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## Victor Hammer and Thomas Merton: *A Friendship Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam*

David D. Cooper

Victor Hammer's dedication to the vocation of art and craftsmanship was inspired at an early age. He was born in the oldest district of Vienna, and his earliest visual recollections bore the lasting imprint of the seventeenth and eighteenth century religious art that surrounded him in his environs in the Schoenlaterngasse. As a young boy, before he had the words or concepts to understand what he saw, he gazed with profound fascination at the carved altar pieces and rood cross in the Jesuit church next door. He frequently visited the empty church alone during mid-week to admire its interior, especially the ceiling fresco where angels and saints appeared among the clouds, seemingly suspended in air. Such sights as these both shaped Hammer's world view and molded him, as an artist, into the character and style of the late Renaissance, a period when a resurgence in the power of Christian faith joined with an artistic celebration of the splendors of antiquity to produce the neoclassical religious art and architecture that absorbed Hammer in his native city. Thus his aims as an artist, pursued unflinchingly for the next eighty years, were unknowingly decided for him, Hammer later claimed, by artists and craftsmen who thrived two centuries before him. "The distant past . . . [of] my world at this early age," Hammer recalled, "still lived [for me] and gave daily nourishment to my vision, my mind. The square, . . . the interior of the church, and all else around me, had a hold on my imagination, a hold that lasted all my life and will last until my ultimate breath."<sup>1</sup>

Like Victor Hammer, Thomas Merton felt the hands of past artisans shaping his future from an early age, too. And, like the artist who would later become one of his closest and most respected friends, Merton encountered the locus of that influence in religious art and architecture. In his dramatic, high-pitched autobiography, Merton recalled visiting the church of Sts. Cosmas and Damian in Rome. He was both lonely and grief-stricken as a result of his father's recent death. Merton's self-esteem had reached



a nadir when, as a self-described dissolute and directionless adolescent, he stepped into the church where a Byzantine mosaic in the apse struck him like a bolt of spiritual lightning. Merton was awed by the mosaic's vitality, its eloquence, urgency, solemnity, and, above all, by its utter simplicity. "What a thing it was to come upon the genius of an art," Merton wrote, whose artists had perfected a "subservience to higher ends, architectural, liturgical and spiritual ends which I could not even begin to understand, but which I could not avoid . . . , since the nature of the mosaics themselves and their position and everything about them proclaimed it aloud."<sup>2</sup> Fascinated by the mosaic, Merton quickly searched out the shrines, tombs, sanctuaries, altars, and arches of Rome, submerging himself under the spell of sixth century Christian art. The mosaics on the walls and the frescos in the tombs of the martyrs and the rendering of St. Peter in chains and the stiff, elongated portrait of St. Lawrence burning on a gridiron—through these works of Byzantine art Merton's first "conception of Christ was formed." Although it would be some years until he entered a monastery, the Byzantine art of Rome served as a benchmark of Merton's religious life. So, as with Victor Hammer—who called upon such words as "mystical," "mysterious," and "revelation" to describe the impact of old Vienna's religious art—the church art of an earlier era claimed Thomas Merton, shaped his world view, and laid the foundations for a vocation to which he, too, would devote the balance of his life.

It is not surprising, then, that Merton and Hammer's friendship of a dozen years—from their first meeting in 1955 to Hammer's death in 1967—was dominated and enriched by aesthetic matters, especially religious art, which had had such a formative influence over each of them. At the very outset of their friendship Merton and Hammer engaged the topic of religious art. The initial letters they exchanged in 1955 are shot through with a lively and intense discussion, eventually stilled by a mild disagreement over admitted prejudices and preferences which bore the stamp of those youthful experiences in Vienna and Rome. In his first letter to Merton, Hammer defended his dictum that "classic art is civilized art" and detailed for Merton the neoclassical elements of spirituality, intellect, and humanity reflected in late Renaissance and Baroque arts. Merton favored a more primitive style. He admitted that Hammer's defenses of classical theory only "entrench me in my



own prejudice *against* classicism. It is quite true," Merton continued, "that primitive . . . art is intellectually poor and limited. Precisely. Less human also—just that!"<sup>3</sup> What became a disagreement over "city art versus cave art" derived, in part then, from Hammer's staunch classicism and Merton's predilection for a more spartan and astringent Byzantine style. That disagreement was no doubt further tempered by Merton's militant anti-worldliness at the time, a mentality reflected, for example, in the strident, near-misanthropic anti-city polemics of *The Seven Storey Mountain* where Merton had derided High Renaissance sculpture and the "heavy melodrama" of Baroque painting. For Merton, any work of art which hinted at the presence of human genius in its execution and form violated the higher aims to which the artist must be dedicated: those religious and liturgical ends Merton found only in the austere spirituality of Byzantine art. Thus the "modern" period in Merton's reading of art history began with Hammer's Renaissance, when individualism and humanism entered art, and when, as in the great Byzantine age of faith, art was no longer created in heaven, but made on earth. This ran counter, of course, to Hammer's preference for the "man-made enclosure" of classical art, "the frame of the agora," he argued, "the market place, the polis."<sup>4</sup> "It seems to me," Merton countered, "that the self-assurance with which the classical eye accepts the 'man-made enclosure' tends . . . to exclude the transcendental . . . [and] Holy."<sup>5</sup> Clearly, at this point in their friendship Merton preferred the desert to Hammer's agora. Perhaps not willing to provoke Merton's biases much further, Hammer replied simply that he would rather spend his time painting and printing than arguing. "No doubt I am conditioned by my experiences of childhood. Having grown up in the old part of Vienna amidst baroque and Italian architecture I cannot help being a city man."<sup>6</sup>

