fourth is the idea that unless you are writing noel cowid plays, movies, new yorker articles, note comment or cole porter songs, you are wasting your time.

fifth is the idea that unless you are travelling from county to county with a guitar singing spirituals and preachin the gospel you are wasting your time.

sixth is the idea that you are never wasting your time, but yes you are.

seventh is the idea that unless you are doing whatever some body asks you to, you are doing something silly on your own hook.

eighth is the idea that unless you are eating or sleeping you are wasting your time, unless you are exercising.

ninth is the idea that when you are eating or sleeping you are wasting your time, unless you are getting an idea for a novel (you don’t know what it is because you’ve never read one.)

tenth is the idea that anybody who isn’t either dead and in heaven or horizontal and on a psychoanalyst’s day-bed is wasting his time.

eleven is the idea that waking or sleeping, alive or dead you are just the nicest little fellow you ever met.<sup>9</sup>

In the summer of 1945 Rice met Margery Hawkinson, a very pretty Mount Holyoke graduate who lived near his Brooklyn home. He would court her for two years, then they would get married and move into an apartment in Greenwich Village at 58 Bank Street. “Margery wanted to get married,” he reminisced. “I would have drifted along. Marriage is a difficult thing. The Church doesn’t instruct you. A 24-year-old priest instructed us. What did he know? I wanted a lot of kids. Margery only wanted two. She wanted a country club life.”<sup>10</sup> Rice got a job at RKO Pathé News and continued his creative writing, but without much success. “Over the years,” he later remembered, “I’ve written five unpublished novels, and I did a musical comedy with Bob Gerdy [another member of the Columbia crowd] for Vera Zorina. I wrote a scenario for a Universal Pictures film that was never made, and I was offered a job in Hollywood but I didn’t accept it.”<sup>11</sup>

Lax, in October, 1945, was hired by an unlikely employer: *Time* magazine. It was not a good match. His explanation:

Rice may have told me they needed someone up there and gave me the name of Jim Crider, who was doing the hiring. They had some vacancies, one in the religion department, one in the film department. I said religion sounds good to me. But then they asked me what religion I was. I said Catholic. They said they can’t have anyone who is committed to just one religion do these stories, so it was the film department. I guess James Agee had just left as critic. The editor, Tom Matthews, said to me, “Do you like films? Because the last editor we had didn’t like them.” I said I didn’t mind them, something like that. . . . I certainly didn’t tell him I ate them up. So I got the job.

They send you to the movie with a senior editor and a researcher, and you go to what they call screenings. You sit through the show and the senior editor is making up his own mind about what he sees and the researcher writes down in the dark what she thought you laughed at or anything like that so you’ll have the line ready to quote for your review. Then you write your review and it goes to the senior editor. They call it group journalism. On one review I remember writing that it was an average melodrama. The senior editor added, “just head and shoulders above the average.” So I realized what group journalism was like, what a satisfaction it was going to be. I don’t remember what film it was. But I’ll tell you it was average.<sup>12</sup>

Lax recalled three of the films he reviewed – *Spellbound*, *Lost Weekend*, and a Noel Coward war propaganda film called *In Which We Serve*. “I was told by my eye doctor that it was ruining my eyes. . . . I was seeing four movies a day . . . and it was bad for me, not just for my eyes. Nancy Flagg read my reviews and was sickened by some of them. But if you look them up remember the senior editor might have made a few changes.”<sup>13</sup> The *Time* stint lasted only five months, until February, 1946. Alexander Eliot, a distinguished art editor and critic, was on the *Time* staff in those years, became Lax’s life-long friend, and would put him up at his home in Greece when Lax first went there in 1962. He says that “Bob was fired because the editors couldn’t figure out from his reviews whether he liked the films or not. ‘Is that bad?’ I said. ‘I would have thought that getting beyond mere “like” and “dislike” was the first essential step in criticism. Perhaps you were disturbed by his subtlety of mind. I empathize with that.’ Ironically, some years later a book of reviews by James Agee was published but some of the reviews were actually by Lax – there were no bylines in those days.”

A while later Eliot and Lax collaborated in the making of a documentary film in Harlem titled “Black & White.” From his Friendship House days Lax knew one of the local gang leaders who cleared the

way for the filming of, as Eliot describes it, “nothing but Harlem shadows on an August afternoon: shadows of shoppers, pot-smokers, gossipers, basketballers leaping in an empty lot, and finally the shadows of two horses hitched to an old-fashion ice-wagon.”<sup>14</sup> The film never made it to theatres, but a print still exists.

