

Patmos Journal: In Search of Thomas Merton with Robert Lax

by Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.

Foreword

The following excerpt from a journal I kept while traveling to Greece to research the first volume of the Merton Journals, should perhaps be called a "footnote" since it makes sense only if read in tandem with Merton's pre-monastic journal, *Run to the Mountain* (1939-1941). The Editor of *The Literary Renaissance*, Mr. Ron Whitehead, expressed interest in publishing this fragment of journal as a "chapbook" which fit into his ongoing series of similar small books. It is being reprinted here in *The Merton Journal* with the permission of Mr. Whitehead. Anyone interested in his "Published in Heaven Series"™ of chapbooks, should write to: Mr. Ron Whitehead, White Fields Press, P0 Box 3685, Louisville, KY 40201-3685, USA.

Tuesday, March 17, 1992. Paris.

Ron Seitz was out front in the guest house waiting for me with yet more books, two for Bob Lax and a big book on Greece for travellers. I took the two for Bob but declined the big Greek tome. My bags are heavy enough!

Got to Louisville in plenty of time to check in and have a leisurely breakfast at the airport cafeteria with Ron, who says something about my not coming back, but they can't get rid of me that easily.

TWA to Saint Louis where I changed planes for Boston. After two hours we board for Athens with a refuelling stop in Paris. A Greek PhD student from the University of Minnesota sits next to me, and we have a fine conversation about life in America for a native of Athens. He speaks excellent English.

I settle down taking the transcript of the early Thomas Merton journals from my hand bag, and begin to read over the problematic part regarding Merton's 1940 visit to Cuba while he was still in New York, and just prior to his move to St. Bonaventure's, Olean, New York, where he would teach English and creative writing for a year before entering Gethsemani. Bob Lax is probably the only person alive who can really help in deciphering these early journals and their chronology — I look forward to a few days with him at his Patmos solitude.

Wednesday, March 18. Athens.

After a very long and not too tiresome ride we arrived safely in Athens on time (2:30pm). Of course we lost six or seven hours flying East, which we'll make up on the return flight. Rather than take a taxi I venture the shuttle bus for Constitution Square which is just a couple of blocks from the Minerva Hotel where I have reservations.

First glimpse of the Acropolis coming in from the airport is impressive. Majestic standing there on a hill in the heart of the old city and I think of Saint Paul who preached to the Athenians nearly two thousand years ago. I settle in at the Minerva, which is a splendid place with courteous English speaking attendants at the desk. Above all, it is reasonably priced, at least according to USA standards. First thing to do is locate a Catholic Church. The Cathedral of Saint Dionysius is about three blocks away, and across the street from the American Express Bank, where I will cash some

travellers checks into drachmas.

Mass in Latin, with the Gospel in Greek, which I tried to follow in a booklet but got lost for the most part except for Kyrie Eleisons at the beginning. They seemed to be using a pre-Vatican II rite.

Dinner at the Far East House with excellent Chinese food and Greek white wine. Got back to the Minerva to find a message from Bob Lax with a welcome and a warning not to try coming to Patmos that day as the sea was turbulent. He suggested I call back tomorrow morning, to find out if the Aegean was calm enough for the ferry.

Thursday, March 19, Patmos.

Bob called at about 10 am to say the sun was out and the sea quiet, and that I should come out on the one o'clock ferry from Pireus, where the boats were lined up to take passengers to the islands. I rushed next door to get a ticket for the ferry while the receptionist called a taxi to take me to Pireus, the port town about 20 miles from Athens, where the ferry left promptly at one o'clock.

I settled into my digs which I shared with a Greek military officer who is stationed on Kos or Rhodes, I forget which. His name is Nick Michalas and he speaks good English, having an American wife from Texas! The cabins are built for four persons, but with only 600 passengers on the ferry (capacity 1000), we can spread out a bit, two to a cabin so we each can take a lower berth.

My first taste of Greek beer for lunch, which I had with my room-mate Nick up in the dining hall. After some lively conversation we retired to our bunks for a couple hours rest. The trip was so smooth that I actually slept a bit, but then woke as we were nearing the island of Patmos. The lights were blinking as we approached the island, welcoming us to this enchanted island of the Apocalypse.

Bob Lax, bearded and smiling, was standing on the harbor as I descended from the ferry at 11pm. After a rather dangerous crossing of the street at the dock, we walked across the street to the Rex Hotel. Very modest indeed but entirely adequate for my needs. Bob had fruit and candy along with a bottle of Greek wine in my room, as well as bottled water. What a thoughtful and gracious host.

Friday, March 20, Patmos.

Bob came down from his house and met me at the café on the harbor about 8:30. We had breakfast with very good coffee. After more conversation covering our mutual friends at the monastery and Ron Seitz and the O'Callaghans in Louisville, we headed up the hill to his home which is about a 20-minute walk from the harbor. Through winding unnamed and unnumbered streets, we walked through narrow lanes, wide enough for a bicycle or a motorcycle but hardly for an American car. Everyone on the island knows Bob and he is known as "Petros" by the natives. Apparently "Robert Lax" is hard to translate into Greek. We are greeted along the way with "Kalimera" or "Kalispera" or close friends simply "Yasu!"

After Bob gave me a tour of his pad (leased by his niece, Marcia Marcus Kelly and her husband Jack for 99 years), which is on the second (top) floor of a small house with a balcony overlooking the shore and the Aegean in the distance. Gorgeous view from the balcony and also from his living room. Three or four rooms, with a little library off the living room with lots of books, including Merton and many other poets and artists.