In the years ahead, there would be long conversations during frequent picnics at the monastery beside Dom Frederick's Lake, over lunch at Victor and Carolyn Hammer's nearby home, or in the many letters posted between Gethsemani and Lexington—a sustained dialogue over such things as religious art, architecture, furniture design, typography, theories of composition and art philosophy, classic art versus modern trends. Even when they were not together, a work of art established the presence of each man in the routine of their separate daily lives. Hammer spoke fondly, for example, of his Merton portrait hanging in the bedroom, its face





Victor Hammer, *Hagia Sophia Crowning the Young Christ*, triptych, 27  
1/4" x 23 3/4". (Private Collection)



reflecting a quiet introspection and the kindness and sincerity of Merton that Hammer so admired. "I have the painting near my bed," Hammer wrote, "a few feet away from my eyes, and I look to it often—'dear Tom,' so I greet it in the morning."<sup>7</sup> When Merton moved to his hermitage in 1965, his greatest disappointment was that he could no longer conduct daily hours before a crucifix Hammer had fashioned for the novitiate chapel. The "one thing I miss," Merton said in a letter, "having had to change from the novitiate chapel to another place for my Mass, I no longer say Mass before your crucifix. I miss it very much, it had come to be a very important element in my worship."<sup>8</sup>

During those years, Merton also tapped Hammer's expertise as a principal reader for *Art and Worship*, a book on sacred art that Merton began writing just after meeting Hammer and finally shelved, unpublished, shortly after Hammer died. And there is a final episode worth mentioning in connection with the role of religious art as a common denominator in the Merton/Hammer friendship. It concerns Merton's first visit to the Hammers' home in Lexington, described at length by Merton's biographer, Michael Mott.

Merton was so delighted by the Hammers' house that he gave a lengthy description of it in [his private] journal. He went from painting to painting. Then he stopped in front of a triptych Victor Hammer had begun. This time he was not just interested, he showed signs of great emotion. Even when the Hammers sat down to lunch . . . Merton kept getting up from the table to take another look at one of the panels of the triptych.<sup>9</sup>

That central panel, actually completed at the time of the visit, depicted a woman seated elegantly upon a short scalloped colonnade and extending a crown toward a boy Hammer identified as the young Christ. Merton seemed most fascinated with the unnamed woman in the panel. Victor Hammer later recalled the incident when explaining the origin of his triptych's title.

One day, Father Louis (Thomas Merton) our friend, came from his monastery at Trappist, Kentucky. . . . We had prepared a simple luncheon and I welcomed him to sit with us at table. From where he sat he had a good view of the



erat cum ipso. Quod ergo vides secundum  
Deum velle animam tuam/hoc fac/et cus-  
todi cor tuum.



rant duo senes in una cella  
pariter sedentes et nam-  
quam inter se vel qualem-  
cumque parvam contentio-  
nem habuerant. Dixit ergo  
unus ad alterum: Faciamus  
et nos vel unam litem/  
sicut et alii homines. At ille  
alter dixit ei: Nescio quem-  
admodum fit lis. Dixit ei ille: Ecce ego pono  
laterem in medio et dico: Quia meus est/  
et tu dic: Quia non est tuus sed meus. Et  
ex hoc fit contentio et rixa. Et cum posuis-  
sent laterem in medio/dicente uno: Quia  
meus est, ille alter primo respondebat:  
Ego meum esse spero. Cum ille alter iter-  
um diceret: Non est tuus sed meus/tunc  
ille respondit: Et si tuus est/tolle illum.  
Quo dicto non invenerunt quomodo litiga-  
rent.

Dixit abbas Pastor: Quia si duas res od-  
erit monachus/potest liber esse ab hoc  
mundo. Et dixit praeter: Quæ sunt istæ? Et  
dixit senex: Carnalem repausationem et  
vanam gloriam.

What Ought I to Do? Sayings of the Desert Fathers, the first work in the Merton trilogy, printed in 1959 at the Stamperia del Santuccio by Victor and Carolyn Hammer. The book's wrapper, shown here, is reminiscent of early printed books bound in leaves of manuscript; the type is Victor Hammer's American Uncial, accompanied by a two-color initial printed from plates that he worked in brass.



triptych on the chest and he often looked at it.—After a while he asked quite abruptly, "And who is the woman behind Christ?" I said, "I do not know yet." Without further question he gave his own answer. "She is Hagia Sophia, Holy Wisdom, who crowns Christ." And this she was—and is.<sup>10</sup>

After titling the triptych "Hagia Sophia Crowning the Young Christ," Merton returned to Gethsemani. He soon wrote Hammer a long letter explaining Hagia Sophia as a primitive feminine archetype who embodies Christian wisdom, mercy, love, creative potential, and beauty. "I am sure Hagia Sophia herself," Merton added, "was guiding you in the process [of painting the triptych], for it is she who guides all true artists. . . ." <sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that Merton later used a carbon of that letter as a prototype for his didactic prose poem *Hagia Sophia*, the third of a trilogy of Merton books designed, lovingly crafted, and superbly executed by Victor Hammer's Stamperia del Santuccio "Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam"—"To the Greater Glory of God."

2

Since all three of those books concerned the monastic life, they were perfectly suited to the aims expressed in that epigraph which always appeared in the colophon of the books of the Stamperia del Santuccio (Press of the Little Saint). Merton proposed the first volume of the trilogy in 1956 shortly after meeting Hammer. By then a popular author facing a growing backlog of writing projects, Merton was determined to ease up on his literary obligations and return to the sources of his monastic spirituality—a determination, as Merton remarked in a letter to Hammer, made "in accordance with the command of my superiors."<sup>12</sup> Merton arranged, however, for what seemed a reasonable exception and offered Hammer a series of translations from the Latin texts of the sixth century desert fathers accompanied by an introductory essay. "Certainly the manuscript belongs to the Santuccio," Merton wrote. "Print it as you please." *What Ought I To Do? Sayings of the Desert Fathers* subsequently appeared in 1959 as Number XV in the Stamperia del Santuccio Opus Series.