The departure from the *Time* organization had not been abrupt. “Nobody quits *Time*, that’s a slap in their face,” Lax told me. “They found a way that I should work for *Life*, but I only stayed there about a week.” By that time there was an opening at *Parade*. This would be Lax’s fourth magazine job within five years. At *Parade* he was told that, “‘We personalize our stories. When we do a story about bucks, it’s from the buck’s point of view.’ Groan. I knew what we were in for. We had a department something like, ‘Truth is Stranger than Fiction.’” It was run by his old Columbia friend Robert Gibney. “We were just making up the contributions . . . week after week. Some man had an alarm clock that he kept in the pouch of a kangaroo. When it went off the kangaroo would come over and tap him on the shoulder to let him know that morning had come. That kind of thing.”<sup>15</sup>

Next up for Lax was Hollywood, where he worked for two years in the script department at Sam Goldwyn studios. How did he get there? This is from Lax’s Hollywood journal:

Mike Beam [a friend from North Carolina days] and I drove out in an open 1941 Plymouth convertible, starting right after Labor Day [1946]. Mike had been offered a job out here last spring. I had never officially been offered one, but Arthur Ripley Jr. had written his father [Arthur Ripley Sr., a director] a letter about me. . . . There was nothing I wanted to do in New York. I wanted to drive across the country. I had just come back from 2 pleasant trips, to Bermuda & Grenada, & I had developed a liking for traveling. . . . Before I started out I asked Arthur Reef of *Parade* magazine to make me official West Coast representative of the magazine. . . . There was also a strong possibility that I would be earning my living by writing weekly stories for *Parade*.<sup>16</sup>

Eliot recalls that Lax sent him a message when he got settled. “Am writing swamp-cries for Maria Montez!” Actually he had gone to work for Ripley collaborating on a screen play for a film called *Siren of Atlantis* starring Montez, Dennis O’Keefe and the French actor, Jean Pierre Aumont. It was an adaptation of a novel by Pierre Benoit that had already been made into a successful film in Germany. The producer, Seymour Nebenzal – “Seymour . . . crazy” said Ripley – had come to Hollywood to remake the film. The 31-year-old Lax got \$125 a week for the research and then a somewhat higher salary as a screen writer. He stayed on the picture from early 1947, when the story conferences began, until June, 1948, when the cutting was almost finished, living in a place called Castle Argyle. “Where else would ya live in Hollywood?” he guffawed to me as he recalled the period during an interview in Patmos in 1997.<sup>17</sup>

Hollywood made him feel unholy, as he explained to Merton. “I’m still in need of a lot of spiritual guidance,” he wrote. “I can’t believe that a good life can be this idle. I wonder what the great unrecognized sin has been?”<sup>18</sup> Realizing that his friend needed succor, Merton wrote back promptly. He had made his solemn vows on March 19, 1947, and said, “I go around singing inside about it all day.” He then offered unrealistic career counsel: “About Hollywood I myself would I think want to get away from it. . . . If you stay there why don’t you write a movie about Charles de Foucauld since you are all full of research on the Sahara. He was a Trappist then he was a beggar at the door of a convent in Jerusalem then he was a hermit in the Sahara & finally the Tuaregs killed him” (*PV* 101, 102). Lax

must have sucked in his breath after reading that although in retrospect it was prescient advice since Lax would, fifteen years later, hole up by himself on a remote Greek island, living practically as a hermit for almost four decades. The same Merton letter revealed that, "Harcourt Brace is publishing the autobiography [*The Seven Storey Mountain*] & all the fellows are in it, so is Peggy [Wells, who was probably in Hollywood, herself, at the time]." More advice: "At present I would not say to you to be a Trappist, unless you get some strong & special urge. But I do think you ought to pray God and ask for a vocation to the priesthood. Anyway, pray to him and ask him for a definite vocation, that is important & I would do that" (PV 102, 103).

Although going for the priesthood was not in the cards for Lax, neither was Hollywood. *Atlantis* got a devastatingly negative review from, ironically, Lax's former employer, *Time* magazine. This was the plot: Aumont and O'Keefe are foreign legionnaires who stumble on the sunken city of Atlantis while on a mission in the African desert. Montez is Queen Antinea, who romances both guys. A review can be called up even now on Internet's *All Movie Guide*. Here is a sentence: "Of the many deliriously awful Maria Montez vehicles of the 1940s, *Siren of Atlantis* may well be the worst, though it's not without its campy pleasures."<sup>19</sup> There were no new film opportunities to entice him. He wrote Merton in late November that a plan for making a movie out of Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*, which could have been interesting, was dropped and others were ludicrous, like "one called Johnny Macbeth is about a gangster who got to be head of a mob by killing Big Duncan, at his wife's (Lily Macbeth's) instigation. The ghost Banky shows up at their dinner party" (PV 103-104). "Well, by then I had had enough," Lax told me. "Another car door opened – it was Andy Soybell's, a young composer friend who was headed back to New York. . . . 'Not alone you don't go,' I said, and I hopped in. We stopped in Las Vegas, which was pretty exciting, but I don't remember where else."<sup>20</sup>

It was high time to get back to serious writing. Early in 1946 he had had still another poem published in *The New Yorker*. For those Lax readers who may be familiar only with his cryptic abstract poetry of more recent years, here it is, "Truth Compared to the Light of Day," replete with real rhymes:

Sun hath one pivot, night and day,  
Toward which we haste, then turn away.

So Truth, at our sweet system's center,  
Sees us approach and then resent her.

Sun lights his system like a part.  
(The universe is mostly dark).<sup>21</sup>

Merton's writing was about to hit new professional heights, but not without encountering temporary disappointment. After, in 1946, New Directions had published the second volume of his poems – *A Man in the Divided Sea* – he was told that his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, had been rejected by the Trappist censors, "not on theological grounds, but as unripe for publication. . . . I am held to be incapable of writing an autobiography 'with his present literary equipment' and I am advised to take a correspondence course in English grammar."<sup>22</sup> Cynicism about his routine in the monastery began to emerge. "The Cistercian life is energetic. . . . We go out to work like a college football team taking the field. Trappists believe . . . [a]nything that makes you suffer is God's will. . . . We seem to think that God will not be satisfied with a monastery that does not behave in every way like a munitions factory under wartime conditions of production. . . . We think we have done great things because we are worn out" (SJ 41).

