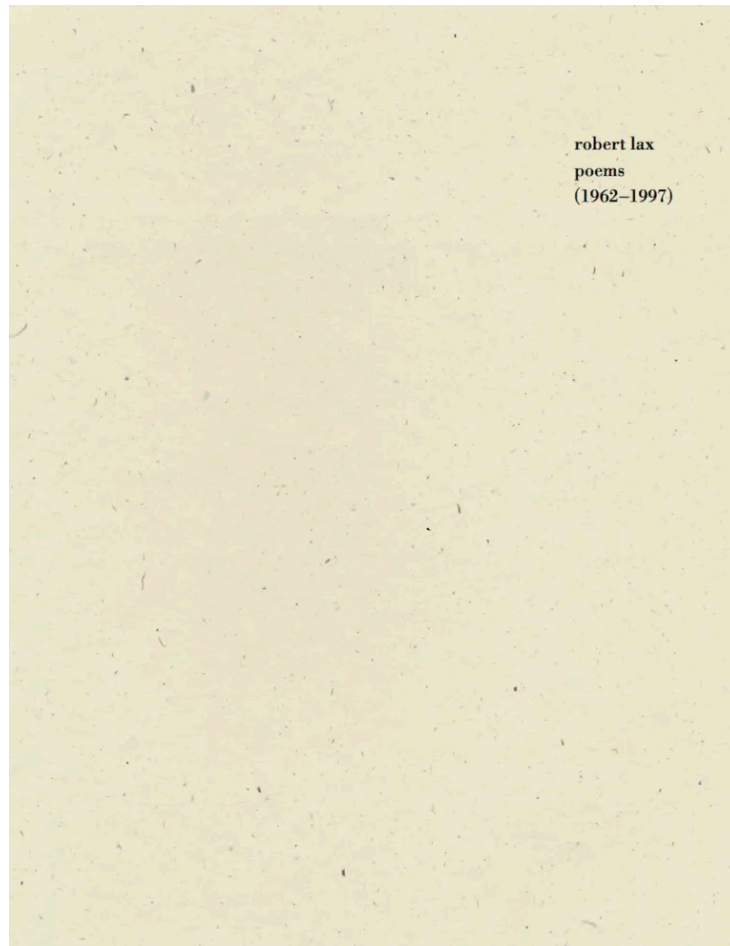


Beguiling Simplicity: The Poetry of Robert Lax



Louis Bury April 16, 2016



Lifelong friend of Trappist Monk Thomas Merton and abstract painter Ad Reinhardt, Robert Lax wrote spare poems that, in their beguiling simplicity, provoke anxieties about how and why we read. A typical Lax poem forms a narrow vertical column, each line of which is only one or two words long, that descends down the center of the page in repetitions and permutations: “one stone/ one stone/ one stone,” opens *poems (1962 – 1997)*, edited and with a superb introduction by poet John Beer, “i lift/ one stone/ one stone// i lift/ one stone/ and i am/ thinking” (3). Such phrases, repeated and varied, make the reader aware, if not self-conscious, about the reading act. However, unlike other poets whose work causes readers to read themselves reading it, such as Gertrude Stein or e.e. cummings, Lax’s poems present no obvious difficulties or impediments to sense. Instead, stanzas like the above — difficult in their easiness, complex in their simplicity —

lull the reader into committing the heresy of paraphrase: *Lax lifts one stone and he is thinking*. It's easy, all too easy, to be lax when reading Lax.

The difficulty of reading Lax in part stems from a temporal dissonance. His poems contain so few words, repeated so many times, you almost can't help but read them fast, too fast, much too fast, even as their form and content gesture toward a meditative slowness that remains just out of reach. "hurry/ up/ hurry/ up/ hurry/ up," beseeches one stanza, only for the next to admonish, "slow/ down/ slow/ down/ slow/ down" (48). The two stanzas' forms are almost identical to one another but their contents advocate for opposite reading cadences, each facilitated by the repetitive form. Quick: the reader can skip over the repeated words without much loss because she's already read them anyway. Slow: the repetitions force the reader to take notice of them and slow down. The back-and-forth commands to "hurry/ up/ slow/ down// hurry/ up/ slow/ down" represent the simultaneous conflicting imperatives of Lax's poetry (48).

