

The Abstract Minimalist Poetry of Robert Lax

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"Why Should I Buy a Bed When All I Want Is Sleep?," the title of Nicolas Humbert and Werner Penzel's 1999 "Chamber Film" on the American poet Robert Lax, is taken from a Lax poem first published in the *New Yorker* in 1942. "The Man with the Big General Notions"¹ is a fable that mocks the man's abstract ideas. This man is "accounted very wise." "When he went to build a house he said, 'Why get brick when all you want is HARDNESS?'," and he makes a pile of various hard things. Next he asks, "Why should I get cement when all that I need is STICKINESS?"

So on top of the stone he put some snow
And on top of the bone he put some glue
And on top of the box he put some tape
And on top of the bar he put some gum
And on top of the pile he put molasses

This man's lack of practicality and disregard for the concrete in favour of the abstract is ultimately his downfall—or at least that of his house. It eventually tumbles down about him. "Some man // Some house," the poem ends.

Abstract vs. concrete is a relevant opposition to raise, for although Lax's work appeared in anthologies of Concrete poetry, and he was described in 1968 as "a concrete poet of international fame," he is more properly characterised as an abstract Minimalist. Lax's eventual development of an abstract style was strongly influenced by the work and thought of his friend, the painter Ad Reinhardt, and "The Man with the Big General Notions" may have been directed at Reinhardt's dogmatic insistence on abstraction as the only true mode of art. Reinhardt also dictated that there should be a strict separation between art and life, an issue Lax grappled with time and again.

Yet in Humbert and Penzel's film, as well as their 1999 video installation *Three Windows*, Lax's life has become art. In both works, which share footage, the camera lingers close to Lax's face, showing only his eyes. Mundane tasks such as washing dishes and feeding cats are attended to with solemnity in the film. The camera follows Lax down the winding streets of the village on the island of Patmos where Lax lived for more than thirty years at the end of his life, and patiently records the process of an elderly Lax walking into the sea, step by step, with the aid of cane. A significant portion of the film is given to the reading of "One Island," one of Lax's most impressive poems. The treatment given to the poem undercuts its abstraction, and ties the work of art to life by combining footage of Patmos with Lax's reading, turning an abstract rendering into realistic representation.

Humbert and Penzel's video installation on Lax was co-produced by Kunsthaus Zürich, Haus der Kunst München, P3Art and Environment Tokyo, Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art Helsinki, and Bavarian Radio. Lax's Journeyman Press books and films made of Lax's work by Emil Antonucci were the subject of a show at the Zona Gallery in Florence, Italy in 1979. An exhibition of his work alongside that of Reinhardt was held at the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart in 1985. A reading in celebration of Lax's eightieth birthday was staged in Zurich, the home of Pendo Verlag, one of Lax's publishers. A performance of his *Black /White Oratorio* was staged at the Festival de la Bâtie in Geneva in 1997, attended by a "triumphant full house," probably because the audience remembered the festival six years previously, when he read "be-

¹ Robert Lax, "The Man with the Big General Notions," *Love Had a Compass: Journals and Poetry*, ed. James J. Uebbing (New York: Grove, 1996), pp. 35-37.

fore an utterly enchanted audience.”² These facts are some of those that can be offered as evidence for the “international fame” of this American poet who produced a distinctive body of work before his death in September 2000.

Much of Lax’s poetry is instantly identifiable as his own. It features starkly reduced lines that give it the appearance of verticality, a severely restricted vocabulary, and rhythmic repetition, and it resembles that of no one else. As David Miller put it in 1975, long before Lax’s literary production ended, “Lax is a poet whose discoveries are entirely his own and not drawn from the books of other poets; he has been from the beginning an extremely original, an unprecedented innovator.”³

Lax persisted in his uniqueness through the nineties, but he remains relatively unknown in his native country. His work has not, to my knowledge, been anthologised since he appeared in two collections of Concrete poetry in the 1960s, and literary scholars have largely neglected him. The economics of printing bear some of the blame for this neglect. Some of Lax’s poems, while Minimalist in nature, require a great deal of paper for their proper presentation. The proportion of text to white space is exceedingly small, and editors have expressed reluctance to publish him for this very reason. His characteristic vertical style is at odds with the demands of the publishing business. “If you have any short poems which are more “horizontal” than the one you sent me last year,” wrote James Laughlin to Lax on *New Directions* stationery in 1969, “I’d love to have a look, for I’ve always wanted to see you in the Annual one year. But we do have this terrible space problem now, which cuts down badly on certain types of poems.”⁴ A few years later Laughlin reiterated his interest and again stressed the issue of spatial constraint: “do let me see some of your journal or any *short* poems.”⁵ James Fitzsimmons of the *Lugano Review*, who in 1965 did publish Lax’s “Sea & Sky,” a Minimalist poem extending to 117 pages, also expressed concern that it would too expensive to publish some of Lax’s poems as they should be presented.⁶