The 32-year old Trappist, soon to become famous, was in the dumps, and had even thought of discontinuing his journal writing. "I continue writing this journal under obedience to Dom Gildas, in spite of my personal disinclination to go on with it," he wrote in March, 1947 (*SJ* 27). Imagine the loss if he had stopped. But he wouldn't and he would still be making insightful entries more than 20 years later – as in his last weeks before his tragic death, when he had a bad cold, sore throat, could breathe only with difficulty in the coal-polluted air of Darjeeling and Dharamsala, and yet write paragraph after paragraph of complex thoughts on subjects like Buddhism. But there were sterile days, even in these early years. The completion of his solemn vows failed to stir him. "So yesterday I made my solemn vows. I do not feel much like writing about it. This does not mean that I am not happy about profession. But I am happy in a way that does not want to talk" (*SJ* 32). In the next month he was still trying to boost himself up: "the monotony of the life," he wrote, "sometimes makes us so dejected that we cannot seem to do anything about it. What we need above all are words that will make us love one another and advice that will strengthen us to overcome evil with good" (*SJ* 43). The evil of the times seemed to be consuming him. The title poem of *Figures for an Apocalypse*,<sup>23</sup> published in 1947 but probably written at the end of World War II – after the dropping of the nuclear bombs on Japan – was 16 pages of relentless foreboding and warning of what was happening to his adopted country. The whole volume seems more a versified tract than poetry. Mark Van Doren praised the book, and in particular its concluding essay in which Merton wrestles with the conflict between his contemplative desires and his writing. "Nothing has ever touched me more deeply," Van Doren wrote to Merton, "than the problem you pose on page 110, and somehow solve on page 111" (Van Doren, *Letters* 183). The "problem" as stated by Merton in the essay, "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," is "what if one's religious superiors make it a matter of formal obedience to pursue one's art, for some special purpose like the good of souls?" His solution, or rationalization, is that "we can console ourselves with Saint Thomas Aquinas that it is more meritorious to share the fruits of contemplation with others than it is merely to enjoy them ourselves" (*FA* 111).

But Van Doren's comments on *Figures* were not all positive. "Your new poems," he wrote, "are very rich – sometimes too rich, I think, for the thin blood outside those walls. I mean, the phrasing runs too often in parallels, and admits too many epithets; result, a tincture of monotony." Then, as if to soften the harshness, "If that is heathen criticism, let it pass. Substantially, the poems are powerful. The *Duns Scotus* is the best . . . I suppose Bob [Lax] has copies" (Van Doren, *Letters* 180-81). Laughlin, too, had his criticisms of Merton's poetry, and even passed on the criticism of others, notably, in 1948, T. S. Eliot, who was spending some of the war years in Princeton. Eliot, he said, "is most interested in your work, but he thinks it is very uneven, and he wishes you would strive more toward form" (*SL* 44). Then he asked if Merton could have Van Doren or Lax send him some more poems to show Eliot.

Lax, Merton and Rice, in these years, would each have experiences with the rites of the Eastern Church that would stay with them for a lifetime. Lax's did not come about until he moved to Greece, but both Merton and Rice had exposures in the late 1940s that affected them profoundly. Merton described the visit of some Eastern clergy to Gethsemani in 1948:

the place was full of priests of the Byzantine-Slavonic rite who . . . ended up by singing two Masses a day and Benediction and the last night they were here they were still singing . . . The Eastern-rite – we got a good look at it this time – is in many ways impressive. I like seeing priest, deacon and subdeacon all praying together at the altar with their hands up in the air like the *orantes* in the catacombs. . . . Their Mass gives you a greater sense of the reality of the Mystical Body (*SJ* 131-32).

Rice, only months after Merton had made that entry, recorded this in his own journal:

Ever since I first discovered the Byzantine rite, my head has been filled with the memory of the music and the churches and the people. I want to tell everyone about them, bring everyone to the services. But what can you do in this world? Nobody really seems to care. (I've brought Gerdy, Lax, Freedgood [another of the Columbia crowd], the BW [his wife Margery], and Flynn [also Columbia], but outside of Lax, none of them seems to care enough to go back, although they all express the hope for phonograph records). I can hardly wait for Sunday to come, and after it I have this terrific music, these wonderful thoughts of what the Liturgy has said and what it means to me, unable to communicate them to anyone.<sup>24</sup>

He would, in fact, communicate those thoughts through many articles, beautifully photographed, on Eastern-rite religions in *Jubilee* magazine over its 15-year lifetime in 1953-67, some of them written by Merton and Lax.

Although Merton's problems with censorship of his manuscript for *The Seven Storey Mountain* were not entirely solved, the book finally emerged in 1948 from Harcourt, Brace, the publishing house of another of his Columbia friends, Robert Giroux. Rice, in his 1972 postmortem biography of Merton, claimed that the manuscript was "bowdlerized" by the censors, and that an original copy does not even exist today. Rice might have been mistaken. In his journal Merton indicates that besides Giroux's copy he gave one to Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, which is at Columbia, and there is another in the Merton archive at Boston College. But it's not clear how much the Abbey censors had stricken from the copy which went to Giroux, who then cut out a large amount of material he might have thought too pietistic, very likely improving the readability.