Consecutive numbers in the Opus Series soon followed with *The Solitary Life* (XVI), Merton's essay on the contemplative vocation,



and *Hagia Sophia* (XVII).<sup>13</sup> From 1959 to 1962, then, Victor Hammer devoted his considerable design talents exclusively to Merton's trilogy on the monastic life. And Carolyn Hammer, who had taken over the presswork due to her husband's failing eyesight, turned her labors to the production of those books on a venerable Washington hand press. The typographic and design characteristics of the Merton trilogy reflect the same understated elegance and impeccable workmanship that had brought Victor Hammer a reputation as a preeminent fine printer, while the manner of their production owed much to Hammer's beloved Renaissance when printers were regarded as master artisans. "I print these books the same way the old printers did," Hammer once remarked humbly to a friend, "making the types for my books myself, just as they did, and then I print these texts as decently as I can."<sup>14</sup>

Hammer's design of the Merton trilogy not only honored his friend's monastic spirituality, it gave Hammer an opportunity to express, through the typographic arts, his rigorous classicism, a topic that continued to surface during Merton and Hammer's dialogue about art philosophy and especially the aesthetics of sacred art. Traditions of religious art, then, played a central role in the formation and temperament of each man, became the foundation of their friendship, and, perhaps most important, were concretely realized through a close, articulate collaboration between a writer and a printer. As a result, the relationship of Thomas Merton and Victor Hammer exemplifies a rarely-achieved ideal in the recent history of arts and letters: literature and the book arts, that is to say, advance together, in human measure, when an author entrusts his texts to a skilled craftsman who, in return, "then . . . print[s] these texts as decently as [he] can."

Hammer's injunction that art, whether painting, architecture, or fine printing, must be undertaken in service to God—*Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam*—was only one facet of the art philosophy he sought to express in the Merton trilogy. Hammer adapted, for example, the graphic character of Medieval illuminated manuscripts to each of the Merton books, most notably in the ornamental two-color initials Hammer cut for the dust wrappers and the setting of text and display matter in his American Uncial type, itself derived from Medieval letter forms. By using the illuminated manuscript as a design prototype, each of the books captured the ambience of the Medieval monastery where manuscript writing was undertaken



only to serve the biblical and liturgical purposes of the church. Moreover, the very subject matter of the Merton texts advanced the aims of the Stamperia del Santuccio epigraph. While Merton proposed many projects and sent several manuscripts for consideration, Hammer selected material with great care, choosing only those items rooted in Merton's monastic life—a life, as Merton said of the desert fathers, dedicated solely “to serve and contemplate God in solitude.” The same thing can be said of the printer that Hammer claimed for the painter, that “the subject matter on which the artist can feed . . . must be spiritual, never material alone.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, typography, like all the other arts for Hammer, “is based upon a kind of religious sensitiveness, upon a profound, steadfast severity. For this reason it allies itself so willingly with religion,”<sup>16</sup> an alliance clearly evident in the typographic idiom of the Merton trilogy.

While that idiom was inspired largely by the manuscript arts practiced in the scriptoria of the early Middle Ages, other elements of Hammer's classical aesthetic enriched and complemented his design of the Merton books. These included Hammer's basic epistemological premise that “the secret of [classical] art,” as he said to Merton when countering his announced prejudice for cave art, “consists in the creation of three dimensional space with two dimensional means.”<sup>17</sup> Secondly, the “framing” or “enclosing” of a composition was essential, Hammer believed, to transforming flat material fields, whether a panel or a page of type, into three perceptual planes, something Hammer called “visual actuality”—the *sine qua non* of classical technique—which elevates, he felt, the viewer of a painting or the reader of a book above “animal vision.” Another principle of classicism that underlay Hammer's typography concerned an intimate relationship between the “indivisible unity” of a design and its constituent parts; “the secret of the craftsman's procedure,” Hammer explained in an essay on type design, “is always to see details and distinctions in connection with the whole form he works upon. . . .”<sup>18</sup> Lastly, Hammer's unbending dedication to the elements of classical style fostered an almost reactionary graphic conservatism in all the Stamperia del Santuccio editions, including the Merton trilogy. Not given to innovation, Hammer's designs echoed his distaste for all trends in modern art. “I cannot spiritually cooperate with or acknowledge,” he stated bluntly, “the chaos of the modern movement in art.”<sup>19</sup> That critical, counter-modern sensibility is apparent in the



traditional vernacular of Hammer's book designs, perhaps best described by Merton himself when assessing Hammer's religious paintings as "concrete, non-eccentric, in many ways deceptively prosaic."<sup>20</sup>