Many of Lax’s poems contain only one, two, or three words, and first-time readers may find this stark simplicity baffling or even off-putting. These poems run the risk of provoking the response not unknown to Minimalist artists working in various media, that the artwork has too little “work” in it, that it is “not-art-enough,” or was so easy to produce that it could have been done by anyone without much effort.⁷ Claims that Lax’s “preferred method of production” is “automatic” writing and the characterisation of his attitude as one of “confident negligence with regard to the publication of his work” — “which poems should be printed and where and how” — do nothing to dispel such initially erroneous assessments of his work as carelessly conceived and constructed.⁸ As Lax himself noted, “it is hard to write a simple

² Vincent Barras, “The First Production of *Black/White Oratorio*,” and “Two Meetings with Robert Lax,” both in *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, eds. David Miller and Nicholas Zurbrugg (Exeter: Stride, 1999), pp. 226, 221.

³ David Miller, “The Poetry of Robert Lax: An Introduction,” *New Lugano Review*, no. 2 (1975), p. 46.

⁴ James Laughlin, letter to Robert Lax, 2 July 1969, Papers of Robert Lax, Columbia University.

⁵ Laughlin, postcard to Lax, 23 December 1973, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

⁶ James Fitzsimmons, postcard to Robert Lax, n.d., Lax Papers, Columbia University.

⁷ See Richard Wollheim, “Minimal Art,” in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art* (London: Studio Vista, 1969), p. 395, and James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (Yale University Press, 2001), p. 81.

⁸ Gerhard van den Bergh, “On Robert Lax,” in Lax and Bergh, *On and By Robert Lax: Essay, Poetry, Drawings, Bibliography* (Zurich: Pendo Verlag, 1995), p. 38.

poem. . . . it is hard to write a poem that is not simply, simply a poor reflection of many other(s) poems.”⁹

Whatever the reason for Lax remaining unknown and thus unappreciated (for those who do know his work praise him generously), his continued neglect is a shame. I agree with Richard Kostelanetz that Lax is “among America’s greatest poets, a true minimalist who can weave awesome poems from remarkably few words.”¹⁰ Lax’s Minimalism is precisely what sets him apart from most contemporary American poets. It is inextricably bound with claims for his excellence, for it is not just the case that Lax is good *and* a Minimalist: Lax is good through or *because of* his Minimalism. Abstraction is the key to his Minimalism, and it was influenced not only by Reinhardt, but also by Lax’s spiritual concerns. His achievements in this mode represent the best of literary Minimalism itself and demonstrate the power a reductive method can hold for getting to the root of the question of why literature matters to us.

The late 1950s were crucial, transitional years for Lax as a poet. His letters to Thomas Merton, whom Lax met while both were students at Columbia University in the 1930s,¹¹ indicate that he was in close contact with Reinhardt at this time, when he was living in New York. In 1959, Lax and Reinhardt visited Merton at the Gethsemani monastery in Kentucky where Merton eventually settled. According to Richard Kostelanetz, Lax “sought linguistic purity comparable to the visual purity of [Reinhardt] and the spiritual purity of [Merton].”¹² But the divisions are not so neat. Lax recognised the spiritual element of Reinhardt’s doctrines. Reinhardt exhibited a keen interest in a variety of spiritual traditions, and acknowledged the validity of “making a religious analogy” to his artistic process.¹³ Though years earlier Reinhardt had attempted to talk Merton out of entering the Catholic Church, in 1957 he presented Merton with a small version of one of his black paintings, with the understanding that Merton intended to use it for meditative and latreutic purposes. Reinhardt’s influence, that is to say, was not at odds with Lax’s religious inclinations, but it did affect the way in which those appeared in his poetry.