Merton, himself, does not mention any manuscript manipulation in his journals, and when Lax wrote him a congratulatory letter he acknowledged it with enthusiasm:

Thanks for your beautiful letter. One of the best things I like about 7 storey mtn was the index which they fixed up at Harcourt Brace and which came to me as a surprise. It made me wish I had mentioned a whole lot more people in the book. It reads like a big party on the night before judgement day, with everybody invited by Providence to be in this book also invited to go to heaven in a big yacht provided by the prayers of the ones who were the biggest saints like Francis St and Blake William and Michelde-Cuxa, Saint. . . . More and more you get the sense that Christ is working in everybody and that tremendous things are happening and when you walk down the cloister you feel as if the earth shook because Christ is walking in your shoes. . . . Right now very busy trying to fix up a fancy picture book about the Abbey for our centenary. Some very classy photographers from Louisville were out here twice and they are very good. One of them is a kid nineteen just out of the marines but he works like Rice works, with the same kind of seriousness (PV 106-107).

By this time, Merton had accepted the kindness of Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, herself a poet, and a teacher at various universities. She would transcribe his longhand notes – not always easy to read – serve as his sounding board and adviser on poetry and devoted factotum for the next 20 years, although they met only once, at a Gethsemani picnic in 1967. The Merton-Lentfoehr file in the Columbia archive is very substantial. In early 1949 he wrote her that he now had a different place, much more agreeable, to write in the monastery.

The new Father-Cellarer, at the beginning of the year, took over the room where I was working. That left practically nowhere for me except the rare book vault. And now here I am behind a double iron door in . . . this silent monastery, and surrounded by twelfth-century manuscripts of St. Bernard. It is simply wonderful. It is a miracle that I do any work at all. The constant temptation is to sit still and taste the beautiful silence. I have permission to come in here in the "interval" after the night office on certain feasts – around four thirty a.m. – and study old liturgical ms, missals, antiphoners etc. What a meditation! (RJ 190).

Lentfoehr took her responsibilities as Merton's helper with such seriousness that she began to examine the Merton materials in the Columbia University library. He wrote her that he hoped she wouldn't have her "sensibilities" damaged by what she found.

Thank you also for the card from New York. One thing distresses me: it is the thought that you may have been led to ferret around in the Columbia library until you unearthed some skeleton in the closets of the Columbia of fifteen years or so ago. If you did, then I have no need to assure you that those skeletons are certainly skeletons and there is nothing in those closets to edify a religious. I am only thinking of your own sensibilities. For my own part, I ought at least to be able to accept the humiliation of my past as some kind of penance. After all I ought to do something to make amends. On the other hand you will be glad to hear that the priesthood is very close now and that they have arranged the ordination for Ascension Day, May 26<sup>th</sup> (RJ 191).

The ordination took place on that day, in 1949, as scheduled. It was the same year that saw the publication of *Seeds of Contemplation*, meditations, *The Tears of the Blind Lions*, poems, and *The Waters of Siloe*, a history of the Cistercians. A big Columbia representation came down from New York for the ordination ceremony. Lax, though, probably journeyed from Connecticut College for Women, where he had taught English for the prior academic year of 1948-49. His cousin, Bob Mack, who was head of the English department, had arranged for Lax to replace a professor who was sick. Merton's account of the ordination:

I could not begin to write about the ordination, about saying Mass, about the *Agape* that lasted three days, with all those who came down to attend. Perhaps some day it will come out retrospectively, in fragments. . . . I am left with the feeling not only that I have been transformed but that a new world has somehow been brought into being through the labor and happiness of these three most exhausting days, full of sublimity and of things that none of us will understand for a year or two to come. . . . So I gave communion to Nanny [Frieda Hauck, who had helped to raise him back in Long Island] and to Dan Walsh and Bob Lax and Ed Rice and Bob Giroux, who wore his U.S. Navy jacket, and to Tom Flanagan who came with Ed, and Rod Mudge who came with Dan and to McCauliffe who wrote here about poetry. But I couldn't give communion to Jay Laughlin or to Seymour [Freedgood]. . . . Now I know that I had the whole Church in America praying for me and I am scared and consoled by so much mercy and by the sense that I myself have contributed practically nothing to the whole business and that I have been worked



on and worked in, carried upward on the tide of a huge love that has been released in people, somehow, in connection with a book printed over my name: and on this tide millions of us, a whole continent perhaps, is riding into heaven (*SJ* 193-95).<sup>25</sup>

Seeking some of the religious fervor he caught from Merton at Gethsemani was his friend Rice, who composed a wistful note around this time – perhaps to his friend from Columbia days, Bob Gerdy:

oh: this is what is happening: i am going up to Graymore [sic] monastery for a few days to save my soul. if I don't come back by friday, call my poor old daddy and tell him where I am. if I am not back in a week from today, send him the enclosed letter but don't soak off the stamp before you do. . . . I am sorry for being so melodramatic about this trip, but it is the ham in me coming out for the last time. Give the rest of the fellows my compliments and tell them they ought to repent themselves.