All of the above-mentioned elements of classical style are interrelated in the specific design features of the Merton volumes. For example, Hammer's judicious use of red accents throughout the text formats adds visual depth to a page of type. By printing in red recurring textual elements—such as subheads, Latin translations, page numbers, or initial lead-ins—Hammer sought to interrupt the two-dimensional harmony of black juxtaposed against white. Thus the subtle emphasis of red ink, as Hammer said to Merton when describing "the luminosity of classic technique," "creates a foreground that pushes the onlooker somewhat outside the frame, preparing him to realize depth visually, as a third dimension. . . ." <sup>21</sup> Hammer applied the same principle to his portraiture and religious painting. Such is the case with "Hagia Sophia" where the rays from young Christ's hand bring the chipped gravestone in the foreground into three-dimensional relief against the distant town wall, a "trick," Hammer recalled, that took him months to perfect. Even the most inconsequential details of a Hammer composition—the dress fold in a portrait, the printing of a paragraph marker in red, or a staggered left margin of type—aimed to activate "the visibility of civilized man," as he continued to explain to Merton, which "permit[s] the onlooker to perceive . . . three dimensions in a single act of contemplation." The slightest minutiae of a Hammer design contributed to the overall balance of masses, so much so that Rudolf Koch insisted that in a Hammer portrait "a button is as important as an eyelid."<sup>22</sup>

"Framing," Hammer further claimed, is an essential design component—especially germane to typographic art—that assists the artist's struggle for "artistic truth [through shaping] the substratum of three-dimensional space." Attention to framing techniques is evident in the typical layout of a Hammer page, especially in his calculated manipulation of border space enclosing a form of type. In all the Merton books Hammer used a customary ratio of top to bottom border space, precisely calculated at 1:2. But he resorted to more extreme proportions for vertical margins: 3.5:1 for verso and 1:3.5 for recto. Such a radical ratio in effect pinches verso and recto text matter into the spine where they are "caught and



gathered into a frame," as Hammer said in another context, "in order to be seen: kept separate, prevented from fleeting away like a sensation. To do this is the business of the artist."<sup>23</sup>

It is true that Hammer modeled such proportions after traditional design formats; they reflect, as well, the practical exigencies of hand press printing. Early printers, to whom Hammer turned for his apprenticeship in design and technique, rarely bound books; they left their patrons ample border space for trimming pages to accommodate bindings of their choice. Also, since the pressman working the hand press receives his or her best impression at the center of the bed or platen, it is as much a matter of technical necessity as of aesthetic effect to lock type forms in the middle of a chase, especially when printing full-page signatures two-up. While Hammer's page layouts were governed partly by traditions and economies of letter press printing, they nonetheless facilitated his aesthetic principle that framing proportions were essential "in the creation of three dimensional space with two dimensional means." The separate planes of a composition, like the margins of a page, Hammer explained to Merton, "must be so proportioned that one . . . cannot be confused with the other within the frame."<sup>24</sup> Once again, Hammer's comments about the importance of framing in the visual arts generally applies specifically to the geometries of page layout: "It is the frame," he said, "the enclosure, that isolates objects and forces into focus what we see"—and *read*, we might well add—"and see it startlingly anew, and see it in three-dimensions, as if we were able to move, and feel, within it."<sup>25</sup> By framing single page layouts with such asymmetries of border space—so that, simply put, one border cannot be confused with another—and utilizing red accents, Hammer aspired to achieve "visual actuality," the cornerstone of his classical technique. "A frame," he concluded, "has not always only height and width, it can also have depth . . . its third dimension."<sup>26</sup>

By mirroring, however, the exact margin asymmetries verso to recto, Hammer unified both pages, struck a balance of typographic masses, and established the open book as the primary frame of visual reference. This suggests another hallmark of Hammer's design philosophy. The constituent parts of a typographic composition, he insisted, must always contribute to the unity of overall design. Although based on a sixteenth-century convention, Hammer's use of catch-words, for example, accentuated page-to-



page continuity, a small graphic reminder that each page was linked to the book as a unified whole. "Most important to me [is] a clear, tight composition of the parts in relation to the whole." "The old adage of classicism" calls upon the artist, Hammer believed, "to rely on his sense for an indivisible unity so that nothing can be added or subtracted without destroying the whole."<sup>27</sup> "Victor's sense of the whole and his mastery of the contributing parts," Raymond McLain noted, "[was] a philosophical concept underlying his art, and his life as well; that the whole must always be considered, and then the parts, and then the parts and the whole."<sup>28</sup> Such attention to continuity, overall symmetry and unity inspired Jacques Maritain to praise Hammer's architectural design of the Kolbsheim Chapel for its "perfect sculptural melody [echoing] the quiet proportions of the age of classicism."<sup>29</sup> What Hammer achieved architecturally at Chateau Kolbsheim reflects as well his goals in the practice of the book arts: a "total effect," according to Maritain, which aspires to St. Thomas's three virtues of beauty—Integrity, Consonance, Clarity.

The graphic uniformity of the Merton volumes demonstrates Hammer's commitment to such standards of consonance and harmony in book design. Their close typographic kinship clearly suggests too that Hammer read each book as a companion to the others in the true spirit of a trilogy. From a design standpoint, *What Ought I To Do?* served as a pattern Hammer followed closely when laying out *The Solitary Life* and *Hagia Sophia*. Each book—from both a typographic and literary perspective—was fashioned, in keeping with Hammer's "old adage of classicism," as an equal part contributing to the indivisible unity of the trilogy as a whole. Hammer printed each book, for example, on Whatman paper. Each was case bound in the same manner and wrapped with Magnani paper bearing a Hammer initial and quotations, set in eighteen point American Uncial, to complement the texts. Other design details shared by the books—format, text typeface, line length, leading—reinforce their relationship as members of a typographic family.

Other technical similarities suggest that Hammer tried to unify the design and subject matter of the trilogy as well. For instance, the uncomfortably tight word spacing together with the fourteen point American Uncial texts might have prompted Merton to complain politely about the difficulties of reading proof. The minimal spacing and weighty uncials nonetheless slow down the



eye to a meditative reading pace entirely appropriate to Merton's reflections probing the contemplative life. Sixth century letter forms, moreover, were well suited to texts inspired by Merton's monastic forebears, especially his translations of the desert fathers. By the time *Hagia Sophia* appeared Merton readily acknowledged that "I owe much to your uncial. Certainly when men wrote out their words in this hand it had a tremendous influence in shaping their thought."<sup>30</sup> In addition, Hammer's unassuming, nearly diffident title pages and his self-effacing colophons underscored typographically what Merton defined as the "basic realities of the interior life: faith, humility, charity, meekness, discretion, self-denial."