Cats: Bob has many friends among the island's cats, and he has names for them. He feeds them small fish that he picked up at the market on the way up the hill, calling each by name. He claims each has a distinctive personality; and I believe it from their response to his largesse. Am reminded of T.S. Eliot's "Cats" made famous through the production of Andrew Lloyd Webber.

Friday, March 20, Evening, Patmos.

We begin paging through the various transcriptions of Merton's Cuban journal, comparing the copies of the "Fitzgerald File" with the other ms. from Combermere House and the Columbia Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, which Sister Therese Lentfoehr had bequeathed to Merton's alma mater. After a lot of discussion and citing of passages we came to the conclusion that the fragments from the "Fitzgerald File" are really the "raw journal" rather than what was published in the Secular Journal or even the manuscript from Madonna House or Columbia.

Both lunch and supper, which we enjoyed at Bob's house, were provided by his neighbors. A lady came to the kitchen door about lunch time and left a large portion of their family's meal for us. Very touching how these people look after one another, and have a special affection for Bob and see that all his needs are taken care of; like "mothers" or "sisters" in the family.

Saturday, March 21, Patmos.

We continue with our work on the journals, getting them in better chronological sequence. Miami first, and then Cuban entries. It is beginning to fit together like a jig-saw puzzle or rather a Dead Sea scroll! We both enjoy a sense of satisfaction in discovering the proper order in which Merton first wrote these journals. For a break, in the afternoon we decide to take a taxi up to the Monastery of St. Christodoulos, but on the way we stop for a short visit at the cave of Saint John where the Apocalypse is supposed to have been written. About three or four Greek Orthodox monks were chanting Vespers in the chapel when we arrived. I bought a candle as did Bob, which we lit for our intentions, especially the successful completion of our work on the Merton pre-monastic journals.

The taxi then dropped us off at the top of the mountain at the entrance to the ancient Monastery of St. Christodoulos. Although their Liturgy had just ended, we looked around for awhile before taking a bus back down to the harbor. Fantastic view.

Sunday, March 22.

We meet again at the café for breakfast facing the sea. It has been raining slightly. We enjoy the relative luxury of heat during our breakfast with the satisfaction of having completed the work I came for, thanks mainly to Bob's assistance.

Bob reiterated his conviction that the journals are valuable in "the raw" and that scholars in the future can have a great time comparing these with the published material. By way of celebrating my last evening in Patmos, we go to a pizza place where we find a quiet corner to enjoy our pizza and Greek beer. The boat leaves Patmos at 9pm and arrives in Athens at 7am so I'll have another evening on the ferry. Bob had phoned again, thoughtful man that he is, and the boat was on time.

Sunday, March 22, later pm.

Got on the boat early enough to find my room and discovered a German companion in our cabin. He speaks good English and we have a short visit before he takes off for the bar.

Meanwhile I get ready for bed. Only two of us again. He turns out to be a worker on Patmos from Germany but wants to come to the States. The boat docks on time in Athens and after haggling with a taxi driver, we share a taxi to Constitution Square and back to the Minerva again just off the Square.

A message there from Bob, to find out if I arrived safely. He has no phone so I could not call him back, but Elena, the lady at the desk assured him of my arrival on time.

Monday, March 23, Athens.

After breakfast, which is served at the Minerva, I'm off to the Acropolis by foot! Good long walk and I felt a bit exhausted when I reached the top of the hill overlooking the smoggy city of Athens. Walked back through the Plaka and nearly got lost, but soon enough got my bearings with my very poor knowledge of Greek. Checked on time for evening Mass at the Cathedral, which turned out to be earlier, 5 o'clock, and a High Mass at that with lots of singing, soprano, tenor and baritone parts. Very operatic!

Tuesday, March 24, Athens.

Rose early and went out to buy some postcards and an American newspaper. I felt quite isolated from any news while at Patmos, although Bob picked up a BBC news report in the evening, but it was hard to follow.

Decided to go to the big Byzantine Museum (the famous icon museum) about six blocks from Constitution Square. Spent a couple hours browsing through the various rooms and cloisters. Several buildings connected by a fine preau or cloister garth. Some of the best icons I've ever seen are housed here. On my return in the afternoon I stopped at the Benaki Museum but it was closed on Tuesday. Still I was grateful to have had some time with the Greek icons.

On my way to the Cathedral for evening Mass there was a great parade of bands and all the school children, both grade and high school, marching between the bands with arms swinging straight out as they marched. I never did find out the occasion for the big celebration. Mass this time was at a rather dismal side altar with women lighting candles at the Statue of Our Lady during the Consecration. The priest seemed to ignore it completely as if it were a daily occurrence and something to be expected in Greek churches. Sad.

Since I'm off early in the morning for Israel, I get to bed early after a spaghetti dinner with Budweiser at an American restaurant for a change. I felt like I was back in Louisville.

Wednesday, March 25, Athens.

Got up very early and decided to skip breakfast until I got to the airport, which was providential. When I arrived at the El Al counter I was told to hurry through Customs as the plane was ready to take off - two hours earlier than scheduled on my ticket! Even with the last minute rush, my bags were scrutinized and two persons questioned me about the nature of my visit. Where did I come from, and what was I doing in Greece? They even asked to see the research I was doing on the Merton journals. Why was Bob Lax living on Patmos? Finally I was ushered on to the plane only minutes before it took off for Tel Aviv. Interesting that after I showed them the Merton journals they sent me quickly on to the plane for Israel. I'm convinced Merton arranged it all.

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