Get it right, Y'rs<sup>26</sup>

Merton asked Lentfoehr to stop by Rice's apartment at 54 Bank St., New York, and pick up "some snapshots he took down here and some other old ones perhaps" (*RJ* 192). These photos show most of the ordination visitors mentioned above but do not show Lax, Merton and Rice in one frame – and, alas, no such picture was ever taken in their lifetimes, evidently, except for a poorly focused one at the cabin in Olean in 1939 or 1940. Rice's photo of a blissful Merton after his ordination, in straw hat and traditional Trappist robes, and many others he took on visits to the Abbey in later years, are heirlooms. Several of them were on the wall of Jonathan Montaldo's office when he was Director of the Merton Center at Bellarmine University and are now his personal possessions.<sup>27</sup>

In the summer of 1949 Lax got to do something he had been aching for. He got a \$400 advance from a publisher – maybe Duell Sloane & Pierce – to do a kind of reporter-at-large article on traveling with the Cristiani Brothers circus through parts of western Canada. Some 50 years later he recalled the experience in an e-mail to me from Patmos:

I was to fly out and meet them in a big border city in Saskatchewan and travel with them to Saskatoon. Mogador met me at the plane and it was as though we'd just seen each other yesterday. I'd ride in the cab of Mogador's truck and take notes all the time as we talked. It seems we'd drive all night, then sleep just a little before it was time to raise the tent in the morning. More likely, performers slept late and circus grips did the tent-raising, still, performers had to be on hand to install trapezes, tight-wires and nets. I lived and ate with the performers – the food was great. The first draft of my book was all full of breakfast menus. . . . Played just one role with them, not at every performance, but they allowed me to play the clown for maybe about 10 days. Another clown would say, "What's your name?" I'd say whatever. He'd say, "My name is milk. Shake." Another: I was carrying a bag and fishing into it and bringing out a flashlight. I fished and fished and finally came out with a flashlight and I was amazed by it and that got a laugh. They were all farmers in that part of Saskatchewan. One day a whole farmer family with a baby was watching me do this pantomime with the flashlight . . . the baby was sober as a judge. I was in a tramp suit. It was only a slight adjustment to what I was wearing all the time. I pulled out the flashlight and the baby smiled and they all sat back and relaxed. I started to walk away and the baby was following me. It was quite a

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triumph. I was out of advance money by the time we got to Saskatoon. Mogador lent me fifty dollars so I could fly back to New York, and I mailed it back to him from the Virgin Islands where I'd gone to visit Nancy [Flagg] and [Bob] Gibney."<sup>28</sup>

He never wrote the article, and is not sure if he ever returned the \$400 advance, but the material he gathered became grist for *Circus of the Sun* which would be published ten years later, in 1959.

A few weeks before getting the above e-mail I had telephoned Paul Cristiani (Mogador, the acrobat, in *Circus*) at his home in Las Vegas and he remembered with great warmth his friendship with Lax. "You gotta like him," he told me. "You don't teach anybody to have a funny walk and make good faces."<sup>29</sup> For his part, Lax remembers the Cristianis for, as he told Mark Van Doren, their "unearthly sweetness and grace [having] taken him in as a poet and philosopher without portfolio." Van Doren eventually met Mogador at lunch in New York with Lax. "Mogador was handsome and lithe, but scarcely more articulate than his friend, so that I did most of the talking. But I learned that he had studied dancing under Balanchine in order to perfect his balance." Not long afterwards Van Doren went to a Cristiani Brothers performance, traveling to Massachusetts from his home in Connecticut. Mogador "bounded out to greet us; assigned us the best seats in the tent; and during the show perpetually bowed and waved to us, so that we felt very important." Van Doren wrote about the show to Lax, whose reply was one word: "Gee!"<sup>30</sup>

Not long after returning from Canada Lax accepted an invitation, and an airplane ticket, to the Virgin Islands from his former girl friend, Nancy Flagg, then married to his old Columbia buddy, Bob Gibney. Another friend from Columbia days, Ad Reinhardt, soon to make his mark as an abstract painter, and recently divorced, went with him. Lax had visited Flagg and Gibney in Bermuda on their honeymoon. "Why were they in the Virgin Islands?" I asked Lax on Patmos in 1997.

Well, they were tired of New York certainly. Gibney, at least, perhaps Nancy, too, maybe they both had come into some money from the deaths of their parents. I had just come from traveling with the circus and was trying to write the circus book. I spent most of each day on the book, although I did go for a swim each day. The form of *Circus* changed a lot. Since I had thought it was going to be a reporter-at-large piece it included every menu or every meal I ate while I traveled with them. It was all magical with me. Ooh, corn flakes! As it went along it got to be more and more a poem. I got sick at some point, some stomach disorder, maybe from eating too many avocados. . . . I had eye trouble . . . had it back in New York, too. I went to the hospital in St. Thomas. I remember an Anglican chaplain coming by my bed and saying things like, "Anything good happening?"