3

It has often been said of Victor Hammer that he made no distinctions between the practice of art and the art of living. Aesthetic principles remained useless abstractions, he believed, unless rooted in experience. Such a fusion of the aesthetic and the existential is readily apparent in the Merton trilogy where Hammer, by employing some of the design components noted above, forged a unity of typographic character and literary content. Moreover, the trilogy itself encompasses three carefully considered dimensions of Merton's monastic life. It was a life that Hammer must have viewed as an indivisible unity itself from which nothing could be added or subtracted without destroying what he honored as the symmetry of the whole. The desert fathers translations, for example, lay the foundation of that experiential unity; Merton's contemporary monastic life is rooted in and nourished by its continuity with centuries-old tradition. Merton follows in *The Solitary Life* with a discourse on the principles which guide the monastic vocation, while *Hagia Sophia* focuses on the deeper Christian mysteries inspiring vocation and tradition. Since art and life were one to Victor Hammer, his central typographic injunction that constituent parts must contribute to a unity of overall composition is embodied in the very life the Merton trilogy chronicles: a life rooted in tradition, guided by vocation, fueled by inspiration, and unified by a fullness of wisdom common to all three. "There is in all visible things," Merton writes in *Hagia Sophia*, "an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all. . . ."



If you seek a heavenly light  
 I/Solitude/am your professor!  
 I go before you into emptiness/  
 Raise strange suns  
     for your new mornings/  
 Opening the secret windows  
 Of your innermost apartment.  
 When I/loneliness/  
     give my special signal  
 Follow my silence/  
     follow where I beckon!  
 Fear not/little beast/little spirit/  
 (Thou word and animal)  
 I/Solitude/am Angel  
 And have prayed in your name.  
 Look at the empty/wealthy night  
 The pilgrim moon!  
 I am the appointed hour/  
 The «now» that cuts  
 Time like a blade.  
 I am the unexpected flash  
 Beyond «yes» beyond «no»/  
 The forerunner of the Word of God.  
 Follow my ways and I will lead you  
 To golden-haired suns/  
 Logos and music/blameless joys/  
 Innocent of questions  
 And beyond answers:  
 For I/Solitude/am thine own Self:  
 I/Nothingness/am thy All.  
     I/Silence/am thy «Amen»!

*Merton's The Solitary Life, printed by Victor and Carolyn Hammer in 1960, bears a wrapper decorated at the left margin with an engraved band printed in terra cotta.*



The first volume of the Merton trilogy traced that first dimension of monastic life to the earliest fourth century desert fathers of Egypt and Palestine. The sayings Merton selected for *What Ought I To Do?* capture the common sense, humility, and wisdom of the first Christian monks. Their aphorisms, translated by Merton from Migne's Latin Patrology, were framed as responses to the questions of young novices seeking the fathers' knowledge of human nature and their advice on how best to live a life of prayer and successfully avoid the seductions of *corporalis quies*, which Merton translated as "an easy life," the bane of the monastic way. Merton's translations emphasize above all the timelessness and universality of the sayings. With respect both to their teachings as spiritual directors and their pragmatic, earthy advice about the everyday life of a monk, Merton stressed that the first Christian hermits remain durable models for the ascetic life from which present day Christians—both contemplatives and the laity, Merton believed—have much to learn. "The Desert Fathers," Merton wrote Hammer, "are really not to be tied down in a 'period.' They transcend all epochs."<sup>31</sup> Even the title Hammer and Merton chose for the volume underscores the applicability of monastic tradition to present day realities. "*What Ought I To Do?*," Merton writes in the Introduction, "alludes to the fact that these proverbs and tales were the answers to questions about how to live the Christian life and solve its most urgent problems." These words of "humble, quiet, sensitive people," of "great and simple personalities," Merton continues, "are the words of men of flesh and blood like ourselves . . . [who] have not feared to leave everything and commit themselves totally to their faith."

By stressing the humble and demure side of the desert fathers, Merton may have been aiming to counteract their reputation for ascetic fanaticism. A quiet agenda to polish the image of ascetics is more pronounced in *The Solitary Life*, the next volume in Hammer's Opus Series. Merton turns there to examine in more detail the precise function of the hermit and the means and manner of his attaining to the totality of faith and commitment that Merton, and Hammer, so admired in the fourth century desert solitaries of Nitria and Scete. An extended essay on the vocation of solitude, *The Solitary Life* is a sort of manifesto of eremiticism where Merton argues passionately for the relevance of hermits to present day monastic communities and, by extension, to the entire modern day Christian ethos, which, Merton felt, was slipping





