



When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Robert Lax

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J. Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was a twenty-year-old sophomore when he was introduced to fellow student Robert Lax (1915-2000) in the Columbia University cafeteria in 1935. They were brought together by an admiration for each other's writing in the college humor magazine. Upon graduation in 1938, Merton converted to Roman Catholicism; Lax began graduate study in English and took a job at the *New Yorker*. Three years later, Merton entered the Abbey of Gethsemani, and he and Lax saw each other only four more times. Yet their friendship was sustained for the next thirty-three years through an amazing correspondence.

Their letters show Merton as an irreverent and often hilarious critic of presidents and popes. He also turned to serious issues, such as the war in Vietnam and the dangers of nuclear holocaust. Merton and Lax's correspondence is filled with reminiscences of friends and faculty from their years at Columbia, including Mark van Doren, Lionel Trilling, Ad Reinhardt, Edward Rice, and Jacques Barzun. These letters of two poets and solitaries betray a giddy delight in wordplay, unconstrained by rules of grammar or conventions of spelling. Puns, portmanteaus, and inside jokes abound. The thirty-year exchange began when Merton dashed off a note on June 17, 1938, after spending a week with Lax's family.

The final epistle in this extraordinary correspondence was written by Lax on December 8, 1968. Merton died in Bangkok five days later and never received it. Arthur Biddle spent nearly ten years collecting every letter known to exist between Merton and Lax, a total of 346, two thirds of which have never been published. Biddle provides chronologies of their lives and places events and people in context within the letters. This volume also includes the text of a rare interview with Lax.

Arthur W. Biddle is professor emeritus of English at the University of Vermont.

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