During that hospital sojourn he wrote a lot of *Circus*, including a very funny poem that describes the lion tamer, "Colonel Angus," who interrupted a chat to go into the cage with chair and whip, then left the lion "furious . . . with his paws against the door" while he "Scurried from the cage" and calmly ended the interrupted sentence with, "I think it was Pasadena."<sup>31</sup>

What did you do for money in those days? "Same as always, just waited for some. We had to go to St. Thomas for mass . . . and Reinhardt would come with me." He, a Communist? "Yes, and he went to Gethsemani once with me. He was an open person, not a committed Communist

like his first wife was. He came from a Lutheran family . . . Lutheran, German, the works." Were there any people there you could talk to about God? "Sure, both Gibney and Nancy." It was there Lax heard about the Holy Year, the Marian Year [1950]. "At the church I heard a voice inside me that said, 'You'll be there.' I have a lot of voices inside me, but I took that one seriously." He did go to Rome later, after writing *Circus*. Lax's affection for Flagg is transparent in this journal entry, written on the day of his arrival with Reinhardt, having been met by Gibney at the airport in St. Thomas:

Nancy dressed in fair colors,  
walking like princess,  
came to the end of the pier  
wept  
so beautiful.

Swim. No suits. Masks and fins. Gibney pursuing fish, could catch them bare handed. . . .

Drink, before dinner. Martinis. Conversation. Dinner: goat curry, mango chutney.

Nancy roasts & grinds own coffee, makes bread, grows vegetables, makes mango chutney, guava jelly, all ice creams, johnny-cake, works out own dishes of native fare, makes dresses, keeps house immaculate, writes stories, stays beautiful.

Have 6 cats: George & the Princess, Eddie, Hazel, Lucille. Ok, 5 cats . . . Gibney makes beds, tables, chairs, repairs motors & tools for natives, catches lobsters, turtles, spears fish, sets home made fish pots for the cats. Two days ago speared three lobsters. Yesterday a big flopping sting ray. Lobsters for us, sting ray wings for cats. . . .

Gib being outspoken conservative, Reinhardt retiring liberal. All day Reinhardt makes abstract watercolors for New York art show. Virgin Islands colors & grace of line beginning to make appearance in pix. Gib against abstract art, "Bastardize extraordinary talents, shouldn't waste them on this."

They play jazz records. The eye business keeps me from going up hill where I do my writing.

Gibney, although a hard drinker, was very athletic. He could swim great distances under water, and he would tightrope walk on a cable, with a balancing rod – not all that hard – but he did it while carrying his kids. His judgment of Lax's writing and Reinhardt's painting was harsh. Flagg would write that Gibney "deplored the direction that Lax had taken: he felt that Lax's supple, shimmering wits were wasted on his false-simple 'concrete' poems." He also wrote, in his journal presumably, that "Merton's book left me with the feeling that he'll deserve martyrdom so essential to canonization." He "rant[ed] against Reinhardt and the whole new 'Culture Industry': Genet, blah, Poor Reinhardt's one-upmanship in purple-on-purple. Welded auto parts. Pop. Rauschenberg. Warhol. Bridget Riley. SHIT! . . ." He wrote Reinhardt himself that, "I tend toward the thoroughly unreal and naïve wish that everything that has happened to the world since 1750 be repealed." Flagg writes that Gibney's only hero was Samuel Johnson and he "clouted Reinhardt with proofs that Andrew Wyeth

was the one contemporary painter worth considering.”<sup>32</sup> Lax and Reinhardt remained oblivious to their friend’s harsh criticism.

Lax’s eye trouble was from exposure to the Caribbean sun. He put a patch over one eye which was sensitive even to moonlight. One night they all drove to one of Nancy’s friends’ house and drank a lot. Everyone was hung over the next day and Gibney felt bad about not writing. Lax recalls that he had a dream about Merton writing a long poem, “100 lines to a page, 1000 pages . . . good long lines, lively religious poem. . . . This he shows me in dark wood panelled New York City room.”

Some 13 years later Flagg, a talented writer who had worked for *Parade* in New York, recalled the daily doings of the quartet in a magazine piece. It evokes the mood of the Olean days, is titled “The Beats in the Jungle” and leads off with this quote from a Wilfrid Sheed article called “The Beat Movement Concluded,” which had appeared in the *New York Times Book Review* of February 13, 1972: “Much of the Beat life style existed among a small group at Columbia University as early as 1939.” Flagg’s article makes it clear that the beat life style was still very much alive in 1949 in the Virgin Islands:

Five cats were the only company we kept. So we were delighted when the poet Robert Lax, Gibney’s great friend and Columbia roommate, promised to come and spend the summer with us. No doubt Thomas Merton would have come along too, if he hadn’t been living austerely enough already, in a Trappist monastery. (Merton’s much-edited autobiography, “The Seven Storey Mountain,” had been published the autumn before, to the scorn and merriment of his friends. “We got a free copy of Merton’s book,” Gibney wrote to Lax. “I can’t put him any closer to grace in a cowl than I could to sin in a straw hat.”)<sup>33</sup>

Flagg’s description of her two guests on their arrival at her abode: “Even after the rigors of the trip down from New York, both Lax and Ad looked just as usual – Ad plump and shrewd and self-contained and benign, like a Buddha or a baby; Lax as skinny and shaky and ungainly as a foal, and just as clearly destined for grace.” She wrote that she had first met Lax when she was 14. That would have been in 1936 when Lax was a sophomore at Columbia and she was perhaps a precocious freshman at Smith. She is proud that “The first full-page poem ever published in *The New Yorker* was written by Lax for me [“A Radio Masque for My Girl Coming down from Northampton”]. When was that? 1940. So I was eighteen by then, and taking poems as a matter of course. All my vanity was still intact; I hadn’t yet met Gibney.”