Lax’s 1959 book *Circus of the Sun* is replete with religious overtones and has been admired by Denise Levertov, E.E. Cummings, Marianne Moore, and Susan Howe. It was put together in its final form during the transitional period of the late 1950s but was begun in the late 1940s and represents an earlier mode for Lax. Lax remarked that at the end of the book, “everything, the whole circus disappears (as they always do) & with it disappeared my interest in such a wide variety of images.” “From this point on,” Lax says, he began “to concentrate on one image, or a few very simple ones, or still later, . . . on no image.” “The end of the circus” was for Lax “the beginning of a more abstract” style of writing.¹⁴

The treatment of religious themes in Lax’s poetry accords with Reinhardt’s ideas about the spiritual in art, and his influence no doubt had something to do with the poet’s abstract Minimalism. But his impact can also be demonstrated in practical

⁹ Lax, “(notes for comment)” [Notes for a commentary to accompanying a recording of Lax’s work for the Library of Congress made in Athens, Greece on 18 November 1965], Lax Papers, Columbia University.

¹⁰ Richard Kostelanetz, “Robert Lax: Neglected Minimalist,” *American Book Review*, XXI/3 (March-April 2000), p. 24.

¹¹ Reinhardt was also a student at Columbia at this time, and the three men began their friendship there. Lax features prominently in Merton’s book *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

¹² Richard Kostelanetz, “Lax, Robert,” *Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes* (Chicago: A Capella Books, 1993).

¹³ Naomi Vine, “Mandala and Cross,” *Art in America*, November 1991, pp. 124-133; p. 126.

¹⁴ Lax, “(notes for comment),” Notes for the commentary accompanying Lax’s reading of his poems for a Library of Congress recording made in Athens, Greece in 1965. Lax Papers, Columbia University.

terms. In an interview, Lax said, "I think that conversations with Reinhardt, and his directions in painting, certainly had an influence on my writing. Sometimes not specifically, but the general direction that he was working in certainly did—towards reducing the number of colours, reducing the form, and repeating the theme."¹⁵

The transition to a new style was not altogether smooth. One can see Lax struggling to reconcile ideas like those espoused by Reinhardt with more expressive modes of art and poetry in "Problem in Design," written in 1958, when Lax was in the process of shifting to his new style:

what if
 you like
 to draw
 big flowers,

 but what
 if some
 sage has
 told you
 that
 there is
 nothing
 more beautiful

 nothing
 more
 beautiful

 than a
 straight
 line
 ?

 what should
 you draw:
 big flowers?
 straight lines?

 i think
 you should
 draw

 big
 flow
 ers

 big
 flow
 ers

 big
 flow
 ers

 big
 flow
 ers

 big
 flow
 ers

 big
 flow
 ers

¹⁵ Nicholas Zurbrugg, "Interview with Robert Lax," *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, p. 28.

big
flow
ers

big
flow
ers

un
til

they
be
co
me

a
str
ai
gh
t

l
i
n
e¹⁶

Lax breaks up the word “flowers” into syllables, and then reduces them even more, making the poem represent visually the straight line the flowers are to become. A layout on the page like this makes the poem concrete, ironically so, since it in effect advocates abstraction. It seems reasonable to assume that the “sage” is Reinhardt.

Continued development in this direction can be seen in a poem I discovered in the Lax Papers at Columbia University in a large notebook with material from 1960 and 1961, including work that was to be published in Lax’s 1962 book *New Poems*:

i draw
straight
lines,
said
the young
man,
and think
they are
perfectly
beautiful;
but what
can I
draw now?

straight
lines,
i said
straight
lines,
straight
lines
until
they
disappear

¹⁶ Lax, “Problem in Design,” *Love Had a Compass: Journals and Poetry*, ed. James J. Uebbing (New York: Grove, 1996), pp. 40-41.

This poem suggests that Lax's aesthetic moved even further at this time toward abstraction and Reinhardt's doctrine of negation. "Big flowers" have been left behind, and the question now is how far one can follow the trajectory of the straight line. Note also the shift in perspective: In "Problem in Design," there seems to be an individual speaker muddling over the question, and prefacing his conclusion with the somewhat tentative "I think" [you should draw big flowers . . .]. In the second poem, there is a dialogue, the first half of which appears to be contributed by the speaker of "Problem in Design," but he has been relegated to the third person: his words here are reported. The response is much more positive this time: there is an unequivocal statement of what should be done. The "I" in this poem has now adopted the role of the sage.