APIENTIA FILIIS SUIS VI-

Wisdom breathes life into her chil-

drum **tam inspirat et suscipit**

and shelters those who

**inquirentes se et praei-**

seek her and she will go before

**bit in via iustitiae: et qui**

them in the way of justice: and he

**illam diligit diligit vitam: et qui vigila-**

who loves her loves life: and those who

**verint ad illam complectentur placor-**

watch for her will embrace her

**em ejus. ¶ Qui tenuerint illam vitam**

delight. They that hold her fast

**hereditabunt: et quo introibit benedi-**

shall inherit life and where she enters God

**cet Deus. ¶ Qui seruiunt ei obsequen-**

will bless. They that serve her shall

**tes erant sancto: et eos qui diligunt**

serve the Holy one: and God loves those

**eam diligit Deus. ¶ Investiga illam et**

who love her. Study her and she

**manifestabitur tibi et continens fac-**

shall be revealed to thee and learning discipline

**tus ne derelinquas eam: in novissimis**

do: not leave her: for in the end

*The final work of the Merton trilogy is Hagia Sophia, 1962. Its wrapper displays another of the Victor Hammer two-color initials, shown with the two sizes of American Uncial type.*



away inexorably to the forces of "secular non-Christian society." The "unique and mysterious function" of the hermit, Merton claims, is to withdraw from the world in order to save it. The hermit refuses complicity in the myths and fictions which constitute collective life because he understands, says Merton, that "our involvement in fiction, especially political and demagogic fictions, [is] an implicit confession of spiritual despair. . . ." Merton used the same inflated rhetoric in *The Solitary Life* that one finds in his popular autobiography, all in an effort, it would seem, to romanticize the hermit in dynamic contradistinction to secular living. A similar drama of separation can be seen in the poetic triumphalism of *Hagia Sophia*, where Merton, one frail man among minions of helpless, is awakened from "the confused primordial dark night into [a] consciousness . . . glimpsed only by a few." "So when," Merton writes in *The Solitary Life*, "as in our time, the whole world seems to have become one immense and idiotic fiction, and when the virus of mendacity creeps into every vein and organ of the social body, it would be abnormal and immoral if there were no reaction." That healthy and righteous reaction is the protest of hermits who "withdraw from the babel of confusion in order to listen more patiently to the voice of their conscience and to the Holy Spirit" and attain to "a clearer vision, a sharper and more uncompromising appreciation of Christian truth."

*The Solitary Life*, along with its companion volumes, reads, then, like an apologia for the hermit vocation punctuated throughout by flashes of polemical social criticism. Merton's frontal assault against "the folly and triviality of conventional attitudes" accompanies a dramatic portrait of the hermit as a paragon of grace, mercy, and self-sacrifice, a kind of pious athlete who has "always been the [object] of reverence or envy among those who really understood the cloistered life"—in a word, a present day desert father. This dual agenda reflects Merton's contempt for worldly affairs during a period when he had not as yet reconciled himself to the modern world and blossomed into the humanist of the 1960s. It is inspired, too, by Merton's own desire at the time to graduate from the cenobitic, communitarian life of the Cistercians to a hermitage of his own, a desire frustrated several times during the 1950s when Merton's superiors refused his requests to transfer to an eremitical religious order.

By exalting the image of the hermit in such works as *What*



*Ought I To Do?*, *The Solitary Life*, and *Hagia Sophia*, Merton encountered criticism. Some detractors complained that his dogmatic ethic of world-denial blinded Merton to the importance of social witness. Others worried that his message of world-renunciation might only absolve Merton's many readers from the responsibility for moral action in a world increasingly threatened by moral crisis. One critic even indicted Merton as a propagandist of mysticism for the masses. But Merton's uncompromising attitude, the rigorous totality of his commitments, and his acerbic condemnations of modern conventions appealed to Victor Hammer's own counter-modern sensibilities and his high standard of dedication to principles governing *his* life and work. The Merton trilogy is not only, then, a product of collaboration between a writer and artist/printer; it reflects as well, and more deeply, an existential, intellectual, and spiritual partnership between friends who shared similar bents of nature, commitments, tastes, values, and world views.

Merton's hermit, for example, is not a man of his time. He owes allegiance to a lineage Merton traces to the desert fathers in the Hammer trilogy. Merton elsewhere frankly confessed that he did not belong in the twentieth century; he preferred instead the intellectual climate of Saint Thomas, Saint Augustine, or Saint Francis. Victor Hammer took great pride in laying no claim to being a revolutionary artist. "Rather I am a recluse," he said, "unknown, an individualist, an anachronism if you will; I . . . do not 'belong' to my time, my century. . . ." <sup>32</sup> If Merton sensed no little despair in a post-Christian century inclining toward "secular non-Christian" values, Hammer saw despair in modern, post-classical artistic innovations and trends. "These 'doodlings,' " Hammer said of abstract expressionism, "these 'scrawls' these meaningless blobs and patches and streaks. . . . Despair is manifest in them." <sup>33</sup> "Not being a child of my age or society," Hammer wrote Merton, "I may bluntly add that I consider Picasso an able experimenter but in no ways an artist." <sup>34</sup> Finally, Hammer's guiding "dictum"—the first entry, appropriately enough, in his autobiographical reflections edited and published shortly before his death—might have served as a splendid epigraph to the entire Merton trilogy.

The dictum: What a pity that the New is not good and the Good is not new. . . . The truth it contains is the bequest of



a poet:

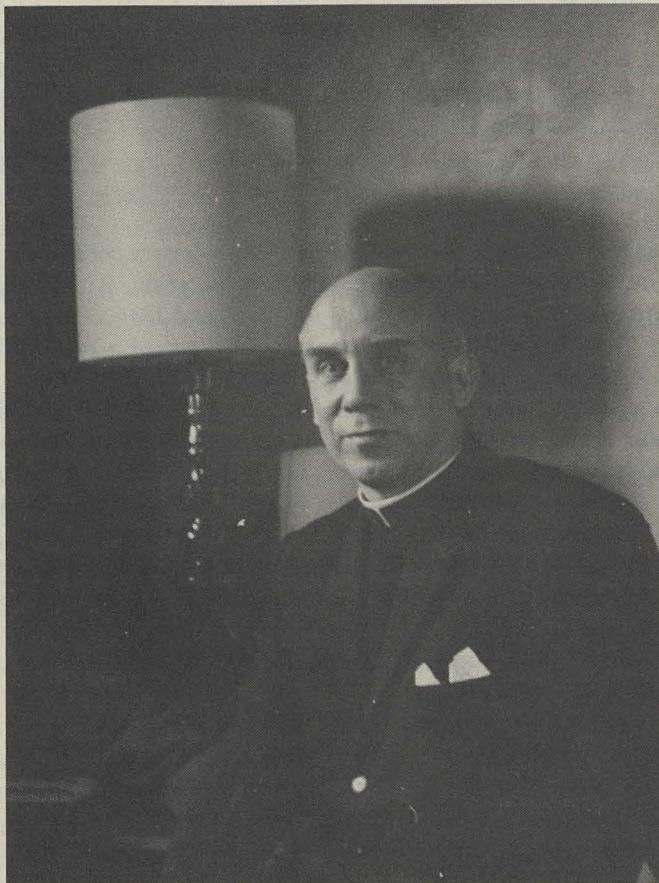
The True was found already long ago  
It bound the noble spirits into one  
Hold to the ancient Truth  
Do not let go!<sup>35</sup>

4

After *Hagia Sophia* appeared in 1962, Merton continued to forward manuscripts for Hammer's consideration. These included excerpts from *The Way of Chuang Tzu*<sup>36</sup> and *Day of a Stranger*.<sup>37</sup> That latter piece, an autobiographical account of a typical day spent at Merton's new hermitage, could have been a good companion volume to *Hagia Sophia* where Merton had used a similar narrative architecture, although *Day of a Stranger* is delivered in a markedly different voice. Even as late as 1966 there was some discussion between the Hammers and Merton about printing the love poems he had written during his (recently much publicized) relationship with a Louisville nurse.<sup>38</sup> Some may wonder why, after three books in as many years of close and intense collaboration, no more Merton titles appeared under the Stamperia del Santuccio imprint, even though Merton proposed many projects.<sup>39</sup>

That was partly due to Victor Hammer's declining health. But perhaps more significantly, Merton underwent a fundamental personal evolution during the early 1960s which brought significant changes in the kind of writing he would pursue during the following years, quite different in voice, aims, and perspectives from the Hammer trilogy. Such changes can be easily detected, for example, in the contrasts between *Hagia Sophia* and *Day of a Stranger*, where Merton no longer followed the canonical hours to trace the sequence of daily events. He chose instead the rhythms of nature, preferring extrospection and sensory impressions to the interiority and meditative spirit of *Hagia Sophia*. ("If you see a meditation going by," Merton wisecracked, "shoot it.") As a result of personal crises and episodes of self-doubt and intense personal scrutiny, Merton experienced during these pivotal years a profound retooling of self-images: from a monk with his attitude of *contemptus mundi* to a more world-embracing contemporary man whom Merton himself later described as a "laicized and deinstitutionalized anti-ascetic humanist"—a change in self-images,





*Thomas Merton photographed with his own camera by Carolyn Reading Hammer at the Hammer residence on Lexington's Gratz Park in 1966. This was one of Merton's last visits in clerical dress. (Later he came in jeans.)*

as Mrs. Hammer recalls poignantly, "from cowl to blue jeans." With that change in self-images came a shift in Merton's literary priorities away from the inspirational writing that had dominated the two previous decades to a greater concern with contemporary social justice issues. "I think it is really a waste of time for me," he frankly admitted to one correspondent, "to write more books on 'the spiritual life'. . . . I have done enough already."<sup>40</sup> Perhaps



Victor Hammer preferred the author of the *Stamperia del Santuccio* trilogy. Perhaps, as Michael Mott maintains, to Hammer, never really sympathetic to his friend's new social activism, Merton remained essentially a contemplative and a religious poet.

Merton's shift in self-image and literary agenda was accompanied, moreover, by a radical revision in his views on art, something that might have seriously compromised those standards of traditional sacred art that Merton and Hammer had previously shared. The evolution in Merton's attitudes on art was inspired by the influence of his friend, the abstract expressionist Ad Reinhardt. A stressful exchange of letters with Reinhardt,<sup>41</sup> written during the years of Merton's collaboration with Hammer, finally led Merton to accept the efficacy of modern artistic innovations. That was understandably difficult for Merton to fully share with Hammer, who continued to condemn all non-representational art as demonic and perverse. Merton nonetheless broached the subject diplomatically. He spoke on one occasion, for example, of his "twinges of conscience" in favoring William Congdon's abstract religious paintings.<sup>42</sup> He later prepared for Hammer a judiciously worded, but still ambiguous and non-committal defense of abstract expressionism.<sup>43</sup> Merton also apologized for his own abstract calligraphies—"strange blobs of ink," he called them—on exhibit in a Louisville gallery, warning Hammer to ignore them as "not worthy of your attention."<sup>44</sup> And it must have been especially difficult for Merton to weather Hammer's persistent attacks on Reinhardt. "Reinhardt may be sincere," Hammer wrote in response to Merton's prudent defense of his old Columbia University friend, "but as an abstractionist he is a sinner against the Holy Ghost. [Abstract art] is a travesty on creation."<sup>45</sup> The best illustration of just how radically Merton's views on art had changed since that epiphanic encounter with Byzantine mosaics in Rome was his decision to reprint Ad Reinhardt's abstract expressionist manifesto, "Art-As-Art," as the lead piece in the inaugural Number of *Monks Pond*, edited and "published" by Merton from the desk of his hermitage the year following Hammer's death.