Ed Rice felt that Flagg really loved Lax and he probably returned her love but seriousness about women was not part of his makeup. His publisher Emil Antonucci once asked Lax why he never married. After a pause he said, “I’m a unicellular being.” Flagg transferred her affection to Gibney since she could get no response from Lax, thought Rice. It was not an easy marriage, though. In the article she recounts Gibney’s depression, as well as Lax’s. She says that Gibney’s

blocks were so many and so massive that they became his castle. Lax too seemed to be, indeed boasted of being, an aesthetic basket case. He couldn’t repeat his early successes with *The New Yorker*. That summer on the cay, he was supposed to be writing for Duell Sloan a straight journalistic book about some circus acrobats of his acquaintance. He couldn’t write it. (“The Circus of the Sun”, a dizzying sequence of high-wire poems, wasn’t published until 1960 [*sic*, 1959], and then not by Duell Sloan.) But the sort of thing he was doing, and was ashamed of doing –

those small slopes and ropes and ladders of words, on all those flyaway scraps of paper – swung him up to his present rarefied reputation.

Maybe “rarefied” but largely unrecognized today, except in some circles in Europe, one would say, although there are some Americans who feel his poems will one day become classics. Flagg recalls an afternoon with Lax that reveals his own self-doubt about the quality of his work:

One afternoon, with the sun like an axe to our skulls, Lax and I plodded up to the top of the cay to admire the peacock-blue view, a full circle of stupefying beauty and boredom. Lax seemed depressed. Perhaps I was trying to cheer him up, perhaps to cheer myself about Gibney’s chronic depression. Anyway, I said, “It’s not fair. There should be a good acceptable name for the sort of talent you and Gibney have. Not for formal writing. Discipline, organization, all that stuff. But for the wonderful talk and jokes and journals and letters to friends.” Lax wasn’t cheered. “There is a name for that sort of talent. That’s what they call posthumous talent.”

Flagg and Gibney took note of a characteristic of Lax’s that stayed with him lifetime – his klutziness. Flagg cited in her article this Gibney remark in a letter he wrote from Boston during one of his escapes from the islands: “I stay constantly irritated (not seriously, but you know) when he can’t seem to open a can or light the lamp or a fire, or get into a boat without being lowered in a sling.” Lax’s talent was elsewhere and, even in the environment of ennui that seemed to hover over the Flagg-Gibney complex, he showed it with some substantive writing on *Circus*.

He returned to Olean and concentrated on making his notes into a long poem, “and I had Father Philotheus [a long-time friend, on the faculty at St. Bonaventure, who was also Merton’s spiritual adviser for some period of time] keeping me at it. ‘You be here by 8 in the morning and you start writing.’” He looked back on his sojourn with Flagg and Gibney in a note to Merton:

i’m home again in the attic; stayed at the island till October 15. it is a fine island, but house too small for three people [Reinhardt must have left earlier] not singing trios. me and gibney pretty good duets, old songs and some new; nancy, solo, with defiantly lonely arias from the rustic cavalier . . . . i wrote about the acrobats and am still writing in gladio’s attic. many words, much paper, but nothing like a finished book. want to make a movie ballet of Juggler of Notre Dame. Mogador Cristiani turning the right kind of somersaults. i wish we could make it in the Church, for the Church. . . . i wrote a lot of like psalm-tones on the island. i think they all need working on; but i will send them to you when i can retype them (*PV* 108).

Even then, it seems, Merton was on the lookout for isolated sanctuaries, as he queried Lax in a letter of several densely typed pages that included his own doings and musings, as well as reflections on the teaching of theology to the novices, and a revelation of his eclectic musical tastes. Excerpts:

Thanks for the letter and the list of poems and the news of Gib and Nancy. Is Virgin Islands any good for a monastery?

I am not writing, too busy teaching mystical theology and a big orientation course for novices to get into the liturgy. I have suddenly woken up to the fact that

somebody needs to be teaching theology the way St. Augustine did and not the way textbooks used in seminaries do. . . .

Anyway, pray that the classes may work out. It will certainly do no harm to stop writing now for a while and all this will build up easy into a better book than I ever thought of before. If God wants it that way.

Naomi Burton [Merton's long-time agent] wants to come down here and persuade me to lie low for a while and she does not believe that this is exactly what I am doing. I have manufactured a private boardwalk out behind the old horsebarn which is half destroyed and there I walk up and down and make up songs that I will never be able to write down, partly King Oliver and partly Stravinsky or somebody and partly gregorian chant. It is about the only way I can pray but it is mildly pacifying and doesn't disturb the cloud where God is. I say it is the only way I pray – no – there is a big opera starts inside me when I get in choir but it is strictly opera and for me Il Trovatore isn't prayer and I shrug it off, when I remember.

Then he reminded Lax of his passion for the Bible, and revealed an interest in mysticism:

Gee, read the Bible.