Formal reduction and repetition together with an abstract treatment of spiritual themes characterise the following poem, written in 1960 and first published by John Ashbery in *Locus Solus* in 1962:

The port
was longing

the port
was longing

not for
this ship

not for
that ship

not for
this ship

not for
that ship

the port
was longing

the port
was longing

not for
this sea

not for
that sea

not for
this sea

not for
that sea

the port
was longing

the port
was longing

not for
this &

not for
that

not for
this &

not for
that

the port

was longing
 the port
 was longing
 not for
 this &
 not for
 that¹⁷

“The Port Was Longing” is visually striking, exemplifying Lax’s vertical style. This poem and the three other Lax poems that accompany it are immediately distinguishable from the rest of the work in the “Double Issue of New Poetry” of *Locus Solus* in which it appeared alongside work by Ashbery himself, Frank O’Hara, Diane Di Prima, James Merrill, Barbara Guest, and Kenneth Koch, among others. The lines of Lax’s poems are markedly shorter than the others, and there is decidedly more white space on the pages on which they are printed. The insistent repetition also sets Lax’s poems apart, as does the severely restricted number of words. Particularly noticeable is the complete absence of adjectives, and the lack of any definite descriptions. In fact, this is in part what the poem is *about*: not “this,” not “that,” but something indefinable, ineffable. I would argue that the indefinable, inexpressible something gestured toward with these demonstratives is religious in nature. It indicates a sort of “negative theology,” in which one can only say what God is not, and not what God is. Reinhardt had a similar notion about his painting: in interviews he would talk about his painting in terms of what it was not.

Traditionally in religious poetry, the port represents the serenity and safety of heaven the storm-tossed soul on the seas of life longs for. In Lax’s poem, however, it is the port itself that does the longing. Perhaps the port could still be said to stand for a sort of heavenly abode, and its longing could be a force that draws souls to it. But in the context of Lax’s work, it more likely stands as a metaphor for spiritual desire on the part of the soul, a theme found in Lax’s *Circus of the Sun*, *21 Pages*, and *Psalm*.¹⁸

There is more to be said about the poem from *Locus Solus*. The repetition of the phrase “the port was longing” does not suggest, as the poem goes on to tell us, that the port is longing for something specific. Rather, “longing” is its state of being. Something essential about its nature is being asserted here: the port *is* longing. It may still function as a religious poem, even though overt religious references have been dispensed with. The emphasis on a state of being, on an essential nature, takes the poem far from any reference to a specific port, as does its lack of adjectives and identifying terms. It is, therefore, abstract. These abstract features, together with its terse lines and limited vocabulary also make it Minimalist.

The distinctive verticality of Lax’s poetry was to become even more prominent in a number of the *New Poems*: he seems there to have abandoned the “big flowers” in favour of the “straight line.” Lax chose the title *New Poems* in order to emphasise the stylistic difference of these new works. Even some of his closest friends were at first taken aback at the poems’ starkness. “I was surprised at the small thin lines running up and down the pages,” wrote Merton.¹⁹ Lax’s former teacher at Columbia University, Mark Van Doren, must have expressed his initial reservations to Lax, and received instructions on how to get more out of them. “I read your new poems aloud, several times, as directed, and they had power. But they would have more—for me—still more—if they had more different words in them, and therefore more (I think)

¹⁷ Lax, “the port was longing,” *Love Had a Compass*, p. 9. Written in 1960. First published in *Locus Solus*, vol. 3-4 (1962).

¹⁸ *The Circus of the Sun* (Journeyman Books, 1959); *21 Pages* (Zurich: Pendo Verlag, 1984); *Psalm* (Exeter: Stride, 1991).

¹⁹ Thomas Merton, letter to Lax, 22 January 1963, *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Robert Lax*, ed. Arthur W. Biddle (University Press of Kentucky, 2001), p. 244.

thoughts.”²⁰ There are certainly fewer words in *New Poems*, and the “small thin lines” or the “straight line” in poetry is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the series of one-word poems Lax wrote in 1960-1962, some of which appeared in *New Poems*. Consider, for example:

never
 never
 never
 never
 never
 never
 never
 never
 never
 never
 never
 never²¹

The form of this poem is reduced to the utmost in simplicity, and the vocabulary is cut down to a single word, which is repeated. Lax’s instructions to Van Doren to read the poems aloud reveals the natural rhythm he wanted to capture in the number of repetitions, a point Lax made again in an interview in 1985.²² Negation dominates, by virtue of the particular word chosen. “Never” is a straight line stretching into infinity, disappearing into nothingness.