Although Merton's truce with modernism and his new toleration of the avant-garde might have conflicted with Hammer's rigid classicism, although such changes as Merton experienced saddened Hammer and might have contributed to his reluctance to print further Merton works, there was never any serious dissension



which threatened the friendship or compromised each man's long-standing admiration, indeed love, for the other. The human claims of friendship, that is to say, triumphed over the ideological commitments of two highly principled men. Nowhere are such claims better acknowledged than in the last letters they exchanged and the extent of bereavement Merton felt in the wake of Hammer's death. Moved by Hammer's comment that his "last hour cannot be very far away," Merton sought words of comfort inspired by what he most admired in Hammer. "[L]eave this life," Merton urged, "as you have lived it: with the total submission of your mind and heart and hands and all that you are, to the creative and loving source of all that you have ever loved, or admired, or striven for." "Your friendship," he added simply, "has been a great blessing, greater than I can say."<sup>46</sup> When news of Hammer's death reached Merton, he wrote Mrs. Hammer to express his great sense of loss. "This [bereavement] is somehow different [than others], because there was no one like Victor. Just no one. And for such a loss there are no compensations."<sup>47</sup> After pausing to review the trilogy in his hermitage where memories welled-up through the silence, Merton suddenly realized that "of course he is with us, and we with him, . . . through the medium of the book. So significant, too, the fact that all this really was *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*. . . ."<sup>48</sup>



## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>*Some Fragments for C.R.H.* (Lexington: Stamperia del Santuccio, 1967), 4.

<sup>2</sup>*The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1948), 108.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Merton to Victor Hammer, 26 November 1955, Victor Hammer Papers, Special Collections, M.I. King Library, University of Kentucky.

<sup>4</sup>VH to TM, 8 November 1955.

<sup>5</sup>TM to VH, 26 November 1955.

<sup>6</sup>VH to TM, 3 December 1955.

<sup>7</sup>*Fragments*, 50.

<sup>8</sup>TM to VH, 28 August 1965.

<sup>9</sup>*The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984), 326.

<sup>10</sup>*Fragments*, 54-55.

<sup>11</sup>TM to VH, 14 May 1959.

<sup>12</sup>TM to VH, 19 November 1956.

<sup>13</sup>In addition to these principal texts, Hammer published other minor Merton titles outside the Opus Series, including (trans.) Meng Tzu, *Ox Mountain Parable*, 1960 and (trans.) Piero Bargellini, *The Unquiet Conscience*, 1958. In 1978, Mrs. Carolyn Hammer reissued a variant edition of *Hagia Sophia* under the Stamperia del Santuccio imprint with an unfinished frontispiece engraving cut by Victor Hammer for the original Opus edition. Other Merton titles appeared from presses with which the Hammers maintained close association: *Prometheus: A Meditation* (Lexington: M.I. King Library Press, 1958); *Boris Pasternak/Thomas Merton: Six Letters* (Lexington: M.I. King Library Press, 1973); *Early Poems/1940-42* (Lexington: Anvil Press, 1971). For a complete Hammer bibliography see *Victor Hammer: Artist and Printer* (Lexington: Anvil Press, 1981).

<sup>14</sup>VH to Norman Strouse, n.d., quoted in *Victor Hammer: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of Art, 1965), 69.

<sup>15</sup>*A Retrospective*, 75.

<sup>16</sup>*Fragments*, 51.

<sup>17</sup>VH to TM, 8 November 1955.

<sup>18</sup>"Digressions on the Roman Letter" in *Chapters on Writing and Printing* (Lexington: Anvil Press, 1963), 25.

<sup>19</sup>*A Retrospective*, 75.

<sup>20</sup>*A Retrospective*, 4.



- <sup>21</sup>VH to TM, 8 November 1955.
- <sup>22</sup>"Who Is Victor Hammer?" in *Artist and Printer*, 7.
- <sup>23</sup>*Fragments*, 82.
- <sup>24</sup>VH to TM, 8 November 1955.
- <sup>25</sup>*Fragments*, 76.
- <sup>26</sup>*Fragments*, 86.
- <sup>27</sup>*Fragments*, 26.
- <sup>28</sup>*Requiem for Victor Hammer* (n.p.[lace]: Sprial Press, 1968), n.p.
- <sup>29</sup>"Comment on the Kolbsheim Chapel," Victor Hammer Papers.
- <sup>30</sup>TM to VH, 27 July 1961.
- <sup>31</sup>TM to VH, 23 June 1959.
- <sup>32</sup>*A Retrospective*, 75.
- <sup>33</sup>*Fragments*, 16.
- <sup>34</sup>VH to TM, n.d.[1960].
- <sup>35</sup>*Fragments*, 1. The poet is Goethe.
- <sup>36</sup>*The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965).
- <sup>37</sup>*Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1981).
- <sup>38</sup>Since published as *18 Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985).
- <sup>39</sup>See Note 13.
- <sup>40</sup>TM to Ernesto Cardenal, 25 February 1963, Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky.
- <sup>41</sup>For an incomplete set of those letters see "Five Unpublished Letters from Ad Reinhardt to Thomas Merton and Two in Return," *Artforum*, December 1978: 23-28. See also TM to Ad Reinhardt, n.d.[1962], TMSC.
- <sup>42</sup>See TM to VH, 5 January 1962.
- <sup>43</sup>See TM to VH, 9 November 1963.
- <sup>44</sup>TM to VH, 3 November 1964.
- <sup>45</sup>VH to TM, 2 May 1959.
- <sup>46</sup>TM to VH, 20 September 1966.
- <sup>47</sup>TM to Carolyn Hammer, 11 July 1967, Victor Hammer Papers.
- <sup>48</sup>TM to CH, 27 July 1967.