I have been nuts to go so many years in the monastery without reading Scripture all day and studying about the prophets. Claudel writes awful good about Scripture and there are in France many priests beginning to wake up and find out all about it too. . . . There is a priest living as a hermit in India, knows all about Indian mysticism and thinks that maybe India will someday be the hope of the Church. People keep writing from India we should start a monastery there, but Fr. Abbot say no. also a bishop from switzerland wrote, wants american trappists. French-swiss-german-dutch trappists no pep, he says. wants american trappists. . . . Me hide in kentucky jungle behind horsebarn rain-snow-hail sing king oliver all night. God Bless you, Gladio Benjie Dick Mary Davis all people at Bonas everybody in Olean. Holy and Happy Christmas. In Corde Jesu (PV 109-10).

It was not going to be a happy Christmas for Rice, whose journal showed him plunged in gloom:

Fraud  
Despair  
Gloom and misery everywhere

It's always three o'clock in the morning . . . in the dark night of the soul. Who knows how lonely a man can be? Who can express his own dark night, even to himself? How can we communicate to each other except through Jesus Christ? Who is to cement society together except Jesus Christ? It seems there are two dark nights: the one before the light is given you, and second after. I am still in the first, and how terrible can the second night be!

The mood was still with him on New Year's eve when he, nonetheless, set some goals that seem very modest: "Another year gone. The two most depress[ing] times of each year – Oct 23 [his birthday] & today. My projects for next year – painting & completion of *Great Expectations*, which

I am picking up for the sixth or seventh time.” His comments on art in this same entry are prophetic since they would show up in the remarkable art that would characterize *Jubilee* magazine, soon to be born. “It seems to me that the best art of the present is spot art – simple drawings, often symbolic. Good because it is used as an aid to other things just as medieval and byzantine wall drawings and decorations were used as an aid to worship. Spot drawings are a quick guide to content of a story or article.”<sup>34</sup>

A few months later he would lose his job at RKO Pathé, but it would give him time to begin to develop the concept for what became the much-praised *Jubilee* magazine (1953-67) in which all three friends participated: Lax as roving editor, Merton as major contributor, and Rice as founder, fund raiser, publisher, business manager, art director and writer.

1 The same document specified that his other securities be divided by his brother John Paul’s widow, Margaret M. Merton, 61 Camden St., Birkenhead, Cheshire, England and his guardian, T. Izod Bennett, M.D. Esq., “to be paid by him to a person mentioned to him by me in my letters” – the mother of his illegitimate child – “if that person can be found.” She never was found. Bennett’s address was given as 29 Hill St., Berkeley Square, London W.1 (Thomas Merton Center Archive, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY; henceforth “TMCA”).

2 Rice interview, May 20, 1996, Sagaponack, NY.

3 Thomas Merton and James Laughlin, *Selected Letters*, ed. David D. Cooper (New York: Norton, 1997) xviii; subsequent references will be cited as “SL” parenthetically in the text.

4 *The Selected Letters of Mark Van Doren*, ed. George Hendrick (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987) 168; subsequent references will be cited as “Van Doren, Letters” parenthetically in the text.

5 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 413.

6 Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 168; subsequent references will be cited as “RJ” parenthetically in the text.

7 Robert Lax, *The New Yorker* (Sept. 29, 1945) 55.

8 Note addressed by Lowell on Dec. 12, 1944 to Lax at 315 E. Franklin St., Chapel Hill, NC (Robert Lax Archive, Columbia University; henceforth “LAC”).

9 Lax Journal: Jan. 5, 1945 (LAC).

10 Jennifer Harford interview with Rice, April, 1996, Sagaponack, NY.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Lax interview, May 20, 1997, Patmos.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Eliot letter to author, with journal excerpts, November, 2000.

15 Lax interview, May 21, 1997, Patmos.

16 *Journal E Hollywood Journal*, July 13, 1947 (Zurich: Pendo, 1996) 34.

17 Lax interview, May 21, 1997, Patmos.

18 Lax letter to Merton, April 7, 1947, from Hollywood: Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax*, ed. Arthur W. Biddle (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001) 101; subsequent references will be cited as “PV” parenthetically in the text.

19 *Internet All Movie Guide*.

20 Lax interview, May 21, 1997, Patmos.

21 *The New Yorker* (March 16, 1946) 32. Between 1940 and 1954 Lax had twelve poems published in that magazine. Merton had two.

22 Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 40 [April 16, 1947]; subsequent references will be cited as “SJ” parenthetically in the text.

23 Thomas Merton, *Figures for an Apocalypse* (New York: New Directions, 1947); subsequent references will be cited as “FA” parenthetically in the text.

24 Rice Journal: March 27, 1949 (Edward Rice Archive, Georgetown University; henceforth “RAG”).

25 Also present at the ordination, although inexplicably unmentioned here, was James Knight, another of the old Columbia crowd.

26 1949 (RAG).

27 Many of Ed Rice’s photos of Merton are in the possession of his son Christopher, who lives in Princeton, NJ. The negatives are held by Rice’s other son, Ted, who lives in Santa Fe.

28 E-mail from Lax, Sept. 11, 1999.

29 Phone conversation with Mogador, Sept. 2, 1999.

30 Mark Van Doren, *Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958) 300-301.

31 Robert Lax, *Circus of the Sun* (New York: Journeyman Books, 1959) not paginated.

32 Nancy Flagg, “Reinhardt Revisiting,” *Art International* 22.2 (1978) 54-57.

33 Nancy Flagg, “The Beats in the Jungle,” *Lugano Review* (1972) 56-59.

34 Dec. 1, 1949 (RAG).