It would be misleading to claim that “negativity” is prominent as the *content* of Lax’s poetry, unless it is in the inexpressible nature of God, as suggested in the works I mentioned above, and in Lax’s remark, “I think that by definition God is unknowable to us.”²³ Although “stop” and “death” constitute the vocabulary of other one-word poems, “is,” “life,” and “go” receive the straight-line treatment as well.²⁴ But the negativity of a reductive method, which excludes various things from the poetry, is a relevant topic. We have seen how Lax reduces the line to a single word, and in some cases, to just a syllable. In a statement of purpose Lax repeatedly stressed his interest in the syllable as a basic unit of poetry and language. Clearly, he often omits words, leaving the reader to construct any possible grammatical unit with what is given, or dispensing with grammar altogether. Lax’s concern with formal reduction is evident this poem:

forms
 forms
 forms
 basic
 basic
 forms

 basic
 basic
 basic
 basic
 basic

²⁰ Mark Van Doren, letter to Lax, 16 February 1963, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

²¹ Lax, *New Poems* (Journeyman Books, 1962), n.p.

²² Nicholas Zurbrugg, “Interview with Robert Lax, Patmos—13th January 1985,” *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, pp. 27-28.

²³ Peter France, “A Hermit for Our Time: Robert Lax on Patmos,” Chapter 8 of *Hermits: The Insights of Solitude* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), p. 208.

²⁴ The “stop” poem appears in the Lax papers at Columbia, in a notebook entitled *A Bower of Weeds*, dated December 1961 and January-February 1962. The others are published in *New Poems*, n.p.

basic
forms²⁵

Lax has also written poems that use reduction to “basic forms” as a method to explore the meaning of what it is to be a poem. These two also appeared in *New Poems*:

123
123
1234
123

123
123
1234
123

1234
1234
1234
123

123
123
1234
123

AAA
AAA
AAAA
AAA

AAA
AAA
AAAA
AAA

AAAA
AAAA
AAAA
AAA

AAA
AAA
AAAA
AAA

When asked about these poems, Lax explained that they were inspired by “seeing what abstract painters can do with their work—and trying to find what the essence for me of a traditional poem is, and getting it down to that. . . . I wanted to see what it would be. And it’s something like this. I wanted to do it with the simplest elements.”²⁶

The structure of these poems is worth noting. Both exhibit a certain pattern based on the numbers three and four that recurs in various ways in Lax’s work, and they do so on different levels. On the larger scale, each poem comprises four stanzas, the first, second, and fourth of which are the same, while the third varies. The same pattern applies to the lines in the first, second, and third stanzas: one, two, and four

²⁵ Lax, *New Poems*, n.p.

²⁶ Nicholas Zurbrugg, “Aspiring to the Condition of Music,” Interview with Robert Lax, Luzern, 2nd April 1989, in Robert Garlitz, Nicholas Zurbrugg, Robert Lax, Rupert Loydell, *Speaking Into Silence* (Exeter: Stride, 2001), p. 42.

are identical, and three is a variation. There may be a mystical significance to the combination of the numbers three and four. Certainly the number three is prominent in Christian theology and symbolism. In an article on the spiritual in Reinhardt's paintings, Naomi Vine points out that the painter may have had Jung's notion of "the quaternity [a]s an archetype of almost universal occurrence" in mind when composing his black paintings. In addition, "Reinhardt's notes on his work include numerous lists of ways to divide the universe into four parts."²⁷

But a simpler, less esoteric explanation serves just as well. Lax used repetition as in music, in order to establish a "pattern to play against." A "theme" is established by stating it once and then repeating it. Next there follows a variation, and finally a return to the initial pattern. The minimum number of units with which this can be accomplished, then, is four. These poems are minimalist because they stick close to the bare minimum number of units required to be the type of thing they are, they make use of an extremely limited variety of units, and their referential aspect is severely curtailed. They are also abstract because what they do refer to is a pattern, something that doesn't exist in its own right, not in any physical or concrete sense, but must be "drawn out" of or "read off" instantiations of it. Lax is looking for or describing similarities: he is engaged in the process of (in his own words) "discovering principles at work in the universe and applying them to art, discovering that all the principles are one, & applying that to art."²⁸

Lax's colour poems form a significant proportion of his *oeuvre*. These poems make use of a strictly limited number of colour words, and are experiments in starkly Minimalist abstraction. Nevertheless, they also raise issues of the relation between the abstract and the concrete, and between abstraction and representation. Here is one example of this group of poems:

black	white	black	white
black	white	black	white
white	white	white	black
white	white		black
black	black	black	white
black	black	black	
white		white	
white			

Although it was published as one of "Three Concrete Poems,"²⁹ this is about as abstract as one can get. Other poems in the same vein make use of "red" and "blue" instead of black and white. Years later Lax composed a "maxim" on this type of poetry: "it doesn't matter if red is not red[:] what matters is, red is not blue."³⁰ In other words, it is the contrast between the elements that is important, and that allows the poet to use them to suggest a pattern.