Much of Lax's poetry shuttles between polarities without privileging either pole. Throughout the collection, stanza topics matter-of-factly alternate between light and dark, day and night, life and death, up and down, the one and the many, squares and circles, yes and no, you and me, and other elemental oppositions, without making better-worse value judgments. His 1997 sequence, "More Scales," illustrates this back-and-forth dynamic and the way in which, like musical scales, Lax's poems play with slight variations at fixed intervals: "flow// &/ pause// pause// &/ flow," runs one scale, "more/ flow// than/ pause// more/ pause// than/ flow" (151). Which is it, flow or pause? Both, ultimately, depending, for poet and reader alike, on which mood is waxing and which waning.

Lax's poetic reliance on seemingly incompatible oppositions evokes William Blake's contention that "without contraries is no progression," as well as Walt Whitman's notorious comfort with poetic contradiction: "Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes)". All three poets understand antinomy as constitutional to the poetic act. Unlike for Blake and Whitman, however, for Lax poetic oppositions are terminological rather than conceptual. First and foremost, they foment the progress of the poetic line, one term pointing way to the next, which points the way to the next, and then the next, on and on, repeated and varied.

This terminological ping-pong reaches its most excitable state in one of the collection's key longer poems, "light" (1984), in which the words "light" and "dark" — two of the most basic literary symbols — permute a series of verbs and prepositions that suffuse the movements with causality. Because he writes minimalist and visually distinctive poetry, Lax sometimes gets lumped into the categories of concrete or visual poetry — Aram Saroyan's seminal "light" is the obvious precedent here — but Lax's "light" poem, a deck of cards being shuffled and re-shuffled, evinces a manic verbal energy that seems as much aural as it is visual.

At the poem's beginning, "light// be/ gets// light" and "dark// be/ gets// dark," before, like a light switch toggling between the on and off positions, "light// be/ gets// dark// dark// be/ gets// light" (103). The line breaks here split "beget" into its atomistic lexical components, "be" and "get." To "be/ get" something is not only to cause it to happen but to *be* that thing, in a manner of speaking, and, by being it, to *get* it, in the sense of both acquiring its properties and understanding it.

The poem's other pivot words also posit an unusual kinship between light and dark. The preposition "out of" ("light// out/ of/ light// light// out/ of/ dark") denotes, like "be/ get," simple causality, but the preposition "of" ("dark/ of/ light// light/ of/ dark// light/ of/ light// dark/ of/ dark") goes further to suggest that darkness is a constituent part of lightness and vice versa, while the stanzas that spin variations around the verb "to be" ("light/ is/ dark// dark/ is/ light") assert a surprising equivalence between the seemingly incompatible poles (105-7). However paradoxical these permutations appear, what ultimately matters, what defines the poetic here as quintessential Lax, is simply the constant shuffling of terms, regardless of what they might mean, the on-off off-on box step that the terms "light" and "dark" perform.

This on-off rhythm, so fundamental to the structure of Lax's poetry, actually presents a salutary model for reading Lax and difficult poetry in general: alternately slow and fast, attentive and inattentive, neither pole privileged but instead adopted to suit the occasion and mood. When I first read *poems* — in the space of one day's subway commute, back and forth — the breakneck speed at which I could skate on the poems' surfaces felt freeing. The poems' extreme brevity and apparent obviousness made them easy to read for texture and rhythm without fussing over comprehension. One neighboring rider, watching me breeze through the pages, quipped that I must be a speed reader; *poems* isn't a book that will cause purchaser's remorse on account of going unread. But with that breezy freedom, guilt, distinctively literary in nature, that you're not giving the poems the full attention they deserve, a feeling easily exacerbated by Lax's deceptive simplicity. That I was reading the book to review it only compounded my sense of guilt. Either-or, I imagined, swept along by the subway: fast (and guilty) pleasure or slow (and serious) appreciation. But Lax's poetry, at once fast and slow, shallow and deep, eventually teaches you, if you stick with it — at whatever pace and whatever depth — how to relax and enjoy the ride.

poems (1962 – 1997) (2013) is published by Wave Books and is available from [Amazon](#) and other online booksellers.