Such patterning is audible when Lax's "Abstract Poem" is read aloud:

red	red	black	red
red	red	black	red
black	black	blue	black
black	black		black
black	black	black	black
black	black	black	black
blue	blue	blue	blue

²⁷ Naomi Vine, "Mandala and Cross," *Art in America*, November 1991, p. 128.

²⁸ Lax, untitled notes, September 1972, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

²⁹ Lax, "Three Concrete Poems," *Love Had a Compass*, pp. 15-17.

³⁰ From "A Red and Blue Notebook," 4-8 October 1972, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

The title, "Abstract Poem," echoes those of the numerous works by Reinhardt he called simply "Abstract Painting." Written in 1965 and published in 1967, this poem has a structure like that of the "123" and "AAA" poems from *New Poems*, where there are four units, the first, second, and fourth of which are identical, and the third a variation. This is also the case with "Homage to Reinhardt," published a year after the artist's death:

black
black
black

blue
blue
blue

black
black
black
black

blue
blue
blue³¹

The title of the poem refers us to the black paintings of Reinhardt, some of which apparently also had hints of blue. Even a play, "New Verse Drama," which appeared in *Monks Pond* in 1968, has the same basic structure.

Lax's long poem "Black & White" appeared in a 1966 issue of the *Lugano Review* featuring Concrete poetry, and by the mid-1960s Lax's name came to be associated with Concrete Poetry. The Scottish Concrete poet Ian Hamilton Finlay was the first to make this connection. Finlay gave Lax's "The Port Was Longing" pride of place on the cover of the "Concrete Number" of his little magazine *Poor Old Tired Horse* in 1964. Finlay probably chose the poem because of its distinctive appearance, although the visual element does not contribute to its meaning in the way it would in a properly Concrete poem. In 1967, Finlay devoted the entirety of Issue 17 of *Poor Old Tired Horse* to Lax. Issue 18 was given over to one of Reinhardt's dogmatic texts beginning "There is just one Art." Later still, Finlay's "Homage to Robert Lax" employed Reinhardt's name as one of its few words, appropriately broken up into syllables in imitation of Lax's vertical style.³² Stephen Bann included Lax in his 1967 Concrete anthology, and Mary Ellen Solt followed suit in what is perhaps the best-known collection of the form, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*.

Despite the fact that the contributors notes to Merton's periodical *Monks Pond* proclaimed Lax in 1968 to be "a concrete poet of international fame,"³³ doubts that Lax truly fit in the company of Concrete poets crept in early on. In the introduction to his anthology, Stephen Bann admits that "Indeed Robert Lax comes closer than any other poet whose work is included in this collection to achieving an almost 'abstract' style." By abstract, says Bann, "I mean something significantly different from 'concrete': something which is in fact almost the antithesis of concrete. . . . One might say that the concrete procedure is inductive, while that of the abstract is reductive. And it is this element of reduction which is the remarkable feature of Robert Lax's work."³⁴ Although I am unsure whether Bann's analysis of Concrete procedure is correct, his

³¹ Lax, "For Ad Reinhardt," *Stereo Headphones* vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring, 1969). Originally published in *Voyages*, vol. 1, nos. 1 and 2 (1968).

³² Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Homage to Robert Lax* (Wild Hawthorn, 1974).

³³ *Monks Pond: Thomas Merton's Little Magazine*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (University Press of Kentucky, 1989), p. 347.

³⁴ Stephen Bann, "Introduction," Bann, ed., *Concrete Poetry: An International Anthology* (London Magazine Editions, 1967), p. 25.

statement about the reductive element in Lax's work, a combination of abstraction and Minimalism, certainly is.

Lax's colour poem experiments include pieces such as "Another Red Red Blue Poem," "Mostly Blue"³⁵ and "Cloning for Yellow"³⁶ in which no words appear. Instead, these poems are made of lines, blocks, or patches of colours. Since they follow in the tradition of Lax's colour poems with words, they exhibit similar patterns to the colour poems with words, and because at least one of them is explicitly called a poem, we must consider them as such. Nevertheless, they serve as examples of the way in which Minimalist literature often raises questions about genre and indeed about the boundaries between different art forms themselves. These poems are also interesting in light of the discussion of abstract and concrete here because by providing actual, visible instances of colour rather than using the arbitrary and abstract linguistic signs for them, they become concrete whereas their counterparts with words, I argue, should be considered abstract.

In notes for the comment he wrote to accompany a reading of his work recorded by the Library of Congress in 1965, Lax addressed the paradox of the abstract and the concrete in poetry. Poems are necessarily both concrete *and* abstract. "The more concrete / the more / abstract" and "the more abstract / the more / concrete." A poem's "being is / concrete"; "its meaning / abstract." Nevertheless, Lax was emphatic about the value of abstraction. Abstraction, like song, is a path to the divine: "the greatest abstraction refers precisely to the highest (and simplest) meaning of the highest (and simplest being)." But apart from its nature as "one of the aspirations of the human spirit," poetry is "essentially a play of syllables." The play of syllables is what "Ik / Ok" (the latter is not to be confused with "o.k."), is all about. "Ik / Ok," published in Stephen Bann's anthology of Concrete poetry and included in Lax's notes for his commentary, is composed entirely of those two syllables, repeated in a rhythmic pattern. Lax explains that if he says "ik / ik / ik," if he puts "three syllables in a line," then "they stand for what they are."

a question may be raised as to what they represent
not a thing

seen often enough in relation to other syllables they will (eventually) represent (precisely) that relationship: they will represent themselves in that relationship.³⁷

In other words it is the pattern, the relationship between elements, that such poetry attempts to evoke, and if it can get at the most profound patterns at work in the world, it may well get close to God.

In his "concise statement of my project," written as part of his application for a Guggenheim Fellowship in the mid-sixties, Lax emphasised the syllable as the key to his poetic research. He viewed the syllable as "the unit of which poems are made."³⁸ His work with it was part of his effort

to dig under the present structures of world poetry in search of a firmer and deeper foundation
to discover beneath the traditional modes of poetry a firmer, more universal foundation

to discover deep in the human consciousness a firmer, more universal foundation for the (eternal) & recurrent modes of poetry

The spiritual aspect of this project is expressed in Lax's description of it as "a disentanglement, slow and patient of the soul's own inner & eternal song."

³⁵ Both published in New York by Journeyman Press in 1971.

³⁶ Published in Zurich by Seedorn Verlag, 1984.

³⁷ Lax, "(notes for comment)," n.d., Lax Papers, Columbia University.

³⁸ Lax, "description of project," *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, p. 48.

Yet evidence suggests that Lax's colour poems were not entirely uninfluenced by current events. On 15 September 1963, four young black girls were killed in a racist bomb attack while attending church in Birmingham, Alabama. In early October, Merton wrote Lax that he was "tired of belonging to the humiliating white race." Reinhardt was a prominent subject of exchanges between Lax and Merton at this time. They discussed his participation in Civil Rights Marches, and writing from Greece, Lax declared himself present at the marches in spirit. Both were full of praise for their artist friend, and not just for his political activities. By this time Reinhardt had begun to paint his five-foot square black paintings exclusively. "Old Reinhardt is a splendid fellow and all but the king of the birds," wrote Lax. "His paintings is magnificent and works like dynamite when set down in any particular locale. They are all black paintings (get it?) black, black, black & can hardly help doing some good in the whole situation." In the midst of this conversation, Lax gave Merton some poetic advice: "as reinhardt makes now all the time the same black painting, make you also all the time the same dark poem; all the time, just that one poem: here a word, there a word, maybe a little different; only when you think it should be, until it gets to be tight as a sonnet: the music, the music always the same, here a word, there a word just a little different." "You got the right answers," returned Merton, "I think this poem should get blacker and blacker and blacker like Reinhardt's paintings, then everyone will see the light, they will have to. Every man got one poem, and when he stumbles on it he got to make it smaller and smaller and blacker and blacker and then it will finally convince." Lax replied that he had "of recent months become so generally small & black myself that it is useless for me to apply for abrogation from the whites. How come you want to get out of the race (they would snigger) you was never in it."³⁹

Along with this letter Lax sent Merton "the first part of the second volume of the book I am always writing," probably a long poem called "Black & White" that was eventually published in the *Lugano Review* in 1966. In the autumn of 1972 Lax explicitly stated what the context of the 1963 "Black and White" poem suggested, that "life or 'life' provides models for art at a certain early stage of the game." Abstraction and "purification" of art, that is, art drawing on its own resources rather than looking outside its domain, "is not a divorce from life which relegates it to a barren sphere." "It is an extension, a development of life, as abstract science is. . . . it is a further development of nature, a further refinement of processes already in existence." Reinhardt's name, as usual, comes up in this context: "abstract painting, as painting, has a short way to go, and has probably gone it. Reinhardt may not have been wrong in saying he was doing the last paintings," even though the other arts lag behind in furthering "the new non-mimetic modes."⁴⁰

Lax finally rejected Reinhardt's insistence on the absolute autonomy of art. The following by Lax appeared in the catalogue for an exhibition of his work shown alongside Reinhardt's in Stuttgart in 1985:

I'm beginning to think
r was wrong

not r, but an idea i had
of him that i practically
worshipped

that said life was the
opposite of art

& art was the opposite
of life

& proud of it

³⁹ This exchange took place between 5 October and 2 November 1963. See *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice*, pp. 251-259.

⁴⁰ Lax, Untitled notes, 21 September 1972, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

but i think life
has something
to do with art

& it's just a matter
of finding

the special point
at which the two of them
get together⁴¹

A point is a small thing, and to find it one must train the focus of the mind, clear away the clutter of consciousness, reduce the concentration to that which matters, to the essential juncture of life of art. To find an adequate way of stating what that point might be requires a similar clearing of language, so that that essential point can be seen anew.

Lax is also the author of a number of what can best be described as nature poems, though they are composed in accordance with his abstract Minimalist principles and practices. These are the poems that, for me, find that point of connection between art and life. Though most of these poems are somewhat more expansive than the examples I have provided so far, they still qualify as Minimalist, even when, like the version of "Sea & Sky" in *33 Poems*, they stretch to sixty pages. Here is an example⁴²:

round & turn ing	bright & burn ing
round & turn ing	round & turn ing
earth earth earth earth	sun sun earth earth
bright & burn ing	round & turn ing
bright & burn ing	bright & burn ing
sun sun sun sun	earth earth sun sun

⁴¹ Quoted in Sigrid Hauff, *A Line in Three Circles: The Inner Biography of Robert Lax* (Munich: Belleville Verlag, 1999), p. 197. Also published in *Timeless Painting: Ad Reinhardt* (exhibition catalogue) (Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie, 1985), p. 85.

⁴² Lax, "Round & Turning" (Firenze: Rattenfallen, 1978)

It seems to me that in this 1978 poem Lax has told of the “roundness of earth” very simply, “one word at a time,” as he said he wished to back in 1939⁴³. By emphasising geometric shape, it also echoes, in an abstract fashion, a passage from the 1959 *Circus of the Sun* about the creation. Such poems thus serve as evidence of Lax’s long-standing commitment to finding a poetic method adequate to such profound concerns as the nature of the world and the human relation to it.

Here is another of Lax’s nature poems, “Dark Earth Bright Sky” (1985):

dark	dark
earth	night
dark	dark
earth	night
bright	bright
sky	day
bright	bright
sky	day
dark	dark
earth	earth
dark	dark
earth	earth
bright	bright
sky	sky ⁴⁴

We could not be more familiar with the simple contrasting elements in this poem, but we often allow the clutter of our lives to obscure our awareness of them. Lax meditates upon them and presents them anew, “direct and primitive,” clarified for our consideration. The contrasting terms and simple rhythm of the poem reflect the two poles that define our earthly existence and the rhythms of alternating light and dark, as the earth turns, that give order to our lives. We are reminded of the presence of forces in the world much larger than we are, forces that make patterns and provide regularity. With the help of life-giving light and the restful dark, life exists at the conjunction of earth and sky. *This* is truly essential poetry, poetry with its roots deep in the universal foundation of the human consciousness.

⁴³ Untitled Notebook, 2 September-18 December 1939, Robert Lax Papers, Columbia University.

⁴⁴ Lax, *Dark Earth Bright Sky* (Furthermore, 1985), n.p.